



Navigating Cultural In-Betweenness: Identity Construction among Second-Generation Diaspora Youth in Indonesian Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

Cultural identity formation among second-generation diaspora youth in Indonesia has become a critical topic in social and cultural studies, particularly within multicultural societies. While prior research has addressed broad aspects of integration, little is known about how these individuals experience and negotiate their identities within institutional contexts such as public schools. This study investigates how second-generation diaspora youth construct cultural identity in response to the social and normative pressures of school environments. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), this research reveals that identity is experienced as a dynamic negotiation between familial expectations and societal norms. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten participants and analyzed thematically to uncover shared and divergent experiences. The findings indicate that participants often experience cultural “in-betweenness,” engage in selective cultural expression, and construct hybrid identities to navigate conflicting demands. These results suggest that identity development is not linear but shaped by personal agency within contextual constraints. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural identity as a lived experience and highlights the importance of inclusive practices in educational settings to support youth identity formation.



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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, cultural identity has become a dynamic and often contested space, particularly for individuals who navigate multiple cultural frameworks from an early age. Among these, second-generation diaspora youth—children born in host countries to immigrant parents—occupy a unique social and psychological position (Khanam & Parihar, 2024). These individuals often experience cultural duality, where they are expected to integrate into the dominant societal culture while simultaneously maintaining ties to their heritage backgrounds. Public schools, as formal institutions of socialization, play a significant role in shaping how these young people come to understand and perform their identities.

This phenomenon is not merely an issue of cultural representation or linguistic adaptation; it reflects deep-seated questions of belonging, self-definition, and perceived acceptance in social environments. Cultural identity, in this context, becomes a lived and evolving experience shaped by interpersonal relationships, institutional norms, and broader sociopolitical discourses. For many second-generation youth, daily interactions in school settings can either affirm their sense of self or heighten feelings of alienation and cultural dissonance (Khatri & Dutta, 2023). These experiences hold significance not only for individual psychological well-being but also for broader societal cohesion in multicultural contexts.

Given the inherently subjective and experiential nature of cultural identity formation, particularly within institutional settings, there is a critical need for approaches that foreground personal narratives and lived realities. A phenomenological perspective provides a valuable framework to explore these complex identity processes. Rather than imposing predefined categories,

phenomenology invites a deep engagement with the ways individuals interpret and make meaning of their world, allowing for a richer and more humanistic understanding of the cultural dynamics faced by second-generation diaspora youth.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals navigating cultural identity has become a central focus within the social sciences, particularly in the context of migration and multicultural societies. Among these, the subjective experiences of second-generation diaspora youth have drawn scholarly attention for their complexity and fluidity. These youth occupy a liminal cultural space, continuously negotiating between inherited cultural expectations and the social norms of their host environments, often within institutional settings such as public schools.

Despite the growing interest in this area, much of the existing research remains limited by methodological approaches that prioritize quantifiable variables over rich, experiential narratives (S. J. Kim dkk., 2024). Quantitative studies, while valuable for identifying broad patterns and correlations, often fail to capture the nuanced, internal processes through which individuals construct meaning and identity. For example, statistical models may illustrate the prevalence of acculturative stress, yet they overlook how that stress is personally experienced, articulated, and resolved by those affected.

This methodological gap has resulted in a fragmented understanding of how cultural identity is lived and negotiated at the micro-level. Without in-depth qualitative exploration, particularly through phenomenological inquiry, essential dimensions of meaning—such as emotion, perception, and internal dialogue—remain obscured. As such, previous studies have struggled to fully illuminate the essence of cultural identity formation as it is experienced by second-generation diaspora youth in real-life contexts.

In addressing the cultural identity development of second-generation diaspora youth, conventional approaches have largely relied on structured frameworks such as acculturation scales, psychological inventories, or sociological models of assimilation (Y. Kim dkk., 2024). While these methods have contributed to understanding the macro-level effects of integration policies and cultural retention, they fall short in capturing the lived, moment-to-moment experiences through which individuals make sense of their cultural identities. These approaches often treat identity as a static variable rather than a fluid, emergent phenomenon shaped by personal reflection and social interaction.

