Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal – Vol. 12, No. 10
Publication Date: November 04, 2025
DOI:10.14ti38/assrj.1210.19538.
Soemantri, N. P., Said, M., Anggraeni, D., Diharjo, H. L. H., & Paccagnnelae, N. (2025). Mixed Heritage: The Formation of Ethnic Identity among Biracial Adolescents in Indonesia. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, *12(10)*. 231-237.

Mixed Heritage: The Formation of Ethnic Identity among Biracial Adolescents in Indonesia

Nathalia Perdhani Soemantri
Universitas Pancasila, Jakarta

Mashadi Said
Universitas Pancasila, Jakarta

Diana Anggraeni
Universitas Pancasila, Jakarta

Helena Lodya Haryani Diharjo
Universitas Pancasila, Jakarta

Nalendra Paccagnnelae
Universitas Pancasila, Jakarta

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and analyse the process of ethnic identity formation among biracial adolescents in Indonesia within the context of intercultural communication. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, using in-depth interviews with three participants of mixed ethnic backgrounds: Indonesian–American, Indonesian–Japanese, and Indonesian–Arab. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal five major themes: (1) early awareness of ethnic identity through family socialization and religious traditions; (2) identity negotiation in social environments that often generate physical and ethnic stereotypes; (3) integration of cross-cultural values that create a unique pattern balancing global and local identities; (4) language and family humour as emotional symbols reinforcing ethnic attachment and pride; and (5) dual identity as social capital that expands relational networks and enhances intercultural communication competence. This study emphasizes that dual identity is not a burden but a cultural and social asset that enriches adolescents' experiences in multicultural societies. The findings highlight the importance of the family, school, and community in creating inclusive social environments that support the development of positive ethnic identity among biracial adolescents. Future research is recommended to extend the geographical scope and examine the role of digital media in shaping ethnic identity among younger generations.

Keywords: ethnic identity, biracial adolescents, intercultural communication, multicultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity is a fundamental aspect of intercultural communication that shapes how individuals perceive themselves and others. According to Phinney (1990), ethnic identity is a

complex construct encompassing a sense of belonging, involvement, and positive evaluation of one's ethnic group. During adolescence, ethnic identity develops through processes of exploration and negotiation (Erikson, 1968). Ting-Toomey (2005) describes identity as a reflective self-concept acquired through family, culture, and socialization processes, while Martin and Nakayama (2010) define identity as the concept of "who we are," shaped by both self-perception and social recognition.

Previous studies show that ethnic identity is not static but continuously evolves in response to social and cultural experiences (Barth, 1988; Liliweri, 2001). It is constructed through family and community socialization, enabling individuals to understand their cultural heritage, language, and values. In intercultural communication, understanding ethnic identity is crucial because it influences how people interact, negotiate meaning, and build relationships across cultures. Recent research further suggests that ethnic identity development among adolescents is shaped by contextual factors such as family, school environment, and cross-cultural dynamics (Hölscher, Rudasill, & Titzmann, 2024; Baumert, Schultze-Krumbholz, Wong, & Becker, 2024).

In the era of globalization, the increasing prevalence of intercultural marriage and international migration has given rise to a new generation of *mixed-heritage* adolescents who face unique identity challenges. Previous studies indicate that biracial individuals often experience identity dilemmas—caught between their parents' cultural affiliations and the need to adapt to the dominant social environment (Tsai, 2019; Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Research in Western societies highlights that multicultural experiences can enhance intercultural communication competence, but most focus on individualistic and secular contexts. Recent studies in Europe and North America expand this understanding by exploring *malleable racial identification*—the flexible negotiation of identity depending on social context (Cardwell, 2023; Cleveland, 2025).

Conversely, studies in Asian contexts—particularly in Indonesia—remain limited, often addressing general issues of acculturation without considering the complex ethnic identity of biracial adolescents living in socially and religiously embedded environments. In Indonesia, ethnic identity frequently intertwines with religiosity, social norms, and communal solidarity (Abaza, 2014). This is especially evident among Indonesian–Arab adolescents, who navigate intersections between Islamic values, local traditions, and public perceptions of "Arabness" as a symbol of religiosity. Hence, there remains a knowledge gap in understanding how biracial adolescents in Indonesia—whether of Western, East Asian, or Middle Eastern descent—construct their ethnic identities through family and social interactions in intercultural contexts.

