

Factors Contributing to Identity Confusion in Adolescents from Immigrant Families

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the key factors contributing to identity confusion in adolescents from immigrant families living in Canada.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was used with a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of adolescents navigating identity challenges in the context of immigration. A purposive sample of 31 second-generation immigrant adolescents aged 13 to 18 years was recruited from various provinces in Canada. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focused on cultural conflict, family dynamics, social experiences, and emotional well-being. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis method guided the coding and theme development.

Findings: Five main categories emerged from the analysis: cultural dissonance, social belonging and exclusion, family expectations and role strain, emotional turmoil and psychological strain, and navigating self and future. Each category contained several subcategories, such as conflicting cultural norms, peer rejection, academic pressure, emotional suppression, and self-acceptance. Participants reported a fragmented sense of self due to cultural contradictions, intergenerational conflicts, and perceived discrimination. Many described feelings of shame, anxiety, and confusion, while others expressed resilience and pride in bicultural identities. The study highlights the role of family communication, peer inclusion, and personal agency in shaping identity development.

Conclusion: Identity confusion among adolescents from immigrant families is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon shaped by intersecting cultural, familial, and emotional experiences. While it presents psychological risks, it also offers opportunities for self-exploration and identity integration when supported by inclusive environments and open communication.

Keywords: Immigrant adolescents, identity confusion, cultural dissonance, bicultural stress, qualitative research, family dynamics, social exclusion.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterized by identity exploration, social role transitions, and the negotiation of personal values. For adolescents from immigrant families, this stage involves additional complexities, including navigating multiple cultural frameworks, language norms, and conflicting expectations from their heritage and host societies. Identity confusion, defined as a lack of clarity or consistency in one's sense of self, has emerged as a particularly salient psychological challenge for youth growing up in immigrant contexts (Meca et al., 2017). This confusion often stems from the tension between the desire to belong to the mainstream culture and the obligation to honor one's ethnic heritage, resulting in psychosocial strain and developmental dissonance (Edele et al., 2020; Ryu & Wang, 2024).

The process of identity formation among immigrant adolescents cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the multiplicity of influences that shape their lived experiences. Cultural incongruence within the family, peer rejection, perceived discrimination, and conflicting societal messages contribute to the identity dissonance these adolescents often report (Patel et al., 2023; Titzmann et al., 2013). This is particularly significant in multicultural societies like Canada, where immigrant youth are embedded in a context of simultaneous cultural integration and ethnic marginalization. As adolescents attempt to reconcile internal identity negotiations with external social pressures, many report heightened experiences of alienation and emotional turmoil (Onwong'a et al., 2021; Wilhelm et al., 2022).

Within the family system, intergenerational value gaps and parental acculturation levels can complicate identity development. Adolescents often find themselves caught between parental expectations grounded in traditional norms and the more liberal, individualistic values of the host society (Giuliani & Regalia, 2023; Huh & Chung, 2015). Parental control, lack of emotional communication, and differing language fluencies contribute to family strain, diminishing the adolescent's capacity to seek support or affirmation (Titzmann & Sonnenberg, 2015; Torres, 2024). The absence of open intergenerational dialogue may lead to suppressed emotions and internalized conflicts, which in turn heighten vulnerability to identity confusion (Anagnostara & Papakitsos, 2021).

Educational settings also play a significant role in shaping adolescent identity, especially in relation to peer interactions and institutional norms. The ethnic composition of

classrooms, the inclusiveness of curricula, and peer group dynamics can either buffer or exacerbate feelings of cultural dissonance (Edele et al., 2020). Adolescents who perceive their heritage identity as devalued in the school environment often experience a decline in self-worth and identity coherence (Quintana et al., 2021). Moreover, negative peer experiences, such as bullying or cultural stereotyping, may lead immigrant adolescents to mask aspects of their cultural identity in an effort to fit in, a phenomenon associated with internalized shame and social withdrawal (Petersen et al., 2012; Wake, 2018).

Linguistic and religious affiliations also contribute to identity negotiation among immigrant youth. Language proficiency is a powerful marker of belonging and is often tied to perceptions of cultural authenticity. Adolescents who struggle with their heritage language may feel disconnected from their families, while those who are fluent in the dominant language may still encounter exclusion due to accent or cultural markers (Haque, 2012; Laketa et al., 2023). Similarly, religious observance and visibility—such as dress codes, dietary practices, and worship routines—can heighten visibility and difference, especially when these practices conflict with secular or mainstream cultural norms (Giuliani & Regalia, 2023). These dimensions of identity, when stigmatized or misunderstood, intensify the adolescent's sense of being “between worlds,” a liminal psychological space fraught with tension (Nombora et al., 2022).