Such methods frequently lack the depth needed to uncover how youth experience, internalize, and express their identities within the normative boundaries of institutions like schools. As a result, existing research has yielded fragmented or surface-level understandings of identity processes, often missing the internal negotiations and contextual meanings that define the subjective experience of being culturally “in-between.”

A more effective alternative lies in phenomenological inquiry, which centers on the exploration of meaning as experienced by individuals in their lifeworlds. This approach enables researchers to uncover the essence of how identity is lived, rather than merely measured. By adopting interpretative phenomenological methods, this study addresses the gap in literature by providing a richer, more holistic understanding of the identity construction processes experienced by second-generation diaspora youth within public education settings.

Existing research on second-generation diaspora youth has primarily focused on external indicators of integration, such as academic performance, language proficiency, or sociocultural adaptation. Studies by (Ko dkk., 2022) highlight the challenges faced by diaspora youth in maintaining cultural identity while navigating societal expectations. However, few studies have deeply explored the lived experience of these youth in institutional environments like public schools. Theories of identity development, including Erikson’s psychosocial theory and Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity, provide useful frameworks but require further grounding in real-world narratives.

This study responds to that need by asking: How do second-generation diaspora youth experience and construct their cultural identities within the normative environment of Indonesian public schools?

By centering this research question, the study aims to illuminate the dynamic identity negotiations and meaning-making processes that occur within school settings.

To address the limitations of previous approaches, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This method allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective meaning-making processes of second-generation diaspora youth. The choice of IPA responds directly to the gap identified earlier, namely the lack of insight into how identity is constructed in real-life, institutional contexts. By using this approach, the study aims to uncover the essence of cultural identity as it is experienced within the daily realities of schooling. This method is particularly suited to reveal the complexity and richness of identity experiences from the youth's own perspectives.

The structure of the article is organized to reflect the phenomenological orientation of the study. It begins with an introduction that presents the background, knowledge gap, and rationale for the study. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenological approach and methodological procedures (Kräft dkk., 2024). The results section presents thematic findings supported by participants' narratives, while the discussion explores their implications in relation to existing theory and literature. The article concludes with a summary of findings, contributions, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how second-generation diaspora youth construct and experience their cultural identity within the institutional context of public schools. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected due to its emphasis on capturing the nuanced, subjective meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences. The phenomenological design enabled a deep investigation into how cultural identity is formed, negotiated, and expressed by participants in response to their social environments (Lee & Yu, 2020). Rooted in the philosophical tradition of Heidegger, this interpretative approach assumes that individuals are embedded in and shaped by their socio-cultural worlds, making it particularly suited for studies involving complex identity dynamics. IPA facilitated the exploration of how participants make sense of their identity within educational settings that often promote dominant cultural norms.

Participants

Participants consisted of second-generation diaspora youth enrolled in urban public high schools. Selection was guided by purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between the ages of 16 and 18, have been born in the host country to immigrant parents, and have experience attending public secondary education for at least three years (Leone & Mura, 2020). Individuals who had recently migrated or attended private or culturally-specific schools were excluded to maintain focus on the specific educational context of mainstream public institutions. A total of 10 participants were included (6 female, 4 male), with an average age of 17. All participants identified as bicultural and had varying levels of language proficiency in both their heritage and host languages.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in a quiet and private setting within or near the school premises, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. A flexible interview guide was used to elicit detailed narratives surrounding participants' cultural identity, school experiences, peer relationships, and perceived societal expectations (Li dkk., 2024). The interview environment was designed to foster comfort and psychological safety, ensuring openness in sharing personal reflections. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Where necessary, minor adaptations were made to the phrasing of questions to align with the participant's cultural and linguistic background.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through a multi-stage coding process. First, each transcript was read repeatedly to immerse the researcher in the participant's narrative. Initial notes were made in the margins, focusing on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. These notes were then developed into emergent codes that reflected core aspects of meaning.

To enhance rigor and traceability, two researchers independently coded 30% of the transcripts and compared results to ensure consistency in interpretation. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, establishing a baseline for inter-coder reliability.

