E-ISSN 3048-0329 Vol. 2, Issue 3 (2025)
Doi: https://doi.org/10.37899/mjds.v2i3.200

Mahogany Journal De Social

Identity Construction and Cultural Negotiation in Second Generation Urban Migrants

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Article Info

Article History:
Received: 27 August 2025
Revised: 21 September 2025
Accepted: 26 September 2025

Keywords:
Identity
Cultural Negotiation
Second Generation Migrants
Transnationalism Urban

Abstract

This article examines the identity construction and cultural negotiation processes experienced by second-generation migrants in urban areas. Using a qualitative approach through case studies and in-depth interviews, this research highlights how second-generation migrants construct transnational identities that are fluid, hybrid, and contextual. The results show that they face challenges in the form of discrimination, stereotypes, and social pressures that often lead to identity crises, but also open up space for cultural resistance and creativity. Digital media plays a crucial role as a means of self-expression and the formation of transnational imagined communities, strengthening transnational connectedness and identity flexibility. These findings emphasize that second-generation migrant identities are not simply inherited from family but are dynamically shaped through social interactions, daily experiences, and the flow of globalization.

INTRODUCTION

The international and domestic migration has come to be a recognizable characteristic of the modern globalization which has transformed not only the economic systems, but also the ways of constructing and contesting identities in the host societies. Migration is not to be seen only as physical mobility of people but as a multifaceted process that transforms social organizations, cultural landscapes, and political discourses (Castles et al., 2014; Castles, 2010; Vertovec, 2023; Cirella,, 2024). In urban settings, where heterogeneous groups of people live together, the experiences of second-generation migrants as the children of migrant parents who are born or raised in the host community are put in a unique and rather tenuous position. Unlike the first-generation migrants who face displacement and resettlement directly, the second generation lives in the intermediate world that is both related to the ancestral traditions and firmly rooted in the socio-cultural realities of the host nation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Kılınç, 2022; Ferdous, 2025; Seriki, 2022). This duality produces not only possibilities of cultural hybridity, but also issues of belonging, thus making the research of identity construction within this cohort of people especially important.

The identity development of the second-generation migrant is not stagnant; on the contrary, it is going to be established as a result of the continuous negotiations, which are influenced by both internal and external forces (Ullah, 2025; Hakooz,

2023). On the inside factors like language retention, religious affiliation and family expectations are more paramount in protecting cultural heritage. These aspects are continuities to parents but may as well present tension when they are not in line with the norms of the host society. Outside, discrimination, structural limits in education or work, and media images contain no lesser pressures on identity building (Berry, 1997; Alba & Nee, 2003). This interaction is an expression of the shifting and disputed quality of the thing of identity, in which young migrants are forced to negotiate between conflicting demands. Stuart Hall (1996) and Floya Anthias (2009) conceptualize the process as a form of cultural negotiation, which generates hybrid, resistant, or assimilated identities. Such framework is more advanced than dichotomous groups of integration and exclusion and acknowledges the subtle techniques that people use to locate themselves (Ager & Strang, 2008).

This negotiation is enhanced by the urban setting. Cities have also been described as cosmopolitan centres where multi cultural experiences and transnational identities are able to be experienced (Vertovec, 2007; Rojas Gaviria & Emontspool, 2015). It is true that the urban places can facilitate migration by allowing the migrants to retain cultural practices and also avail globalized living and networks. However, such a jubilant vision dangerously clouds endemic inequalities. The segregation in residential world, the discriminatory approach of labor markets, and the stereotyping based on ethnicity in the educational facilities or in the mass-culture limit the degree to which the second-generation migrants perceive the city as an inclusive area. Urban realities, as Crul & Schneider (2010) claim, are full of ambivalence, at the same time, providing chances of cultural exchange, it recreates the social exclusion through the processes of marginalization. As such, the second generation is faced with a paradoxical situation in which the inclusion and exclusion environments coexist at the same time, thus dictating the identity formation lines.

Notably, identity construction process should not be romanticized as a free choice of culture choice. Rather, it is placed in larger power arrangements. The limits within which the second generation can indeed bargain its position are also defined by discourses about national belonging, immigration policy, and debate among people over multiculturalism. Indicatively, demands to integrate into the dominant culture tend to mask demand of cultural assimilation where diversity is only tolerated to the level that it does not interfere with national discourses of unity. On the other hand, preservation of heritage practices will be pathologized as non-integration. This movement brings out the extent to which identity construction is highly political and it is formed through societal representations, as well as institutional frameworks.

