






Commitment of adolescents and youth to ethnic identity in a contemporary intercultural society

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined the influence of age on ethnic identity commitment, examining the extent to which adolescents in a multicultural society identify with their ethnic origin. The primary objective was to explore patterns of ethnic identity development across distinct stages of youth and early adulthood. A quantitative design was employed surveying 336 participants aged 17-35 using a structured questionnaire assessing ethnic identification, including cultural affiliation, pride, and involvement in ethnic-related practices. The results revealed a moderate level of commitment to ethnic identities among participants. However, age was a significant variable. Younger participants (17-22 years) showed lower commitment levels compared to older groups (23-28 and 29-35 years) suggesting a developmental trajectory in ethnic identity formation. These findings have important implications for understanding identity, values and belief system evolution in adolescence and early adulthood within multicultural contexts. The study highlights the need for further longitudinal and cross-cultural research to deepen our understanding of complex ethnic identity processes in diverse societies.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to knowledge by revealing age-related differences in ethnic identity commitment among youth in multicultural contexts highlighting a developmental progression from adolescence to early adulthood. It emphasizes the importance of age in shaping cultural affiliation, offering insights for future research on identity formation in diverse societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identification is important for an individual's development during the adolescent stage. Among other things, it establishes a sense of self-worth, self-belief, values and the development of a strong sense of self. At the early adolescence stage, people are preoccupied with adjusting to several changes ranging from biological to cognitive, emotional, physical, and social changes (Erikson, 1950; Pearson, 2008). Erikson (1950) noted that people in this phase are primarily concerned with their external image and how it contrasts with their internal self-perception in addition to these changes. He also maintained that adolescents grapple with aligning the roles and abilities they developed earlier with the prototypes that are deemed standard and popular. Adolescents actively seek a sense of belonging and similarity; they need to recognise that each stage of their development contributes to their group

identity. They must be ready to adopt enduring models and ideals to validate their internal roadmap for life (Erikson, 1950; Harris & Mylroie, 2016). People find it necessary to explore and discover who they are, including identifying with their ethnic origin (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

One of the main challenges adolescents face during this period is forming a personal identity. Failure to develop a well-defined sense of ethnic identity can lead to role confusion and interpersonal frustration, which may result in socioemotional issues, such as antisocial behavior, depression, substance abuse, delinquency, internalized and externalized behavior problems and even suicide (Burke, Brennan, & Cann, 2012; Hlongwane & Lawrence, 2021; Lawrence, 2020). These behaviors can negatively impact an individual's developmental process and lead them to question their ethnic identity. Identity exploration involves actively evaluating and considering different options for one's identity to determine which values, beliefs, and goals to pursue (Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2013). Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) emphasize that developing a sense of ethnic identity is a crucial step, particularly for young individuals from diverse backgrounds. This process is essential because identity is a significant means by which ethnicity promotes positive adjustment to young adulthood and influences normative development (Neblett Jr, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012; Williams, Tolan, Durkee, Francois, & Anderson, 2012).

