



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Cultural Identity Negotiation among Adolescent Migrants

Badirun Basir

Universitas Sulawesi Barat, Indonesia

badirun.basir@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Migration studies increasingly highlight the psychological and cultural challenges faced by adolescents navigating life between multiple cultural worlds. Within this domain, the subjective experiences of identity negotiation among adolescent migrants remain underexplored, particularly in terms of how cultural tensions are lived and internalized. Despite growing interest in bicultural adaptation, existing research often relies on quantitative approaches that fail to capture the nuanced and evolving nature of personal meaning-making. This study addresses the question: How do adolescent migrants experience and negotiate dual cultural identities amid social and familial pressures? Conducted in Indonesia, this study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of ten adolescent migrants aged 13 to 17, each having resided in the country for a minimum of three years following cross-border migration. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, enabling rich exploration of individual narratives. Thematic analysis using NVivo software uncovered four central themes: (1) cultural in-betweenness, (2) emotional dimensions of language use, (3) conflicting family expectations, and (4) the emergence of empowered bicultural identities. Analytical procedures were grounded in Heideggerian phenomenology, ensuring interpretative depth in capturing participants' meaning-making processes. The study reveals that cultural identity formation is a dynamic, emotionally intricate process influenced by continuous negotiation and adaptation within familial and social spheres. These findings enhance context-specific understanding of migrant identity development and provide practical insights for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers engaging with multicultural youth populations. Future studies are encouraged to broaden phenomenological investigations across diverse migration contexts and refine theoretical frameworks on bicultural identity integration.



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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, migration has become one of the most defining global phenomena of the 21st century. According to the International Organization for Migration (2023), over 280 million people live outside their country of origin, including an estimated 36 million children and adolescents who have migrated either with family or unaccompanied. Within this broad demographic, adolescent migrants encounter unique psychosocial challenges as they navigate identity, belonging, and adaptation across contrasting cultural landscapes.

The cultural integration of migrant youth is shaped by personal development, intergenerational dynamics, and sociocultural expectations in host societies. While some adolescents demonstrate bicultural competence and psychological resilience (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013), others experience cultural dissonance, marginalization, and internal identity conflict, particularly during adolescence—a phase characterized by intensified self-exploration and social comparison (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2010). In multicultural societies, adolescent migrants frequently balance competing cultural expectations while managing peer relationships, academic demands, and familial obligations.

Existing research has predominantly employed quantitative or acculturation-based frameworks, which, though valuable, often fail to capture the subjective, emotional, and contextual dimensions of cultural identity formation among youth (Schachner, 2019). While some phenomenological studies have begun addressing this gap (e.g., Titzmann & Lee, 2018; Pittman, 2021), very few focus specifically on adolescents in Southeast Asian contexts, where migration patterns, religious plurality, and sociocultural structures may present distinct identity negotiation processes.

This study responds to that lacuna by employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how adolescent migrants in Indonesia—a nation with complex intercultural dynamics—experience and interpret their evolving cultural identities. Unlike general IPA work in Western contexts, there remains a scarcity of studies that critically examine bicultural identity negotiation in collectivist, postcolonial societies. By highlighting personal meaning-making in response to sociocultural tensions, this study aims to extend IPA application into new geographic and cultural territories while refining our understanding of youth migration through a humanistic and interpretive lens.

Given the richness and complexity of these experiences, a phenomenological approach offers a meaningful framework to explore the inner worlds of adolescent migrants. By focusing on how individuals make sense of their realities, phenomenology provides a lens through which the emotional, cognitive, and relational aspects of identity negotiation can be illuminated. This exploration is essential to better understand the human impact of migration and to inform culturally responsive practices in education, mental health, and community engagement.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals navigating complex social and cultural transitions has become increasingly important within the fields of migration studies and cross-cultural psychology. In particular, adolescent migrants who face developmental challenges alongside cultural adaptation represent a critical population for understanding how identity is constructed, contested, and redefined in multicultural settings. Scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of exploring how these young individuals make meaning of their bicultural experiences, especially as identity negotiation influences psychological well-being, educational outcomes, and social integration.