This article examines how biracial adolescents in Indonesia form and negotiates their ethnic identities through the roles of family, social environment, and cross-cultural experience. Drawing from three cases—Indonesian–American, Indonesian–Japanese, and Indonesian–Arab—the study provides a comparative portrait of ethnic identity construction in Indonesia's multicultural setting.

The novelty of this research lies in its effort to expand Phinney's (1993) model of ethnic identity development and Ting-Toomey's (2005) intercultural communication framework within Indonesia's unique socio-religious context. Unlike previous studies focusing on Western societies, this study demonstrates that religiosity, familial values, and cultural collectivism play significant roles in shaping biracial adolescents' identity negotiation. This approach offers a

new understanding that ethnic identity is not merely a result of cultural acculturation but also a communicative process of expressing values, beliefs, and solidarity that reflects the distinctive character of Indonesian society.

RESEARCH METHOD

Paradigm and Approach

This study adopts an interpretive paradigm with a descriptive qualitative approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interpretive paradigm emphasizes understanding social reality as a construction of subjective meanings shaped through symbolic interaction. In this context, the research seeks to interpret how biracial adolescents negotiate their ethnic identities amid encounters with diverse cultural systems. The descriptive qualitative approach allows an in-depth portrayal of the processes, contexts, and meanings behind participants' experiences without manipulating their social realities.

Participants

Three biracial adolescents aged 18–19 participated in this study, representing the late adolescent category as defined by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia (2009). The participants were purposively selected to reflect diverse cultural backgrounds, namely Indonesian–Japanese (influenced by East Asian culture), Indonesian–American (influenced by Western culture), and Indonesian–Arab (influenced by Middle Eastern culture). This purposeful selection was intended to capture the range of cross-cultural variations that characterize Indonesia's pluralistic patterns of ethnic identity formation. Each participant was regarded as a unique social actor who actively negotiates identity within and between multiple cultural value systems, offering distinct insights into how biracial adolescents construct and interpret their sense of belonging in a multicultural society.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on Phinney's (1993) ethnic identity development theory and Ting-Toomey's (2005) concept of intercultural communication. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, depending on participants' availability. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes to document nonverbal cues and contextual details.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves three interconnected stages. The first stage, data reduction, entailed selecting, simplifying, and categorizing raw data into relevant thematic clusters to focus on patterns that directly addressed the research objectives. The second stage, data display, involved organizing the reduced data into matrices and thematic narratives, enabling the researcher to visualize relationships among concepts and identify emerging trends across participants. The third stage, conclusion drawing and verification, consisted of interpreting the meaning of the data through cross-case comparisons while consistently reviewing and validating the emerging patterns to ensure accuracy and credibility. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing insights across participants and situating them within each adolescent's social context. This analytical approach provided a comprehensive

and contextualized understanding of how biracial adolescents in Indonesia form and negotiate their ethnic identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Early Awareness of Ethnic Identity

Interviews revealed that all three adolescents were aware of their ethnic differences from an early age. The Indonesian–American participant observed religious practices such as Ramadan and visited Indonesia regularly despite living abroad. The Indonesian–Japanese participant recognized their "different" identity after moving from multicultural Batam to the more homogenous Jakarta. Meanwhile, the Indonesian–Arab participant grew up in a deeply religious family where Islamic values, worship, and religious celebrations were integral to daily life.

These findings reflect Phinney's (1990) first stage of ethnic identity development—unexamined ethnic identity—characterized by early awareness influenced by family socialization. At this stage, identity is not yet consciously explored but internalized through recurring family values and practices. They also align with recent empirical evidence that school and family contexts jointly scaffold adolescents' heritage-identity trajectories (Hölscher, Rudasill, & Titzmann, 2024) and that cultural identity is linked to adolescents' socio-psychological adjustment in immigrant-background samples (Baumert, Schultze-Krumbholz, Wong, & Becker, 2024). In our data, early religious routines and family traditions appear to play a similar anchoring role in the Indonesian context.