Defining a precise and widely recognised definition of ethnic identity has proven to be challenging (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Various scholars have offered perspectives that illuminate the concept. The process of developing one's ethnic identity is dynamic and continuous involving critical analysis of preexisting beliefs, review of historical and modern cultural experiences, and interaction with other groups to enhance one's comprehension of one's ethnic background. This process reflects the diversity within ethnic groups, which can be shaped by factors, such as language, acculturation, immigration status, socioeconomic class, and regional background—each contributing to variations in cultural norms and values among members of the same group. Browning et al. (2004) argue that ethnic identity evolves through both internal developments within a group and its interactions with external groups. According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), ethnic identity comprises two dimensions, namely, external ethnic identity which refers to social and cultural expressions, and internal ethnic identity, which includes cognitive, emotional, and moral components. They also highlight the critical role of family, community, and broader societal influences in shaping individual ethnic identity. McMahon and Watts (2002) define ethnic identity for this study as the psychological relationship that a person has with a group that shares a common cultural heritage, which includes shared customs, beliefs, language, and behavioural patterns.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Multiple researches indicate a strong relationship between ethnic identity and the development of prosocial behaviour in adolescents and youth. For instance, a comprehensive study was carried out by Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) on the effects of ethnic-racial identity on the developmental outcomes of African American, Asian American, Latine, Native American and Pacific Islander youth. The study examined the five dimensions of ethnic identity including centrality, exploration, positive affect, public regard and resolution. The study results indicated that individuals who explored their ethnic identity have higher self-esteem, sought information about their heritage, and connected with others who shared their ethnic background. Resolution was associated with an interest in learning, and centrality was linked to high academic motivation, peer acceptance, popularity as well as prosocial behaviour. Positive affect was found to be associated with achievement, greater school success and connectedness, prosocial behaviour, positive self-esteem, and fewer depressive symptoms. Lastly, public regard was related to academic competence, greater school belonging, higher grades, and fewer somatic symptoms in youth. Rivas-Drake et al.'s (2014) research revealed a strong and positive relationship between ethnic-racial identity and the mental well-being and social functioning of youth. The study also found a significant relationship between ethnic-racial identity and academic achievement among Black, Latine, and Asian American young people although this relationship was less

pronounced. The study did not identify any consistent patterns in ethnic-racial identity among Native American youth.

Huguley, Wang, Vasquez, and Guo's (2019) meta-analysis explored how parents' behaviours influence the ethnic-racial development and socialization of children from diverse backgrounds, examining effects on academic performance, mental well-being, and social skills. Analyzing 68 studies, the research revealed a significant relationship between parental socialization practices and ethnic-racial identity formation. Practices that fostered cultural pride and heritage showed the strongest positive relationship to identity development. While parental socialization positively impacted most aspects of ethnic-racial identity, it had a negative effect on public perception. The impact of socialization on identity was most pronounced during high school with Latine youth showing the strongest effect followed by African American and Asian American youth.

Castillo, Reynolds, Lee, and Elliott (2020) examined how internalized oppression influences identity development among individuals with a Black-Asian American ethnic-racial background. Their findings revealed that these individuals often faced identity conflicts within their communities and were frequently objectified because of their mixed heritage. In contrast, there remains a significant gap in research on the racial identity formation of White children, underscoring the importance of exploring their development alongside that of children of color. Addressing this broader need, Williams et al. (2020) proposed a comprehensive framework for ethnic-racial identity development across the lifespan, outlining five core components: recognition, connection, values, actions, and understanding. Their model underscores the critical role of family and parental guidance, particularly in the early years in shaping children's identity formation. Furthermore, the study highlighted that identity development is influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic status, community context, and individual traits such as age, gender, and skin tone. Nishina and Witkow (2020) explored multiracial ethnic-racial identity, emphasizing how it is shaped by community affiliation, gender, and physical appearance (phenotype).

Research by Iruka, Curenton, Sims, Harris, and Ibekwe-Okafor (2021) highlighted the significance of early ethnic-racial identity formation in shaping cognitive, social-emotional, and academic development in young children. The study emphasized the importance of early identity formation for healthy social development and role formation.

Topps and Jiang (2023) investigated a strong ethnic identity could mitigate the negative impact of peer stress on life satisfaction in adolescents, finding that it served as a protective factor, particularly for adolescent wellbeing. Previous studies have consistently shown a positive correlation between ethnic identity and overall life satisfaction across diverse ethnic groups (Herrington, Smith, Feinauer, & Griner, 2016; Syed et al., 2013). Elshad (2020) found that Azerbaijani-speaking students exhibited stronger ethnic identity compared to Russian-speaking students, showing a strong emotional connection to their ethnic group and cultural heritage.