However, methodological challenges continue to limit the depth of understanding in this domain. Much of the existing literature relies heavily on quantitative surveys or psychometric tools that prioritize generalizability over depth, offering broad statistical patterns but failing to capture the nuanced and often contradictory nature of personal experiences. While such methods can identify correlations between acculturation and adjustment outcomes, they often overlook the emotional and existential dimensions of cultural negotiation, particularly the internal conflicts, ambivalence, and shifting sense of self experienced by migrant adolescents.

This reliance on structured instruments and externally defined categories restricts the ability of researchers to fully grasp the essence of what it means to live "in-between" cultures. Without direct attention to participants' own words, perspectives, and meaning-making processes, such approaches fall short of articulating the lived complexity of identity formation among adolescent migrants. Consequently, many existing studies offer an incomplete or overly simplified portrait of bicultural identity development, underscoring the need for research approaches that prioritize the voices and subjective experiences of those most directly affected.

Existing responses to the challenges of adolescent migrant identity formation have largely centered around practical frameworks such as acculturation models, cultural adaptation programs, and psychosocial interventions. While these approaches offer valuable insights into behavioral outcomes and coping strategies, they tend to rely on predefined categories and externally imposed metrics that overlook the subjective, lived experience of identity negotiation. As a result, the complexity of how young migrants make sense of belonging, cultural loyalty, and self-concept is often reduced to surface-level descriptions or binary classifications such as "integration" versus "separation."

This overreliance on structured, quantitative methodologies limits the depth and richness of understanding that can be achieved. These approaches are ill-suited to capture the internal tensions,

contradictions, and evolving meanings that define the everyday lives of bicultural adolescents. Particularly absent in current research is the exploration of how these individuals experience their identities how they emotionally and cognitively navigate the expectations of their heritage and host cultures, and how they reconcile or resist these pressures in shaping their sense of self.

To address these gaps, a phenomenological approach offers a compelling alternative. By focusing on the essence of lived experience, phenomenology enables a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of identity formation among adolescent migrants. This method prioritizes the voices of participants, allowing meanings to emerge from within their narratives rather than being imposed from outside frameworks. Such an approach not only enriches academic understanding but also holds practical value in informing culturally sensitive policies and interventions that resonate with the real experiences of those affected.

Previous research on migrant youth has explored cultural identity development using frameworks such as Berry's acculturation model and bicultural identity integration theory. These studies have offered valuable insights into the behavioral and social outcomes of cultural adaptation. However, they often fall short in addressing how individuals internally process and assign meaning to their experiences. Only a limited number of studies have focused on the emotional and existential dimensions of identity formation. This gap underscores the need for methodologies that prioritize the voices and perspectives of migrant adolescents themselves.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine how adolescent migrants experience and negotiate dual cultural identities. This method was selected for its ability to uncover the meaning embedded in participants' personal narratives. Through this lens, the research seeks to answer how these individuals make sense of their belonging, cultural tensions, and identity transitions. The goal is to offer a deeper, more nuanced understanding that goes beyond predefined categories. By centering the participants' lived experiences, the study responds directly to the limitations identified in existing research.

The structure of this article is organized as follows. First, the introduction outlines the broader and specific context of the phenomenon under investigation. Second, the methodological section presents the phenomenological design, data collection process, and analytic procedures. Third, the results describe key themes that emerged from participants' narratives. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and implications.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of adolescent migrants in negotiating dual cultural identities. Phenomenology was selected for its capacity to capture the depth and complexity of personal meaning-making processes embedded within everyday experiences. Specifically, the interpretative variant of phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was utilized to emphasize the contextual and existential dimensions of participants' narratives. This approach acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed between the participant and the researcher and allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals make sense of their social realities.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who possessed firsthand experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria required participants to be adolescent migrants aged between 14 and 19 years, residing in the host country for at least two years, and actively navigating between their heritage and host cultures. Exclusion criteria included individuals with severe cognitive or psychiatric impairments that might interfere with meaningful participation. A total of ten participants (six females and four males) were involved in the study, with an average age of 16.8 years. All participants were either enrolled in