The psychological implications of these intersecting identity challenges are profound. Research has shown that unresolved identity confusion is associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal in immigrant adolescents (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2022; Oshri et al., 2014). For many, identity uncertainty becomes a source of chronic stress, negatively impacting school performance, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships (Reitz et al., 2014). Bicultural stress—a specific form of strain arising from navigating two cultural realities—has been identified as a key factor mediating the relationship between cultural identity development and maladaptive outcomes (Maciel & Knudson-Martin, 2013; Oshri et al., 2014). Adolescents who lack the tools or social support to manage this stress are more likely to experience fragmentation in their sense of self and difficulties in future orientation (Meca et al., 2017; Titzmann & Sonnenberg, 2015).

Yet, identity confusion should not be understood purely as a deficit. For some adolescents, it serves as a catalyst for

self-exploration and resilience-building. The act of navigating cultural contradictions and negotiating personal meaning can lead to a more nuanced, multidimensional identity that embraces hybridity rather than opposing cultural forces (Jensen & Arnett, 2012; Sadath & Faheem, 2024). Studies have found that immigrant adolescents who receive racially and ethnically affirming messages from their families and communities are more likely to develop a positive sense of bicultural identity and demonstrate adaptive coping strategies (Patel et al., 2023; Torres, 2024). Such youth often describe their experiences not as identity confusion but as identity expansion, where cultural pluralism becomes a source of strength rather than fragmentation.

Despite this potential for positive adaptation, many adolescents remain unequipped to manage these developmental challenges without adequate support systems. The literature calls for culturally sensitive interventions that prioritize identity affirmation, family communication, and peer inclusivity (Ryu & Wang, 2024; Wake, 2018). Programs that promote ethnic pride, language maintenance, and intergenerational understanding have shown promise in reducing emotional distress and enhancing psychological well-being in this population (Giuliani & Regalia, 2023; Wilhelm et al., 2022). Moreover, educational institutions and youth services must take a more active role in validating cultural difference and creating safe spaces for identity exploration (Nombora et al., 2022; Quintana et al., 2021).

Given the growing diversity of immigrant populations in Canada and other multicultural nations, understanding the mechanisms behind identity confusion in adolescents is essential for informing mental health practices, education policies, and family support programs. While previous studies have explored facets of this phenomenon, few have offered an in-depth qualitative investigation into the lived experiences of immigrant adolescents themselves. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the personal narratives of second-generation immigrant youth in Canada to uncover the key factors that contribute to their identity confusion.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the underlying factors contributing to identity confusion in adolescents

from immigrant families. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure maximum diversity in terms of cultural background, gender, and length of stay in Canada. The sample consisted of 31 adolescents aged between 13 and 18 years, all of whom were second-generation immigrants residing in various urban centers across Canada. Recruitment was conducted through community youth programs, immigrant support organizations, and online platforms, with interviews continuing until theoretical saturation was reached—when no new themes or insights emerged from the data.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely express their thoughts and personal experiences related to identity, belonging, cultural conflict, and social expectations. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing, depending on participants' preferences and geographic accessibility. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to probe various aspects of identity development and confusion, such as cultural duality, peer relationships, family expectations, and perceived discrimination. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software (version 12), which facilitated systematic coding and categorization of the interview transcripts. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis, beginning with data familiarization and initial code generation, followed by the identification and refinement of themes. Constant comparison was used throughout the process to ensure consistency and depth in theme development. Researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing were also employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3. Findings and Results

The participants in this study consisted of 31 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 years ($M = 15.6$), all of whom were second-generation immigrants residing in various provinces across Canada. The sample included 17 females, 13 males, and one participant who identified as non-binary.

Participants represented diverse cultural backgrounds, including South Asian, Middle Eastern, East Asian, African, Caribbean, and Eastern European heritage. The majority were enrolled in secondary school at the time of the interview, and all had been born in Canada to immigrant parents who had settled in the country for at least ten years. Most participants were fluent in English, with varying degrees of proficiency in their heritage languages. Recruitment efforts were designed to ensure a balanced representation of gender, ethnicity, and geographic location

to capture a wide range of lived experiences related to identity confusion in the context of immigrant family dynamics.