Simultaneously, second-generation migrants do not passively receive these pressures, they also plan strategies to cope with them (Achouche, 2025; Nguyen, 2025). Others embrace hybrid identities consisting of a combination of both parental and host cultural aspects, thus, cutting out new cultural spaces that are not easily categorised. Some of them could be attracted towards assimilation and social mobility achieved by conformity, and some other others indulge in cultural resistance where they could reclaim their heritage practices as a means of empowerment. All these strategies demonstrate the agency of an individual and, at the same time, represent the situation in the structure that makes certain decisions possible or impossible (De Bruijn et al., 2022; Hertwig et al., 2022).

The importance of studying these processes is not merely that it will help us learn more about individual experiences, and this has wider implications on the argument of integration, multiculturalism and social cohesion (Holtug, 2021; Svensson, 2025). Negotiation of identity by second generation migrants provides an insight on the inclusiveness of the urban societies and viability of the multicultural policies. Unless the urban spaces are able to replicate marginalization, then the discourses of integration will become rhetoric. However, on the other hand, if it is the urban

centers that emerge authentic possibilities of being recognized and involved, they may serve as laboratories of cosmopolitanism where novel modes of belonging are created.

METHODS

This paper follows a qualitative paradigm of research, which is based on the idea that the identity construction and negotiations processes are highly subjective, situational, and symbolic. In contrast to quantitative approaches that seek to quantify variables, qualitative inquiry provides the author with the right to the lived experiences, lives and perceptions of second generation migrants who are living in urban spaces. Identity is not an absolute quality that can be readily measured; it is shaped by processes of continuous negotiation between the agency of each individual and the customs of his family, and even larger social systems. As a result, a qualitative framework helps the researcher delve into the various strata of connotation that migrants attribute to their cultural habits, engagements, and belongingness (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The focus on meaning-making is critical, as the second-generation migrants often live in liminality, in the world between their ancestral and the new culture in some manner that cannot be captured by the set of standardized tools.

Research Design

The design of the study used in this investigation is qualitative case study. This methodological decision was selected due to the fact that it allows a comprehensive, contextual analysis of a confined system, in this case, the experiences of the second-generation migrants in a specific multicultural city environment. Yin (2018) indicates that the use of case studies is suitable when the researcher aims to answer the question of how and why about the social phenomenon of the day in its natural setting. It is also centered not only on personal accounts but also on those involving collective forces which inform identity and cultural negotiation. The research can be said to capture the personal testimonies and the overall socio-cultural trends through the case study design, which is beneficial in terms of both the individual worldview and that of the entire society in terms of migrant community and the host society.

Research Location and Participants

The research was carried out in a big multinational urban centre that served as a large migratory nexus. The choice of the location is determined by the heterogeneity of cultures and the existence of migrant enclaves as well as a frequency of intercultural interaction thus offering an ideal environment to study identity negotiation. The respondents included second generation migrants born in the city as well as those who came in at a young age and were largely socialized in the urban environment. The participants were placed in the age bracket of 18-35 years because this group has been extensively considered to be in the critical stages of identity formation, social movement and politics.

Purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants (Patton, 2015). The rationale behind the use of this non-probability method was that it allowed the researcher to select persons most relevant to the research questions, the persons whose experiences would explain the dynamics of the second-generation identity development. The sample size was not established using some strict numerical guidelines but was informed by the data saturation principle, which implies that the data collection was continued until the repetitive themes were identified and no new meaningful insights were generated. This plan will allow the information to be rich and dimensional as well as avoiding redundancy.

Data Collection Techniques

Three complementary methods were used to collect data to capture different facets of experiences of the participants. In-depth interviews: Each respondent was interviewed through semi-structured interviews to provide narratives relating to the cultural identity, sense of belonging and the strategies they use in settling the disparate cultural frameworks. The semi-structured format enabled the participants to reflect their account of stories using their words, but it gave the researcher time to delve further into the subject matter as they or she identified. Participant observation: The researcher was involved in systematic observation of interpersonal activities both in formal and informal contexts, that is, community meetings, in public precincts, and cultural occasions. Such an approach provided information about non-verbal displays of identity, everyday activities of negotiation, and the performing of cultural belonging. Analysis of documents: The additional information was obtained through field records, community research, and online resources, such as the social media messages that participants used to demonstrate or create their identities. These texts further provided a level of meaning especially in the way identity was enacted in virtual spaces as well as corporeal worlds.