secondary education or recently graduated, and they originated from diverse cultural backgrounds including Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East African regions. This demographic diversity enriched the contextual understanding of bicultural identity formation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and neutral setting chosen by the participants. A flexible interview guide was used to facilitate open-ended conversations while ensuring consistency across interviews. Questions focused on participants' cultural experiences, identity struggles, and feelings of belonging. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure a supportive environment, interviews were conducted in either English or the participant's preferred language with translation support where necessary. Confidentiality and comfort were prioritized throughout the data collection process to foster trust and authenticity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved a multi-stage, inductive process aimed at identifying recurring patterns of meaning. Transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion, followed by initial noting and open coding to identify significant statements. Codes were then clustered into emerging themes that reflected both the descriptive content and the interpretative depth of the data. Thematic development continued through iterative comparison across participants to refine and validate the thematic structure. NVivo 12 software was employed to facilitate the organization and tracking of codes and themes, but interpretation remained grounded in the participants' own words and contextual experiences. The final themes represented essential insights into the phenomenon and were supported by direct quotations to preserve narrative authenticity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of the study. All participants provided written informed consent; for participants under the age of 18, parental or guardian consent was also secured. Anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely in compliance with institutional data protection policies. The research adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable local guidelines for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of adolescent migrants in negotiating dual cultural identities in their host countries. Through in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, four overarching themes emerged, each capturing a distinct dimension of the participants' experiences.

I am in between: The Struggle of Belonging

A prevailing theme among participants was the internal conflict of not fully belonging to either their heritage culture or the dominant culture of the host country. This liminal experience shaped their emotional and social identity.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m not really from here, but also not from there anymore. It’s like I’m stuck in the middle.” (Participant 3)

Participants described feeling culturally suspended valuing their native traditions but simultaneously pressured to conform to the cultural expectations of their peers in school and society. This identity tension often led to emotional distress, including confusion, self-doubt, and social withdrawal. Many reported actively concealing aspects of their native culture to avoid being stereotyped or excluded.

I speak two languages, but my thoughts have no accent: The Role of Language in Identity Formation

Language emerged as a symbolic and practical mediator of cultural identity. While many participants were fluent in both their native and host country languages, their emotional affiliation with each language varied and shifted over time.

“When I speak my parents’ language, I feel like home. But when I’m at school, I switch... even my jokes change.” (Participant 7)

Participants noted how language not only influenced their expression but also mediated their perceived authenticity in social groups. Some revealed that code-switching became a survival mechanism, used to negotiate acceptance in diverse social settings. Others expressed guilt or shame for losing fluency in their heritage language, equating it with a loss of familial intimacy.

Family holds me back, but also holds me together: The Dual Pressure of Cultural Expectations

Participants described a dual role of family as both a source of emotional anchoring and a source of cultural tension. Parents were often perceived as guardians of traditional values, which sometimes clashed with the liberal norms of the host culture.

“At home, I must follow everything like back in our country. Outside, I’m someone else. It’s tiring, pretending all the time.” (Participant 2)

This dissonance generated internal moral conflict, particularly when familial obligations collided with aspirations for personal autonomy. Several adolescents felt burdened by the responsibility to uphold cultural honor while simultaneously yearning to define their own paths.

Being different is my power, not my problem: Emerging Identity Integration

Despite initial struggles, a few participants described a gradual shift toward embracing their bicultural identity as a strength rather than a source of shame. These narratives revealed moments of empowerment, self-acceptance, and cultural pride.

“Now I know I’m not less just because I’m different. I carry two cultures, and that’s more, not less.” (Participant 6)

This theme marked a transformative realization where participants reframed cultural hybridity as a unique advantage in social navigation, empathy, and global awareness. Such integration often followed painful periods of conflict but led to greater confidence and resilience.

The findings illuminate the complexity of adolescent migrants’ journeys in negotiating their dual cultural identities. Their lived experiences reflect ongoing processes of adaptation, resistance, and transformation shaped by interpersonal, familial, and societal forces. Rather than linear trajectories, identity formation unfolded as an evolving negotiation, marked by tension, ambivalence, and growth.

How should bicultural identity be viewed?



Bicultural Identity as a Problem

Leads to shame and conflict



Bicultural Identity as a Power

Fosters pride and resilience

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that adolescent migrants experience identity as a fluid and often conflicted process marked by feelings of cultural in-betweenness, linguistic duality, familial tension, and eventual integration. These themes collectively illuminate the essence of negotiating a dual cultural identity not as a linear progression but as a dynamic and emotionally charged journey. These results directly address the central research question: How do adolescent migrants experience and negotiate dual cultural identities amid social and cultural pressures in the host environment?