Demographically, the average (standard deviation) age was 21.61 (2.32) for the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) group, 21.91 (2.40) for the Mindfulness Therapy group, and 22.77 (3.13) for the control group. Descriptive data for all three groups at three stages—pre-test, post-test, and follow-up—are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Main Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts Extracted from the Interviews

Main Category (Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Cultural Dissonance	Conflicting Cultural Norms	Different rules at home vs school, parental expectations, peer pressure, cultural restrictions
	Generational Gap	Language barrier with parents, old-fashioned values, resistance to change, digital divide
	Bicultural Strain	Dual identity stress, switching behaviors, hiding one side of self, confusion in self-image
	Language and Communication Barriers	Feeling misunderstood, struggling with translation, avoiding native language, embarrassment when speaking
	Inconsistent Value Systems	Clash between religious beliefs and modern norms, guilt, feeling torn between two moral frameworks
	Loss of Cultural Continuity	Forgetting traditions, detachment from roots, parental disappointment, inability to relate to culture
	Identity in Public vs Private Spaces	Acting differently at home and outside, code-switching, masking behavior
2. Social Belonging and Exclusion	Peer Rejection	Not fitting in, being teased for background, exclusion from social events, feeling invisible
	Racial or Ethnic Discrimination	Stereotyping, being treated differently, racial slurs, assumed incompetence
	Group Identity Crisis	Struggling to belong to either group, feeling "too foreign" or "not foreign enough", ambiguous inclusion
	Social Isolation	Lack of close friends, difficulty forming bonds, feeling like an outsider
	Bullying and Microaggressions	Mocking accents, cultural jokes, insensitive questions, being singled out
3. Family Expectations and Role Strain	Academic Pressure	Need to succeed, fear of failure, comparison with others, sacrifice for family reputation
	Role Conflict	Caregiver role, cultural translator, emotional burden, lack of freedom
	Parental Control	Strict rules, limited autonomy, curfews, constant supervision
	Sacrificial Identity	Suppressing personal goals, living parents' dreams, not allowed to explore identity
	Lack of Emotional Validation	Not being heard, emotions minimized, absence of open conversations, fear of disappointing parents
4. Emotional Turmoil and Psychological Strain	Anxiety and Confusion	Overthinking, indecision, fear of judgment, loss of self-confidence
	Shame and Guilt	Feeling ashamed of background, internalized stereotypes, guilt over assimilation
	Emotional Suppression	Hiding emotions, inability to express sadness or anger, emotional numbness
	Depression and Loneliness	Feeling empty, no one to talk to, hiding pain, avoiding social events
	Identity Disintegration	Feeling fragmented, unclear personal values, internal contradictions
5. Navigating Self and Future	Fear of Rejection	Avoiding disclosure of identity, staying silent, blending in to be accepted
	Exploration of Identity	Questioning "Who am I?", trying new experiences, seeking independence, exposure to different cultures
	Reclaiming Cultural Roots	Learning native language, asking about heritage, celebrating traditions, pride in background
	Self-Acceptance	Embracing dual identity, recognizing strengths, feeling secure in self
	Future Orientation	Career dilemmas, pressure to choose a "safe" path, desire for autonomy, future in Canada vs heritage
	Personal Agency	Making independent choices, standing up to norms, pursuing passions, forming new values

The findings of this study are organized into five overarching categories: cultural dissonance, social belonging and exclusion, family expectations and role strain, emotional turmoil and psychological strain, and navigating self and future. Each category contains several subcategories that emerged from participants' narratives.

In the subcategory of Conflicting Cultural Norms, adolescents described experiencing tension between the values upheld in their homes and those they encountered at school or in social settings. Many participants reported having to adhere to rules at home that starkly contrasted with what their peers practiced. For instance, one participant stated, "At home, I'm told not to date or hang out late, but at school, everyone talks about parties and relationships like it's normal." This clash of expectations often led to internal conflict and difficulty reconciling their dual cultural affiliations.

The Generational Gap emerged prominently as adolescents highlighted communication breakdowns with parents due to cultural and technological differences. One participant shared, "My mom still thinks I'll be corrupted by Western TV... she doesn't get that it's just how people talk now." Language differences and differing worldviews created a rift in understanding, resulting in feelings of isolation and frustration for many.

In Bicultural Strain, participants described the mental toll of managing two cultural identities simultaneously. Several interviewees used terms such as "double life" and "split self" to describe the pressure of switching behaviors depending on whether they were at home or with peers. One adolescent noted, "It's exhausting pretending to be someone else with my family just to keep peace."