Data Analysis

Making the analysis, the data was analyzed in accordance with the scheme of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): the method of the qualitative research is designed to identify the patterns in the qualitative data set and also to interpret the meaning provided in the participant discourses. The procedure of analysis included four steps: (1) the interviews were transcribed, and the field notes were systematized; (2) the recurrent ideas and linguistic expressions were first coded; it was followed by the aggregation of the codes into the major themes related to the issues of identity and cultural negotiation (3) and finally the interpretation of the themes in relation to the theoretical frameworks of migration, multiculturalism, and identity studies (4). The back and forth process between empirical findings and theoretical ideas was what made sure that the findings of the final results were well-grounded in the lived experience of the participants, and at the same time add to broader theoretical arguments.

Data validity

In order to increase the credibility of the results, the research adopted a number of validity measures. To begin with, the triangulation of the sources and methods was utilized through the cross-checking of the data of interviews, observations, and documentary resources to determine consistency and contradictions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Second, the member checking was carried out through introducing preliminary interpretations to the participants, thus, allowing them to validate, elaborate, or challenge the analysis of the researcher. In addition to enhancing validity of the results, this participative approach also acknowledged the role of the participants in determining the research results. Lastly, the existence of a reflexive research journal maintained the mindfulness of the researcher on the possibility of bias and positionality during data collection and analysis process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study focuses on second-generation migrants living in one of Indonesia's major cities, with diverse ethnic backgrounds including Chinese, Batak, Minang, and Bugis. Second-generation migrants are defined as individuals born and raised in Indonesia but born to parents who are either internal (inter-regional) or external (international) migrants. The urban context was chosen because large cities are spaces of complex cultural interaction. Urban life fosters integration through schools, workplaces, and daily interactions, yet at the same time, social segregation based on ethnicity, language, and religion persists. This situation places second-generation migrants in a unique position: they are no longer completely alienated

from the dominant culture, but also retain a strong attachment to their ancestral heritage.

This case study was chosen because second-generation migrants often face identity dilemmas. They struggle to maintain their family's ethnic identity and adapt to the majority environment. This case study allows researchers to delve deeply into their subjective experiences, cultural negotiation strategies, and the challenges they face in their daily lives. Using this approach, interviews were conducted with several second-generation migrant informants aged 20–30 who are currently pursuing higher education or working in large cities. The informants were selected purposively because they were deemed capable of reflecting on their experiences of cultural identity transition from family to public space.

Dual Identity and the Dynamics of Social Membership

Before delving into the field data, it's important to understand that cultural identity among second-generation migrants is hybrid. Stuart Hall (1996) explains that identity is not static, but rather a constant process of becoming through historical and social experiences. The second generation tends to face a tension between their parents' cultural heritage and the cultural demands of the urban majority.

A participant (P1, male, 24 years old) said:

> *"At home, I have to speak my parents' regional language and follow family traditions. But outside, with my college friends, I feel more comfortable using Indonesian or slang. Sometimes I feel like I'm living in two different worlds."*

This quote demonstrates the dual identity experienced by second-generation migrants. This identity is situational and can change depending on the context of the interaction. In the domestic sphere, participants internalize their parents' culture, while in the public sphere, they adapt to city norms. This phenomenon aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which states that individuals define themselves based on membership in particular social groups. Thus, the identity of second-generation migrants is not singular, but rather divided between loyalty to their culture of origin and the need to adapt to the dominant culture. This also emphasizes that identity is a fluid and negotiable process.

Diverse Acculturation Strategies

The two quotes above demonstrate variations in acculturation strategies. Participant P2 reflects integration , which involves combining the home culture with the dominant culture without sacrificing either. Integration provides flexibility and allows the second generation to construct a more stable hybrid identity (Berry, 1997). In contrast, P3 chooses assimilation , abandoning some elements of the home culture in order to be fully accepted by the surrounding environment. This strategy tends to emerge when social pressure to adapt is higher, for example at school or in the workplace. These differences in acculturation strategies demonstrate that the construction of second-generation identity is not homogeneous, but rather influenced by the context of each individual's social interactions and experiences.