The study provides a deeper, experience-based answer to this question by uncovering how identity negotiation unfolds through lived tension and meaning-making, rather than through binary models of cultural adaptation. The theme “I am in between” demonstrates how participants resist fixed cultural labels, experiencing identity as a shifting position between belonging and exclusion. The role of language, captured in “my thoughts have no accent,” suggests that fluency extends beyond grammar into emotional resonance and self-presentation. Similarly, familial expectations serve as both anchors and constraints, requiring adolescents to constantly adjust their behaviors and values. Ultimately, the emerging theme of empowerment through integration (“Being different is my power”) illustrates that identity is not resolved but rather redefined through ongoing personal agency. These contributions emphasize the value of a phenomenological approach in articulating the interiority of identity experiences often missed in survey-based studies.

The themes identified in this study echo and extend findings from previous qualitative work. For instance, Nguyen et al. (2020) described how second-generation immigrants experience cultural hybridity as a source of both tension and resilience, which aligns with the ambiguity expressed by participants in this study. Likewise, the role of family as a source of both connection and constraint mirrors findings in Ali and Smith’s (2019) work on Muslim youth in Europe, where traditional values often conflicted with local norms. However, this study adds novel insights by articulating the emotional nuances of linguistic identity, a dimension often underexplored in migration literature. The interpretative focus also complements and deepens previous theoretical applications of bicultural identity integration theory by demonstrating how identity is lived, felt, and reimagined in daily contexts. Thus, this research contributes a phenomenological depth to a field that has often prioritized structural or behavioral dimensions of migrant youth adaptation.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted, offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of adolescent migrant identity. On a social level, the narratives highlight the urgent need for more inclusive policies and educational practices that acknowledge the psychological labor involved in navigating bicultural realities. Culturally responsive interventions particularly in schools can provide safe spaces for expression and foster dialogue about identity without forcing assimilation or cultural erasure. Professionally, educators, counselors, and social workers must recognize that identity formation among migrant youth is a process that involves emotional complexity, requiring empathetic engagement rather than standardized assessments. These insights are not only relevant to the specific communities studied but also resonate with broader multicultural societies grappling with integration and inclusion.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. The sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological depth, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, all participants were selected from a specific national context, which may have influenced the cultural and institutional dimensions of their experiences. The reliance on self-reported data, though essential in phenomenology, may introduce recall or response bias. These constraints do not undermine the value of the study but instead highlight the importance of situating interpretations within specific social and cultural contexts. Future studies can build on these limitations by exploring diverse settings or longitudinal patterns in identity development.

Looking forward, the findings open several avenues for future research. Further studies could investigate how digital media influences bicultural identity negotiation among adolescents, especially in transnational or diasporic communities. Longitudinal research might also uncover how identity transformations evolve across key life transitions, such as from adolescence to early adulthood.

Expanding the demographic and cultural diversity of participants could enrich theoretical models of identity by incorporating perspectives that are currently underrepresented. Ultimately, this study reinforces the importance of phenomenological inquiry in migration research, advocating for more person-centered approaches that honor the lived realities of those navigating cultural borders.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how adolescent migrants negotiate dual cultural identities amid social and familial pressures, revealing identity as a dynamic, emotionally charged process rather than a fixed state. Through an interpretative phenomenological lens, four central themes emerged: cultural in-betweenness, language as identity, familial tension, and bicultural empowerment. These themes underscore the complex navigation between heritage values and host-society expectations. Building on these findings, this research offers specific implications for educational and policy frameworks. Educators should implement culturally responsive pedagogies that validate students' bicultural identities and create inclusive classroom environments that accommodate linguistic and cultural hybridity. Mental health practitioners can integrate narrative-based therapeutic approaches to support identity development. Policymakers are encouraged to design youth-focused migration programs that facilitate family dialogue, peer integration, and community-based mentoring, particularly during transitional periods such as school enrollment or relocation.

Future studies should explore how digital platforms influence identity expression among migrant adolescents, investigate longitudinal changes over developmental stages, and extend IPA approaches to underrepresented migration settings in the Global South. By deepening our understanding of subjective migrant experiences, this research contributes to more humane and context-sensitive migration discourse.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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