Emergent codes were clustered into subordinate themes and further organized into superordinate themes using a constant comparison method. NVivo 12 software supported the systematic organization and retrieval of coded data. To validate thematic coherence, themes were reviewed in relation to the original transcripts and discussed within the research team. Additionally, an external auditor with expertise in qualitative research reviewed a sample of the coded data and thematic structure to ensure credibility and confirmability.

This transparent and iterative process ensured that findings were grounded in participants' lived realities, while allowing for interpretative insight into the complexity of identity construction in school settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants and their guardians (where applicable) provided written informed consent. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and all personal identifiers were removed during transcription (Machado dkk., 2024). Data confidentiality was strictly maintained, and all procedures adhered to ethical guidelines established by international standards for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

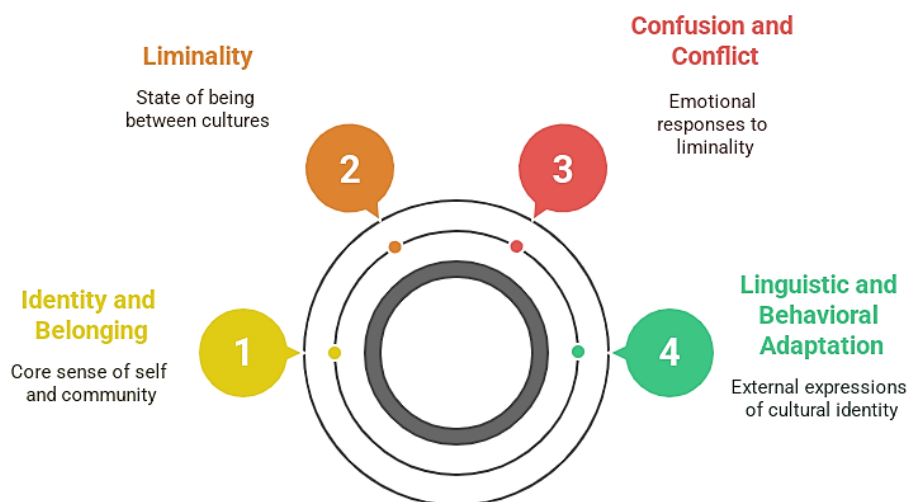
Feeling Culturally "In-Between"

Participants consistently expressed a profound sense of being suspended between two cultures—neither fully belonging to the heritage culture of their parents nor to the dominant culture of the host country. This liminality often manifested in confusion, inner conflict, and a struggle for self-definition.

“At home, I'm expected to speak our mother tongue and follow traditions. But at school, if I do that, I feel like I'm weird or different. I'm not really sure where I fit.” — Participant A

The sense of “in-betweenness” was not simply a matter of linguistic or behavioral adaptation but reflected deeper questions of identity and belonging. For many, identity was experienced as fragmented and situational, adapting according to context and perceived acceptance.

Cultural In-Betweenness



Pressures of Assimilation in School Contexts

The institutional culture of public schools—through both explicit rules and implicit expectations—was perceived by participants as pushing them toward assimilation. This often came at the expense of their cultural heritage, which was either unacknowledged or subtly marginalized.

“We don’t really talk about where we come from in class. It’s like... being ‘normal’ means being like everyone else here. So I hide some parts of myself.” — Participant C

Several participants revealed a conscious effort to suppress or minimize visible aspects of their cultural background, such as language, food, or religious practices, especially when these were perceived as “different” or “othered.”

Cultural Identity as a Negotiated Space

Rather than viewing identity as fixed or binary, participants described it as a space of negotiation. They actively curated which aspects of their cultural background to express or conceal based on social contexts, peer relationships, and emotional safety.

“It’s not that I reject my roots, but I pick and choose. Sometimes I feel more connected to my parents’ culture, other times I just want to blend in with my classmates.” — Participant D

This active negotiation reveals agency within constraint. While institutional and peer environments imposed certain norms, participants exercised selective cultural expression to maintain psychological balance and social functionality.

The Role of Peer and Family Expectations

Participants frequently found themselves navigating conflicting expectations from their families and peers. Family members often emphasized cultural preservation and respect for traditions, while peers—particularly in school settings—signaled the value of conformity to mainstream norms.