Most of these studies were conducted in Western contexts with the exception of Elshad's (2020) study, limiting their generalizability to a multiethnic country like Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has a diverse population of about 100 ethnic groups. Since independence, efforts have been made to create a common Kazakhstani identity. However, adolescents and young Kazakhs may face new difficulties with the formation of their ethnic identity as a result of the migration of young people from nearby countries brought on by ongoing conflict. Developing a positive ethnic identity in young people is essential for the country's economic, social, and political development. The increasingly intercultural nature of Kazakhstan may further influence ethnic identity development. Cognitive and social-emotional skills associated with ethnic identity are viewed as crucial for solving social problems but these skills may be compromised if young people struggle to form an ethnic identity. Studies focusing on ethnic identity commitment among adolescents and youth in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan are scarce. This gap in the literature led to the hypothesis that Kazakhstani adolescents' and youth' commitment to their ethnic identity varies by age.

2.1. Aim

The study aimed to investigate the ethnic identity commitment of adolescents and youth in the modern intercultural space of Kazakhstan. The following two research questions guided the study:

1. What level of commitment did the Kazakhstani adolescents and youth have to their ethnic identity?
2. Was there a significant difference between the ethnic identities of the participants in relation to their age groups?

3. METHOD

3.1. Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research approach using surveys to gather and analyze data. This approach enabled the collection of statistically analyzable data, providing a more accurate understanding of the target population. The study sample consisted of 336 adolescents and young adults from Northern Kazakhstan recruited through convenience sampling, a non-probability technique that leverages easily accessible populations (Elfil & Negida, 2017; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018). The sample was randomly selected comprising 51.2% female and 48.8% male participants, all current university students or graduates.

3.2. Measure

A self-report ethnic identity questionnaire comprising two sections was used. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, nationality and language. The second section employed the revised Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) developed by Phinney (1992) to evaluate two dimensions of ethnic identity: exploration and commitment. The 12-item measure assessed exploration (5 items) and commitment (7 items) using a 4-point Likert scale. Scores ranged from 1 (low commitment) to 5 (high commitment) with higher scores indicating stronger ethnic identity. The measure demonstrated reliability with Cronbach's alpha scores of 0.81 for high school students and 0.90 for college students. Pilot testing ensured cultural compatibility yielding a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.84. Sample items include "I've explored my ethnic group's history and traditions." "I have a clear understanding of my ethnic heritage" and "I engage in cultural practices unique to my ethnic group."

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the L. N. Gumilyova, Eurasian National University Astana and the Republic of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education and Science, KAZAKHSTAN approved this study on 22nd May, 2022 (Ref. No. FSSRECENU22-05-22). The data collection process adhered to strict ethical guidelines and protocols. Participants received an informed consent form and had one week to review it. Those who agreed to participate signed and returned the form voluntarily. Participants' responses were kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. They were informed that their answers carried no right or wrong implications and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. The four-week study distributed 400 questionnaires, yielding 336 complete responses (84% response rate).

3.4. Data Analysis

The data was scrutinized for completeness and validity before conducting the analysis. The necessary statistical assumptions, including normality, collinearity, and homoscedasticity were confirmed. Demographic data were summarized using descriptive statistics. A comparison of variance was performed using ANOVA to examine differences in ethnic identity across age groups (17-22, 23-28, and 29-35 years). Significant differences between groups would indicate disparate means, requiring further analysis. Conversely, similar variances would suggest no significant differences between age groups. The alpha level was set at 0.05 to determine significance.

4. RESULTS

The demographic characteristics of the participants are detailed in [Table 1](#). The gender distribution showed that 48.8% of the participants were male and 51.2% were female. The participants' nationality was as follows: 68.8% Kazakhstani, 22.6% Russian, 4.5% Tatar, and 2.7% other nationalities with Uzbekistanis making up a small 1.5%. The age range was diverse with 33% between 17 and 22 years, 28.9% between 23 and 28 years and the highest proportion (38.1%) between 29 and 35 years. Language-wise, a majority (65.2%) spoke Russian while 34.8% spoke Kazakh.