Language and Communication Barriers were also significant. While most participants were fluent in English, many struggled with speaking their native language or felt embarrassed when doing so. One respondent explained, "I understand my parents' language but I'm scared to speak it—I get laughed at when I say things wrong."

The subcategory Inconsistent Value Systems captured how adolescents felt torn between moral codes, especially around topics such as gender roles, relationships, and autonomy. "I was taught that dating is wrong, but it feels normal here. I'm always confused about what's actually right," expressed one participant.

In Loss of Cultural Continuity, participants described a weakening connection with their cultural heritage. This detachment was often accompanied by parental disappointment. One youth admitted, "I don't know our

traditions well—I feel guilty when my grandma talks about things I can't relate to."

Finally, Identity in Public vs Private Spaces revealed the compartmentalization of identity many adolescents practiced. They adapted their behavior based on context, sometimes concealing key aspects of themselves. "At school, I wear makeup and joke around, but at home, I'm quiet and 'good.' They don't know the real me," said one participant.

In the theme of Social Belonging and Exclusion, the subcategory Peer Rejection showed how adolescents often felt left out or different due to their cultural background. One adolescent reflected, "No one invited me to their birthday party because their parents thought my food smelled weird."

Racial or Ethnic Discrimination was another painful experience. Participants reported being subject to microaggressions and explicit racism. "Someone told me to go back to where I came from, even though I was born here," shared a visibly upset interviewee.

In Group Identity Crisis, several adolescents explained how they didn't feel fully accepted by either their heritage group or mainstream peers. "My cousins say I'm too Canadian, but at school, I'm not Canadian enough," one youth lamented, highlighting the in-betweenness that characterized their identity development.

The Social Isolation subcategory revealed how some adolescents withdrew due to repeated rejection or misunderstanding. "I just stopped trying to fit in," said one participant, "it was easier to be alone than to be judged."

Bullying and Microaggressions were widely reported. Adolescents described being teased for their accents, clothing, or food. One participant shared, "Someone imitated my mom's accent in class, and everyone laughed—I felt so humiliated."

In the category of Family Expectations and Role Strain, Academic Pressure was commonly cited. Many participants felt intense pressure to perform academically as a form of repayment to their parents' sacrifices. "If I don't get straight A's, it's like I've failed my whole family," said one adolescent.

Role Conflict was another key subcategory, with participants often acting as cultural translators, emotional buffers, or caretakers within the family. "I do everything—translate bank stuff, help with my siblings, and I'm only 16," said one interviewee.

In Parental Control, adolescents expressed frustration with their limited autonomy and constant monitoring. "I have to text my mom every hour when I'm out. It's like I'm

not trusted,” noted one participant, underscoring a common experience of surveillance and restricted freedom.

The theme of Sacrificial Identity showed how adolescents often silenced their own desires to fulfill familial obligations. One adolescent revealed, “I want to study art, but my parents said that’s not respectable—I have to be a doctor.”

Lack of Emotional Validation was a pervasive issue. Participants reported feeling dismissed or emotionally neglected. “When I cry, my mom tells me to toughen up—it’s like emotions aren’t allowed,” said one youth.

Under the theme of Emotional Turmoil and Psychological Strain, the subcategory Anxiety and Confusion emerged as adolescents described a constant sense of uncertainty and fear of missteps. One participant noted, “I overthink every word I say, every choice I make—what if I disappoint someone?”

Shame and Guilt were also significant. Adolescents internalized negative stereotypes and felt guilty for assimilating. “Sometimes I hate my name or my lunch because I just want to be normal,” one interviewee confessed.

Emotional Suppression was common. Participants avoided expressing emotions to avoid conflict or shame. “Crying is seen as weakness, so I just keep everything in,” said one adolescent.

The subcategory of Depression and Loneliness included experiences of emotional withdrawal and hopelessness. “I stay in my room a lot—there’s no one who gets me anyway,” said a participant who reported feeling persistently isolated.

Identity Disintegration was described as a loss of cohesive self. “Some days I don’t even know who I am—I’m one person at school, another at home,” said one participant.

Fear of Rejection was also reported frequently. Adolescents described hiding parts of their identity out of fear of exclusion. “I don’t talk about being Muslim because people might judge me,” said one interviewee.

In the final theme, Navigating Self and Future, the subcategory Exploration of Identity captured how adolescents actively questioned and experimented with who they are. “I’m still figuring it out—trying different things, different people, different versions of me,” said one youth.