“My parents want me to go to cultural classes every weekend, but my friends think that’s boring or old-fashioned. It’s hard trying to please both sides.” — Participant B

These dual expectations created tension but also catalyzed identity work, where participants developed coping strategies to balance and reconcile these differing pressures.

The experiences of second-generation diaspora youth in public schools reveal that cultural identity is not a static inheritance but a lived, dynamic negotiation shaped by institutional, familial, and peer influences. These identities are constructed in the interstitial spaces between belonging and exclusion, conformity and authenticity. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing and validating these complex identity trajectories within educational environments to support inclusive and culturally responsive practices.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that second-generation diaspora youth experience cultural identity as a fluid and negotiated process, shaped significantly by institutional contexts such as public schools (Maltby dkk., 2024). Participants consistently described a sense of cultural “in-betweenness,” navigating between familial expectations and the implicit norms of the dominant culture, which directly addresses the central research question concerning how cultural identity is formed and lived in educational settings.

These findings offer meaningful insights into the subjective processes of identity construction and provide a direct response to the identified research gap. Unlike studies that quantify cultural adaptation, this research foregrounds the voices of diaspora youth, illustrating how they actively engage in identity work—selectively expressing or concealing aspects of their heritage based on context and perceived social acceptance. This study contributes a deeper, phenomenological understanding of identity as a lived experience, highlighting the agency and reflexivity with which young people respond to the competing demands of their sociocultural environments.

The results align with and extend prior research, particularly (McDermott dkk., 2021), who emphasized intergenerational identity conflict, and Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, which frames identity as an ever-evolving space of negotiation. However, this study goes further by situating identity construction within the specific institutional space of the school, thereby reinforcing the argument made by (McMullan dkk., 2020) regarding the social pressures that shape religious and cultural expression. By using IPA, this research also addresses methodological critiques in earlier literature, offering a more granular view of how identity is lived rather than merely inferred from external behaviors or demographic indicators.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. Socially and culturally, the study illuminates how second-generation diaspora youth actively construct hybrid identities in response to the often-unspoken pressures within educational institutions. This suggests the need for schools to recognize and support identity work as a legitimate and complex process rather than a problem of non-conformity. Educators and policymakers could benefit from understanding the importance of inclusive practices that validate multiple cultural expressions and reduce the marginalization that contributes to internalized cultural dissonance. Professionally, these insights are critical for school counselors, teachers, and administrators who interact directly with multicultural student populations and play a pivotal role in shaping identity-affirming environments.

While the study provides rich and meaningful insights, several limitations should be noted. The use of purposive sampling and a relatively small number of participants restricts the ability to generalize findings across broader populations. Moreover, the study was conducted within urban public school settings, which may not reflect experiences in rural or private school contexts. The reliance on self-reported narratives, while essential in phenomenological research, may also be influenced by recall bias or social desirability (Olitsky dkk., 2020). These limitations do not undermine the study’s contributions but rather highlight the contextual specificity of the findings and the value of qualitative depth over breadth.

Future research could expand upon this study by exploring comparative experiences across different educational systems, such as faith-based or bilingual institutions, or by including other diaspora communities in different national contexts. Longitudinal studies may also be valuable in tracing how identity evolves over time and is influenced by changing societal and institutional norms (Padua dkk., 2021). Furthermore, integrating participatory methods or visual narrative techniques could enrich the phenomenological exploration of identity and provide additional layers of meaning, contributing further to the interdisciplinary understanding of cultural identity formation.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how second-generation diaspora youth construct and experience their cultural identity within the institutional context of public schools. Using an interpretative

phenomenological approach, the findings revealed that identity is not static but shaped by ongoing negotiations between personal, familial, and societal expectations. Participants described a sense of cultural “in-betweenness” and engaged in selective expression to maintain balance and social acceptance. These insights offer a deeper understanding of the internal identity work often overlooked by previous quantitative or macro-level studies. The study highlights the need for more inclusive school practices that recognize and support complex cultural identities. Future research may build on these findings by examining diverse institutional settings or tracing identity development over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article. All ethical standards were followed, and the research was conducted independently of any personal or financial interests that could have influenced the outcomes or interpretations presented.

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