Table 1. Participant's demographic

Factors		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	164	48.8%
	Female	174	51.2%
Nationality	Kazakh	231	68.8%
	Russian	76	22.6%
	Uzbekistan	5	1.5%
	Tatars	15	4.5%
	Other nationalities	9	2.7%
Age	17-22 years	111	33.0%
	23 – 28 years	97	28.9%
	29 – 35 years	128	38.9%
Language	Kazakh	117	34.8%
	Russian	219	65.2%

Research question one: What level of commitment did the Kazakhstani adolescents and youth have to their ethnic identity?

[Table 2](#) presents the participants' level of commitment to their ethnic identity, addressing research question one. The results show a moderate commitment with six items scoring above the average mean of 3.13 and six items below. The highest scores indicated a strong sense of acceptance and belonging with things like “I’m good with my ethnic background” ($M = 3.85$), “I know my ethnic background well” ($M = 3.62$), “I’m glad to belong to my ethnic group” ($m = 3.58$). However, items related to exploring and understanding one's ethnicity, such as “I understand what my ethnicity means to me” ($M = 2.47$) scored lower. The lowest scores were found in items related to active engagement with one's ethnic group like “I’m active in ethnic organisations” ($m = 2.42$) and “I discuss my ethnicity with others” ($M = 2.54$).

Table 2. Participants' responses to ethnic identity measures expressed as simple percentage rates

No.	Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	SD
1	I dedicated significant time to exploring my ethnic group's heritage, including its history, cultural practices, and values.	17(5.1%)	65(19.3%)	155(46.1%)	99(29.5%)	3.00	0.83
2	I actively participate in community organizations that share my ethnic background.	71(21.1%)	113(33.6)	89(26.5%)	63(18.8%)	2.42	1.02
3	I have a deep understanding of my ethnic roots and their significance.	2(0.6%)	24(7.1%)	73(21.7%)	237(70.5%)	3.62	0.64
4	I often reflect on how my ethnicity influences my life.	62(18.5%)	89(26.5%)	92(27.4%)	93(27.6%)	2.64	1.07
5	I am grateful to belong to my ethnic community and feel a strong sense of connection.	13(3.9%)	6(1.8%)	90(26.8%)	227(67.5%)	3.58	0.71
6	I have engaged in meaningful conversations with others to deepen my understanding of my	-	20(6.0%)	139(41.4%)	177(52.6%)	3.48	0.63

No.	Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	SD
	ethnic heritage.						
7	I am aware of the importance of my ethnicity in shaping my identity.	-	24(7.1%)	126(37.5%)	186(55.4%)	2.47	0.61
8	I talked about my ethnic group with many people to learn more about it.	60(17.9%)	106(31.5%)	99(29.5%)	71(21.1%)	2.54	1.02
9	I am proud of my ethnic group.	-	29(8.6%)	84(25.0%)	223(66.4)	3.56	0.65
10	I keep the traditions of my ethnic group.	-	83(24.7%)	131(39.0%)	122(36.3%)	3.12	0.77
11	I feel a strong sense of belonging.	-	54(16.1%)	133(39.6%)	149(44.3%)	3.28	0.73
12	I'm good with my ethnic background.	-	-	49(14.6%)	287(85.4%)	3.85	0.35
Average weight						3.13	9.05

Research question two: Was there a significant difference between the ethnic identities of the participants in relation to their age groups?

Table 3. ANOVA results showing the test of differences between the age groups of the participants when compared with their ethnic identity

ANOVA					
Ethnic identity					
Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	300.424	2	150.212	5.397	0.005
Within groups	9268.716	334	27.834		
Total	9569.140	336			

The results in Table 3 established a statistically significant difference in the ethnic identity of the participants when they were compared with their age group, $F(2,334) = 5.397$, $p < .05$ (17–22 years, 23–28 years, and 29–35 years). This meant that adolescents and youths differed in their ethnic identity and commitments. Tukey's honest significant difference (HSD) and post-hoc analysis were then performed to confirm where the differences occurred.