Reclaiming Cultural Roots showed a desire to reconnect with heritage. Some participants began learning their native language or engaging in cultural activities. “I started asking my grandma about our traditions—I want to feel proud, not lost,” said one adolescent.

Self-Acceptance was a hopeful theme, with some adolescents reaching a place of internal balance. “I finally realized I don’t have to choose—I can be both,” said one participant.

Future Orientation reflected the tension between individual aspirations and family expectations. “I want to go into music, but my parents think that’s unstable. I’m scared I’ll disappoint them,” said one youth.

Finally, Personal Agency included acts of resistance and independent decision-making. “I told my parents I won’t go to med school—I need to live for myself,” said one participant, signaling a growing sense of self-direction.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that identity confusion among adolescents from immigrant families is shaped by a constellation of intersecting experiences spanning cultural conflict, familial dynamics, social exclusion, emotional distress, and efforts toward self-discovery. Through the voices of 31 second-generation immigrant youth in Canada, this study illustrates that identity is not a static or binary concept, but a fluid process negotiated across environments that often send contradictory signals. These results offer valuable insights into the psychosocial mechanisms underlying identity development in the context of immigration and align with broader research demonstrating that adolescents in multicultural environments must often navigate a complex and emotionally charged negotiation of “belonging” across multiple cultural spaces (Giuliani & Regalia, 2023; Meca et al., 2017).

One of the most prominent findings of this study is the experience of cultural dissonance—a form of inner conflict stemming from opposing cultural expectations between home and public life. Adolescents reported internal tension as they sought to meet parental expectations rooted in heritage values while simultaneously assimilating into the dominant cultural milieu. This is consistent with research demonstrating that adolescents from immigrant backgrounds frequently confront dual demands that require them to “code-switch” or compartmentalize aspects of their identity depending on the social context (Oshri et al., 2014; Titzmann & Sonnenberg, 2015). For many participants, this negotiation produced a fragmented self-concept and difficulty defining who they were across domains. The findings mirror the work of Laketa et al., who emphasize that cultural conflict, especially around language and values,

contributes significantly to bicultural identity stress (Laketa et al., 2023).

This identity fragmentation was further complicated by intergenerational conflict and communication barriers. Participants reported a lack of emotional openness and understanding within their families, particularly due to linguistic gaps and differing generational values. These findings resonate with the observations of Huh and Chung, who highlight the role of bilingual socialization and the challenge of navigating family relationships in households where parents and children differ significantly in language fluency and cultural alignment (Huh & Chung, 2015). Similarly, the work of Titzmann and Sonnenberg supports the notion that value conflicts between immigrant parents and adolescents predict increased family tensions and impede adolescents' identity clarity (Titzmann & Sonnenberg, 2015). These dynamics reinforce the notion that immigrant families must not only contend with external adaptation but also with internal cohesion to support adolescent development.

Another critical factor contributing to identity confusion was the experience of social exclusion and peer rejection. Adolescents recounted stories of being marginalized at school, mocked for their cultural traits, or stereotyped based on race or religion. These social experiences significantly influenced their sense of belonging and self-worth. This finding aligns closely with research by Petersen et al., who found that experiences of ethnicity-related stress among adolescent immigrants are deeply intertwined with their sense of ethnic identity and psychological adjustment (Petersen et al., 2012). Likewise, Wilhelm et al. observed that immigrant adolescents often inhabit "three worlds"—navigating family, school, and peer environments with differing cultural rules and levels of acceptance, often leading to identity uncertainty and emotional exhaustion (Wilhelm et al., 2022).

The theme of emotional and psychological turmoil also emerged strongly. Many adolescents described feelings of anxiety, shame, and emotional suppression. The internalization of cultural inferiority, fear of disappointing parents, and the stress of constant adaptation created a significant mental health burden. This is well-supported in the work of Oshri et al., who showed that bicultural stress and identity instability are strongly correlated with depressive symptoms and maladaptive behaviors in immigrant adolescents (Oshri et al., 2014). Similarly, Mastrotheodoros et al. identified a link between poor family functioning and weak identity commitments, both of which

were reflected in the narratives of the current study's participants (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the developmental risk posed by unresolved identity confusion, particularly when emotional expression is discouraged or invalidated in the family environment.