Identity Negotiation in Social Contexts

All participants reported experiencing identity negotiation in their social environments. The Indonesian–American adolescent often encountered the question, "What are you?", reflecting society's tendency to categorize based on physical appearance. The Indonesian–Japanese participant noticed heightened visibility as "different" after relocating to Jakarta. The Indonesian–Arab participant faced stereotypes linked to physical features and "Arabness," responding by affirming their Muslim and Indonesian identity. This phenomenon aligns with Barth's (1988) situational ethnicity, which posits that ethnic identity is contextually constructed and selectively expressed depending on social interactions. Extending this view, recent work on malleable racial identification shows that mixed-race individuals strategically recalibrate self-labels and communicative cues across settings (Cardwell, 2023) and that such flexibility is a core adaptive resource in mixed-race psychology (Cleveland, 2025). Our participants repeated re-explanations of "who they are" mirror these context-contingent labelling and framing strategies.

Integration of Cross-Cultural Values

All participants demonstrated the ability to integrate diverse cultural values. The Indonesian–American participant emphasized that living within two cultures broadened their understanding of religion, tradition, and social perspectives. The Indonesian–Japanese adolescent described a balance between their father's Japanese discipline and their mother's Indonesian warmth. Meanwhile, the Indonesian–Arab participant internalized religiosity, familial respect, and Islamic spirituality while harmonizing them with local Indonesian customs. This reflects Martin and Nakayama's (2010) multicultural identity model, particularly the integration stage, where individuals embrace pride in their ethnicity while accepting other cultural influences. Consistent with longitudinal evidence that supportive school ecologies can

promote stable or ascending heritage-identity profiles (Hölscher et al., 2024), our cases suggest that proximal contexts (family routines, faith communities, peer climates) enable a workable synthesis of values. Such synthesis is also consonant with findings that coherent cultural identity relates to social and psychological adjustment (Baumert et al., 2024).

Language and Humour as Symbols of Identity

Language emerged as a crucial factor in constructing ethnic identity. The Indonesian–American participant used English as their main language while understanding Indonesian passively, with family humour serving as an emotional bridge across generations. The Indonesian–Japanese adolescent learned Japanese expressions and humour from their father but used them less frequently in daily interactions. The Indonesian–Arab participant primarily spoke Indonesian but incorporated Arabic phrases for religious purposes, such as greetings and prayers. These findings support Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel's (2016) view that language is a cultural symbol that not only conveys meaning but also affirms identity and belonging. In addition, the communicative flexibility observed—switching codes, selecting religious phrases, adjusting humour—parallels Cardwell's (2023) account of communicative and labelling strategies in malleable identification, wherein everyday discourse practices enact and stabilize hybrid selves.

Ethnic Identity as Social Capital

All participants viewed their dual identity as social capital that enriches their intercultural interactions. The Indonesian–American adolescent felt comfortable engaging with other Asian communities such as Vietnamese and Korean peers. The Indonesian–Japanese adolescent leveraged their multicultural background to connect with international students. The Indonesian–Arab participant regarded their identity as a bridge for Muslim solidarity and openness toward Indonesia's cultural diversity. These findings reinforce Gudykunst's (2005) intercultural communication competence theory, suggesting that awareness of cultural differences enhances empathy, tolerance, and adaptability. They also echo Cleveland's (2025) synthesis that mixed-race identity processes, when supported by validating contexts, are associated with broader social networks and adaptive outcomes—a pattern our data illustrate in Indonesia's socio-religious milieu.

Table 1: Key Themes from Interview Findings

Main Theme	Indonesian–American	Indonesian–Japanese	Indonesian–Arab	Related Theory
Ethnic awareness	Ramadan traditions, Indonesian food	Awareness since kindergarten, stronger in Jakarta	Islamic traditions since childhood	Phinney – Early ethnic identity stage
Identity negotiation	Frequently asked "What are you?"	Feels different in Jakarta	Faces stereotypes about "Arabness"	Barth – Situational Ethnicity
Cultural integration	Appreciates religious and cultural diversity	Japanese discipline + Indonesian warmth	Religiosity and family values	Martin & Nakayama – Integration
Language & humour	Understands Indonesian, family humour	Japanese humour and language from father	Indonesian language + Arabic religious expressions	Samovar – Language as cultural symbol

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.14ti38/assrj.1210.19538

Social capital	Connects with other Asian communities	Builds relations with foreign students	Muslim solidarity and openness	Gudykunst – Intercultural competence