Table 4. A Tukey's HSD post-hoc analysis

Multiple comparisons						
Dependent variable: Ethnic Identity						
Tukey HSD						
Age(I)	Age (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
17-22 years	23-28 years	-0.1897	0.733	0.964	-1.916	1.537
	29-35 years	1.853*	0.685	0.019	0.246	3.464
23-28 years	17-22 years	0.190	0.733	0.964	-1.537	1.916
	29-35 years	2.0421*	0.710	0.012	0.370	3.714
29-35 years	17-22 years	-1.853*	0.684	0.019	-3.464	-0.242
	23-28 years	-2.0424*	0.710	0.012	-3.714	-0.370

Note: *. The mean difference was significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4 details the follow-up analysis performed to determine which age groups had a mean value that was statistically different. The results showed that there was a statistical difference between the participants whose ages ranged from 23 to 28 years and those who were between 29 and 35 years of age in terms of their ethnic identity. Furthermore, participants who were between 17 and 22 years of age differed from those within the age range of 29–35 years in terms of their ethnic identity.

5. DISCUSSION

The study explored ethnic identity commitment through the lens of adolescents and youth in an intercultural space. The research questions were as follows: (1) What level of commitment did the Kazakhstani adolescents and youth have to their ethnic identity? (2) Was there a significant difference between the ethnic identities of the participants across their age groups?

The outcome of the study established that adolescents and young people who participated in the study were moderately committed to their ethnic identity. Surprisingly, the overriding influence of the Russian language, which was widely used as the language of communication by the majority in the country (Daminov, 2020) coupled with the fact that the participants lived in a modern environment may be responsible for this outcome. Interestingly, the findings indicated that the participants were more committed to the affirmation and belongingness of ethnic identity (an affective component) than to ethnic identity search and achievement, which is the cognitive aspect of ethnic identity. This implied that adolescents and youths had a good feeling about their ethnic identity despite the plurality of Kazakhstani society. This finding corresponded with the findings of the previous studies of Kiang, Witkow, Baldelomar, and Fuligni (2010), Rivas-Drake et al. (2014), Syed and Azmitia (2008) and Yip, Seaton, and Sellers (2006). These studies affirmed that not all youths believed that ethnicity was central to their lives. This could be the reason for their moderate commitment to ethnic identity in this study. Another possible justification for the moderate commitment to ethnic identity observed in this study could perhaps be the age of the participants. This substantiated the position of Wang, Douglass, and Yip (2017) that ethnic identity varied with age and that older youths were more likely to have a clear and committed sense of their ethnic identity than younger youths.

The second research question revealed significant age-related differences in ethnic identity among participants. Ethnic commitment levels varied across age groups, i.e., 17-22 year olds differed from 29-35 year olds, and 22-28 year olds also showed distinct levels of commitment. These findings support previous research (Huang & Stormshak, 2011; Meeus, 2017) suggesting that age influences ethnic identity development. The study's results align with Yip, Douglass, and Shelton (2013) highlighting environmental influences on ethnic identity diversity. Additionally, Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) noted that ethnicity's importance can vary within and across individuals/contexts.

This study's findings corroborate previous research by Harris and Mylroie (2016), Neblett Jr. et al. (2012), Rivas-Drake et al. (2014), Williams et al. (2012) and Williams et al. (2020) emphasizing age-related differences in ethnic identity.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored ethnic identity commitment among adolescents and youth in Kazakhstan's intercultural society. Findings revealed a moderate level of commitment, potentially influenced by Russian language dominance and age-related differences. A significant age effect was found with commitment levels varying across age groups. These findings have important implications for young individuals' development, self-concept, values, and self-esteem, highlighting the need to consider age-specific differences in ethnic identity formation.

7. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study acknowledges its limitations, including the use of a single data collection method which could have been strengthened by a mixed-methods approach. Future research could explore additional factors influencing ethnic identity commitment in adolescents and youth, including causal relationships. Interventions aimed at enhancing ethnic identity in young Kazakhs could also be investigated. The findings represent a snapshot of ethnic identity commitment in this population paving the way for further research in the Central Asian region and

beyond. These results provide a foundation for discussion and a springboard for in-depth exploration of ethnic identity commitment across age groups in low- and middle-income countries worldwide.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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