Despite the challenges, the study also highlighted a path toward self-exploration and identity integration. Some adolescents described their confusion as an opportunity for growth, using it as a platform to question assumptions, reconnect with heritage, or assert personal values. This perspective echoes the work of Jensen and Arnett, who argue that globalization has created new identity pathways for adolescents, allowing for more fluid, hybrid identities that defy fixed categories (Jensen & Arnett, 2012). Similarly, Sadath and Faheem emphasize that global youth today are forging identities that incorporate transnational influences, even as they face the psychological burden of constant self-definition (Sadath & Faheem, 2024). Adolescents in this study who reported greater self-acceptance tended to express pride in their dual heritage and a sense of agency in shaping their own future.

These adaptive narratives were often linked to support systems that affirmed adolescents' bicultural identities. When adolescents received positive racial-ethnic socialization—particularly from parents who encouraged exploration and expression—they were more likely to describe themselves in coherent, confident terms. This reflects the findings of Patel et al., who found that adolescents who are empowered to discuss and affirm their racial-ethnic backgrounds within the family context are better equipped to manage their identity development and social integration (Patel et al., 2023). Similarly, Torres highlighted the role of protective parent-child factors, such as cultural empathy and emotional support, in buffering adolescents against depressive symptoms and fostering identity coherence (Torres, 2024).

Educational and community settings also emerged as pivotal spaces where identity confusion could either be amplified or alleviated. Adolescents in supportive school environments reported fewer episodes of cultural shame and greater openness in expressing their heritage. This finding aligns with the study by Edele et al., which noted that the ethnic composition and inclusiveness of classrooms significantly influenced adolescents' identification with both mainstream and ethnic cultures (Edele et al., 2020). Moreover, Onwong'a et al. illustrated how youth from immigrant backgrounds often develop a hybrid or layered sense of identity—like the concept of being

“AmeriKenyan”—which allows them to integrate rather than suppress cultural influences (Onwong’a et al., 2021).

Importantly, the study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the role of personal agency in identity development. Adolescents who made deliberate efforts to define their paths—whether by resisting imposed career choices, reconnecting with their cultural roots, or articulating personal values—demonstrated a higher level of identity clarity. These findings resonate with the narrative accounts of Maciel and Knudson-Martin, who documented how Mexican immigrant adolescents actively constructed their identities through resistance, negotiation, and engagement with sociocultural processes (Maciel & Knudson-Martin, 2013). The current study echoes this agency-driven model, suggesting that while structural factors shape identity confusion, adolescents are not merely passive recipients but active negotiators of meaning.

Finally, while bicultural identity conflict is often framed in the literature as a developmental risk, the current study illustrates that it can also serve as a transformative opportunity. Adolescents who are supported in embracing cultural pluralism, who are allowed to explore without shame, and who are affirmed by both family and peers, are more likely to experience identity development as a dynamic, empowering journey (Anagnostara & Papakitsos, 2021; Quintana et al., 2021). These findings add complexity to our understanding of identity confusion—not as a fixed deficit but as a developmental space where cultural tension can catalyze psychological growth.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

While this study provides in-depth insights into the lived experiences of immigrant adolescents in Canada, it is not without limitations. The sample was limited to second-generation adolescents who were fluent in English, which may have excluded the voices of youth with less linguistic proficiency or recent arrivals. The study also relied on self-reported narratives, which are subject to memory bias and personal interpretation. Additionally, although cultural diversity was present in the sample, the study did not perform subgroup comparisons based on ethnicity, religion, or gender identity, which could have uncovered more nuanced patterns.

Future studies could expand on this work by employing mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative interviews with longitudinal or psychometric assessments of identity development and mental health outcomes.

Exploring the experiences of first-generation immigrant youth or those in rural communities may reveal different dimensions of identity confusion. Furthermore, cross-national comparisons could illuminate how policy, education systems, or dominant cultural narratives in different countries shape the identity development of immigrant adolescents. Including parents’ perspectives could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of intergenerational dynamics.

Professionals working with immigrant adolescents—such as school counselors, teachers, social workers, and community leaders—should prioritize creating environments that validate and affirm cultural diversity. Interventions that promote open family communication, support bicultural pride, and reduce the stigma of difference can mitigate identity confusion. Schools should implement inclusive curricula that reflect the histories and experiences of diverse cultural groups and offer safe spaces where adolescents can explore identity-related questions without judgment. Equipping parents with tools for culturally sensitive parenting and emotional responsiveness can also strengthen adolescent resilience and self-acceptance.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Patients were free to withdraw from the research at any time.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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