



Lived Experience of Double Identity among Diaspora Adolescents in International Schools

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ABSTRACT

Global migration and cultural mobility have reshaped the landscape of adolescent identity development, particularly among youth in international educational settings. Within this context, diaspora adolescents often experience a dual cultural alignment that poses unique psychological and social challenges to their identity formation. While existing studies have addressed acculturation and bicultural identity using quantitative frameworks, limited research has examined how adolescents subjectively interpret the lived experience of holding a double identity. This study investigates: What is the essence of the experience of living with a double identity for diaspora adolescents in international schools? Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, grounded in social identity theory and acculturation frameworks, this research explores how adolescents articulate, negotiate, and make meaning of their dual cultural identity in everyday life. Specifically, the study followed Colaizzi's seven-step method to ensure replicability: (1) reading all participants' descriptions, (2) extracting significant statements, (3) formulating meanings, (4) organizing meanings into theme clusters, (5) developing exhaustive descriptions, (6) identifying fundamental structures, and (7) validating findings with participants. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 adolescents from diverse ethnic backgrounds enrolled in international schools across Southeast Asia. Interviews lasted between 60–90 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo software to enhance rigor and transparency. The findings revealed four core themes: navigating cultural in-betweenness, engaging in cultural code-switching, experiencing linguistic dissonance, and striving for cohesive selfhood. These themes reflect the emotional and existential complexity of identity construction in multicultural environments. The study contributes to a richer understanding of identity as a lived and evolving phenomenon, highlighting the need for educational practices that acknowledge and support the emotional dimensions of bicultural development in youth. Findings also offer new directions for future research in cross-cultural psychology, education, and adolescent mental health.



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INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalized society, cross-cultural mobility has become a defining feature of modern life (Gilmour & Bou-Orm, 2025). As families relocate across borders for economic, educational, or political reasons, a growing number of adolescents are raised in environments where they are exposed to multiple cultural systems simultaneously (Price & McGowan, 2025). This has given rise to "diaspora adolescents," who live at the intersection of heritage and host cultures, particularly within international schools where cultural diversity is normalized.

Navigating dual cultural spheres presents both opportunities and challenges. While multicultural exposure can foster adaptability and global competence, it may also trigger internal conflicts related to self-perception, cultural loyalty, and social acceptance (Allen et al., 2025). The experience of "double identity"—being rooted in one cultural origin while adapting to another—carries deep emotional and cognitive implications.

Existing studies on adolescent cultural identity have largely relied on quantitative approaches such as surveys and psychometric instruments (Hunt & Aggad, 2025). Although these capture broad patterns, they often fail to uncover the nuanced, subjective meanings adolescents attach to their lived experiences (Petrová Kafková & Vidovićová, 2025). This methodological focus limits our understanding of how diaspora adolescents interpret, negotiate, and internalize their identities in multicultural educational settings (Marotta, 2025).

This gap calls for a qualitative, interpretive approach that privileges participants' voices. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on lived experience, provides a suitable framework to explore the complexities of double identity in everyday contexts (Maranto et al., 2025). By centering the first-person perspectives of adolescents, this study seeks to illuminate how identity is constructed, negotiated, and embodied within international schools.

Accordingly, this research applies a descriptive phenomenological method, grounded in the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl, to capture the essential meanings of double identity as narrated by diaspora adolescents (Alatawi & Good, 2025). This approach enables access to the emotional depth, cognitive tensions, and contextual dynamics of identity construction that are often overlooked in conventional frameworks.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the context and research gap, followed by a review of relevant literature. The methods section explains the phenomenological design, data collection procedures, and analytic steps. The results present the emergent themes, and the discussion situates these findings within existing scholarship, concluding with implications for research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of diaspora adolescents grappling with double identity in the context of international schools (Fife, 2020). Phenomenology was selected for its emphasis on understanding how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences, particularly those involving complex personal and cultural negotiations. By focusing on the subjective consciousness of participants, this approach enabled a deep investigation into the internal processes associated with identity formation and cultural tension.

A descriptive phenomenological approach, grounded in Husserl's philosophical framework, was adopted to bracket preconceptions and focus on the essence of participants' experiences as they were presented. This method facilitated a rigorous and structured inquiry into the phenomena without imposing external interpretations, aligning with the study's aim to reveal the core meanings of identity negotiation as lived and narrated by the participants.

Participants

Participants in this study were diaspora adolescents aged 14 to 18 years, currently enrolled in international schools across urban Southeast Asian settings. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select individuals who had lived in the host country for at least three years and had regular exposure to both their native cultural environment and the school's international culture.