Overall, the findings indicate that the ethnic identity formation of biracial adolescents in Indonesia is dynamic, contextual, and communicative. Beyond extending classic frameworks (Phinney, 1990; Barth, 1988; Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Samovar et al., 2016), our analysis dovetails with recent Western evidence in two ways. First, context matters: family/school ecologies and heritage-affirming settings are linked to healthier identity trajectories (Hölscher et al., 2024) and to better socio-psychological adjustment (Baumert et al., 2024), both mirrored in our Indonesian cases via religious routines, communal ties, and inclusive peer climates. Second, flexibility matters: mixed-heritage youth deploy malleable identification strategies—adjusting self-labels, language, and humour—to navigate shifting audiences (Cardwell, 2023; Cleveland, 2025). Within Indonesia's socio-religious and collectivist landscape, such flexibility is channelled through religiosity, family cohesion, and communal belonging, distinguishing these processes from more individualistic Western contexts and yielding a hybridized form of "Indonesianness" that is both anchored and adaptive.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The findings show that ethnic identity formation among biracial adolescents in Indonesia is a dynamic, contextual, and communicative process shaped by family, social environment, and cross-cultural experiences. Family functions as the primary socialization agent transmitting cultural traditions; social environments provide spaces for identity negotiation through stereotypes and acceptance; and intercultural experiences enrich self-reflection and adaptability. Dual identity does not cause conflict but instead serves as social capital and intercultural competence, fostering empathy, flexibility, and communicative effectiveness. In Indonesia's religious and collectivist setting, religiosity and familial values emerge as distinctive elements that differentiate this process from those observed in Western contexts.

Practical Implications

The practical implications involve families, schools, and policymakers in supporting the positive development of ethnic identity among biracial adolescents. Families play a key role in cultivating ethnic pride early through traditions, heritage language, and emotional engagement in cultural activities, fostering openness to multiple cultures and a confident sense of belonging. Schools should create inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environments by integrating multicultural perspectives into curricula and classroom practices, ensuring that all students feel recognized and respected. Communities and policymakers should design social programs that promote cross-cultural integration, intercultural communication training, and public campaigns to challenge stereotypes against minority ethnic groups. Collaborative efforts among families, educational institutions, and communities will strengthen a social ecosystem that nurtures healthy and inclusive identity development in Indonesia's multicultural society.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited by its small number of participants and homogeneous age range, which constrains the generalizability of findings. Future studies should expand participant diversity to include a broader age range—from early adolescence to young adulthood—and diverse

geographic regions to capture more representative patterns of ethnic identity formation across Indonesia. Longitudinal research would provide deeper insights into how biracial identity evolves over time and how transnational factors such as digital media, migration, and online intercultural interactions influence it. Moreover, future studies could employ mixed-methods approaches to examine relationships between ethnic identity awareness and variables such as belongingness, self-confidence, and intercultural communication competence. Exploring religiosity and gender as contextual dimensions may also reveal how these factors strengthen or challenge cultural roles in identity negotiation. Thus, this study not only contributes empirically to understanding biracial adolescents' ethnic identity formation in Indonesia but also opens new pathways for exploring hybridity, religiosity, and intercultural communication in evolving multiethnic societies.

References

Barth, F. (1998). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Baumert, J., Schultze-Krumbholz, A., Wong, J. Y., & Becker, J. (2024). *Cultural identity and the academic, social, and psychological adjustment of adolescents with immigrant background in Germany*. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 53*(3), 456–472. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-023-01853-z

Cardwell, M. E. (2023). *Examining the dimensions of malleable racial identification: Cognitive, communicative, and labelling strategies*. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research, 23*(2), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2022.2153615

Cleveland, M. (2025). *The social identity and psychology of mixed-race individuals*. *Personality and Individual Differences, 207*, 112150. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2024.112150

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. Norton.

Hölscher, S. I. E., Rudasill, K. M., & Titzmann, P. F. (2024). *Promoting adolescents' heritage cultural identity development: Longitudinal trajectories and school contextual influences*. *Journal of Adolescence, 104*, 23–35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2024.01.005

Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (2010). *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*. McGraw-Hill.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Sage.

Phinney, J. S. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*(3), 499–514.

Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., McDaniel, E. R., & Roy, C. S. (2016). *Communication Between Cultures*. Cengage.

Tsai, J. (2019). Mixed-heritage individuals' encounters with raciolinguistic ideologies. *Journal of Language and Identity, 18*(2), 67–84.