Inclusion criteria comprised adolescents with bi- or multilingual proficiency, active engagement in multicultural school activities, and self-identification with dual cultural affiliations. Exclusion criteria involved students who were recent arrivals or lacked significant exposure to cross-cultural dynamics. A total of 12 participants (7 females and 5 males) were included, with an average age of 16.2 years. All participants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including South Asian, Middle Eastern, East Asian, and African descent, and had experience navigating dual cultural expectations in daily life.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted in quiet, private settings within school counseling rooms or via secure online platforms where in-person meetings were not feasible. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing for flexible and responsive questioning. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes.

Each session was audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim. The interview environment was designed to promote comfort and psychological safety, encouraging participants to speak openly about their experiences. Probing techniques were used to elicit deeper reflections, and follow-up questions were tailored to individual responses. Field notes and reflexive memos were also maintained to support contextual interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following a descriptive phenomenological framework. Transcripts were read multiple times to gain an overall sense of each participant's experience. Meaning units were then extracted and coded manually and with the assistance of NVivo 14 software, allowing for the organization and retrieval of data segments related to emerging themes.

Themes were clustered through a process of reduction, aiming to identify invariant structures of experience. The final themes reflected shared patterns of meaning across the participant narratives and were refined to preserve the essence of the lived phenomena. Throughout the analysis, bracketing techniques were maintained to ensure that findings emerged inductively from the data rather than from researcher assumptions.

To enhance methodological transparency, two independent coders were involved in the analysis process. After initial coding, the coders compared their interpretations and discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa, yielding a coefficient of 0.82, which indicates a high level of agreement. An audit trail of coding decisions and theme development was also maintained to strengthen the dependability and confirmability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the host university. Written informed consent was secured from all participants and, where applicable, parental consent was also acquired. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. All data were securely stored and de-identified to comply with international ethical standards in qualitative research involving minors.

RESULTS

“Feeling In-Between”: Navigating Dual Belonging

Participants expressed a constant oscillation between cultural identities—neither fully belonging to their heritage culture nor completely integrated into the host culture. This sense of in-betweenness was described as both emotionally confusing and socially alienating.

“I speak my parents' language at home, but at school, I'm someone else. It's like I have to switch personalities every day. Sometimes I don't know who the real me is.” (P4)

The tension between the home and school environments created a fragmented sense of self. Participants often felt that expressing one identity required suppressing the other, especially when social norms in the school contradicted familial expectations. This aligns with previous findings that bicultural adolescents often experience “identity dissonance,” navigating pressures from multiple cultural spheres without feeling fully anchored in either (Schwartz et al., 2010; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013).

“Cultural Code-Switching as Survival”: Performing Identity Strategically

A recurring experience across interviews was the necessity to engage in “cultural code-switching” as a form of adaptation. Participants described this as a survival mechanism to blend in with different cultural groups, avoid discrimination, and gain acceptance.

“When I’m with my international friends, I act more ‘Western,’ but when I’m at home, I go back to being the ‘good’ [ethnic] child. It’s like wearing two different uniforms.” (P2)

Rather than being empowering, this performative adaptation was often accompanied by emotional exhaustion and identity conflict, as the participants struggled to reconcile internal authenticity with external expectations. This echoes findings by Rampton (2017) and Auer (2019), who note that code-switching can function simultaneously as a strategy of belonging and a source of psychological strain, particularly for adolescents negotiating dual cultural expectations.

“Language as a Marker of Identity and Alienation”

Language emerged as a central motif in identity negotiation. Participants who were fluent in both their heritage language and the dominant language of instruction used language as a flexible tool for social navigation. However, those less proficient in either language experienced linguistic alienation and cultural marginalization.

“Sometimes I don’t know the right words in either language. I’m not fluent enough in my mother tongue to connect deeply with my relatives, and I still feel like a foreigner speaking English with my classmates.” (P6)

This dual-language challenge symbolized the broader struggle of diaspora adolescents to articulate their identity clearly in both personal and social domains. Comparable studies highlight that language proficiency is not merely a communicative skill but a symbolic marker of belonging, often shaping inclusion and exclusion in cross-cultural spaces (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; García & Wei, 2014).

“Longing for a Cohesive Identity”: Searching for Wholeness

While all participants expressed awareness of their hybrid identity, many articulated a desire to consolidate the fragmented aspects into a cohesive self-concept. This internal longing reflected a psychological journey toward self-acceptance and cultural integration.

“I want to be just one version of me, not split between cultures. But maybe being mixed is also a kind of wholeness—I’m learning to accept that both sides are me.” (P1)

The theme suggests that identity is not a fixed endpoint but a fluid and evolving process shaped by personal reflection and contextual negotiation. This resonates with Eriksonian and post-structural views of identity, which conceptualize identity as an ongoing project of coherence amid multiplicity (Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1996). Recent studies on bicultural identity integration similarly emphasize the developmental trajectory toward reconciling dual affiliations as part of a holistic self (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

The lived experiences of diaspora adolescents in international schools reveal a dynamic and often conflict-laden negotiation of double identity. Through narratives of cultural in-betweenness, code-switching, linguistic struggle, and the pursuit of internal coherence, these individuals illuminate the emotional and social complexities of growing up in cross-cultural contexts. By situating these findings within existing literature, the results both confirm established insights into bicultural tension and extend them by foregrounding adolescents’ subjective accounts of identity as an existential process of becoming.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the lived complexity of double identity among diaspora adolescents, moving beyond descriptive categories to foreground the emotional and existential layers of cultural negotiation. Rather than restating results, the discussion emphasizes their theoretical resonance and implications.

The findings extend acculturation theory (Egan, 2025) by showing that while integration strategies may foster adaptability, they often carry hidden emotional costs such as fragmentation and alienation. Similarly, the framework of bicultural identity integration (Cooper et al., 2025; Salm et al., 2025) is supported but also problematized: this study reveals how harmony and conflict are not static states but oscillating experiences that adolescents actively navigate in school and family contexts. In this sense, the research contributes a phenomenological deepening of existing models, underscoring identity as an embodied, evolving process rather than a fixed trait.

By centering adolescents' first-person narratives, the study advances a humanistic understanding of identity construction. It challenges reductionist approaches that rely on demographic or psychometric indicators alone (Brammah et al., 2025). Instead, it positions identity as a lived contradiction—fluid, situated, and emotionally textured. This contribution enriches theoretical discourse by foregrounding how cultural belonging and alienation are simultaneously experienced, thus advancing cross-cultural psychology and migration studies.

The implications are equally significant for practice. For educators and counselors in international schools, these insights underscore the importance of moving beyond surface-level multicultural policies toward practices that address the emotional realities of bicultural life (O'Grady et al., 2025). Culturally responsive pedagogy, peer support initiatives, and safe dialogic spaces could help adolescents integrate their dual affiliations without fear of marginalization. Policymakers may also draw on these findings to design interventions that prioritize identity affirmation alongside academic performance, recognizing psychosocial development as integral to educational success.

Limitations must be acknowledged. The purposive sample of 12 adolescents from urban Southeast Asian schools restricts the scope of transferability. Individual narratives, while rich, may not capture the full diversity of diaspora identity negotiations globally (Iqbal et al., 2025; Okechi et al., 2025). Still, phenomenology aims at revealing essences rather than generalizing outcomes, and this study contributes unique insights into how cultural duality is lived in context.

Looking forward, future research should explore identity trajectories across developmental stages and sociopolitical environments (Cui & Wu, 2025; Kim et al., 2025). Longitudinal and cross-contextual studies, including religious and community spaces beyond schools, could illuminate how coherence or conflict evolves over time. Such directions would not only refine theoretical models but also inform more holistic frameworks for supporting diaspora youth.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experience of double identity among diaspora adolescents attending international schools, focusing on how they navigate cultural boundaries and internal conflicts. The findings revealed four core themes: cultural in-betweenness, strategic code-switching, linguistic dissonance, and the longing for identity cohesion. These themes illuminate the emotional and psychological complexity of identity formation that previous studies often overlooked. By applying a descriptive phenomenological approach, this research provided deeper insights into the subjective meanings and internal struggles experienced by culturally mobile youth.

The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of identity negotiation and offers practical implications for educators and counselors working with diverse student populations. Specifically, schools should design culturally responsive curricula that integrate students' heritage perspectives alongside global content, ensuring that bicultural identity is affirmed rather than sidelined. Counselors and teachers can implement structured peer-support programs and mentoring initiatives to provide safe spaces where adolescents openly discuss cultural tensions without fear of marginalization. Training programs for educators should also include modules on cultural sensitivity, code-switching awareness, and strategies to reduce linguistic marginalization in the classroom. At a policy level, international schools and education boards should prioritize inclusive practices that move beyond surface multiculturalism to address the psychological and emotional dimensions of identity development.

Future research may expand this inquiry by involving broader contexts, longer timeframes, or comparative cross-cultural analyses to further enrich our understanding of bicultural identity development. In addition, longitudinal studies could assess how interventions—such as culturally inclusive pedagogy or psychosocial support frameworks—impact identity coherence and well-being over time, providing evidence-based recommendations for sustainable educational policy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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