A participant (P2, female, 21 years old) said:

> *"I still practice my religious duties as a family, but in my daily life, I tend to follow the lifestyle of my friends in the city. So, I don't feel like I'm missing out on my parents' culture, but I also don't feel isolated in my community."*

Meanwhile, another participant (P3, male, 27 years old) said:

> *"If I show too much of my culture, people will think I'm weird. So I'd rather just adapt and be accepted."*

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Cultural Negotiation in "Third Space"

Cultural negotiation is an adaptive strategy employed by second-generation migrants in response to different social contexts. Berry (1997) describes four strategies, using acculturation theory: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. The second generation often chooses integration, blending elements of their ancestral culture with the local urban culture.

A participant (P4, female, 22 years old) explained:

> *"We often host community gatherings, but the food is a mix of traditional dishes and modern fare like pizza and burgers. So, the event still feels 'homey' but also contemporary."*

This statement demonstrates that second-generation migrants create a hybrid space in their daily lives. They do not completely abandon their parents' traditions but also adapt them to fit with urban popular culture. This is consistent with Bhabha's (1994) concept of third space, a space where new identities are formed from the interaction of two different cultures. Identities in this space are hybrid, flexible, and open to transformation. Thus, cultural negotiation is not simply a compromise, but a creative process that produces new forms of identity unique to second-generation migrants.

Challenges of Marginalization and Discrimination

Identity conflicts arise when second-generation migrants experience discrimination, stereotypes, or pressure to choose one identity over another. Erikson (1968) emphasized that identity crises are more pronounced during the transition to young adulthood, when individuals are challenged to define themselves within a broader social context.

A participant (P5, male, 19 years old) shared his bitter experience:

> *"At school, I was often teased because my name was considered strange and my way of speaking was different. It was really hard to truly fit in."*

This quote highlights that discrimination and stereotypes remain serious obstacles for second-generation migrants. Even though they were born and raised in the city, their existence is still seen as "othering." *This* reinforces Crul & Schneider's (2010) view that the integration of second-generation migrants is influenced by existing social structures within society, such as educational policies, public discourse, and cultural representations. This marginalization emphasizes that identity construction is not only a matter of individual choice, but also the result of power relations that determine who is considered "normal" and who remains viewed as "foreign."

Transnational Identity in the Digital Age

Transnational identity refers to the condition in which individuals develop social, cultural, and emotional ties that transcend national boundaries. In the digital age, these ties are intensified through access to social media, online communities, and global networks that enable simultaneous cross-border interactions. Vertovec (2004)

explains that transnationalism creates a “dual social space” where individuals can participate in local cultures while maintaining connections to their culture of origin.

For second-generation migrants, digital technology has become a crucial medium for preserving ancestral cultural memories while simultaneously constructing new, hybrid identities. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube provide a means for expressing ethnic identity, sharing diasporic experiences, and building solidarity with global communities of similar backgrounds (Georgiou, 2019). However, this connectedness can also lead to identity fragmentation as second-generation migrants must negotiate family cultural values with the global identity narratives they consume digitally.

In the context of urban Indonesia, this phenomenon is evident when second-generation migrants use mixed languages (local languages, Indonesian, and English) on social media as a form of self-representation. Transnational identities in the digital age ultimately not only mark adaptation but also demonstrate the creativity of young migrants in constructing flexible, fluid, and dynamic identities.

A participant (P6, female, 23 years old) stated:

> *"Through Instagram, I can stay connected with my extended family back home. But at the same time, I'm also involved in online communities here. So, it's like my identity exists in two places at once."*

This quote emphasizes that second-generation migrants construct identities not only locally but also transnationally through digital media. Their identities are formed at the intersection of engagement with global networks and engagement with local communities. This phenomenon supports Vertovec's (2007) notion of super-diversity, where migrant identities are influenced by more complex social networks, across ethnicities, religions, and even countries. The presence of digital spaces broadens the arena for identity negotiation, enabling the second generation to build a sense of belonging that transcends geographic boundaries.

Negotiating Identity and Belonging among Second-Generation Migrants

Research findings indicate that second-generation urban migrants face a dynamic identification process, where identity is not understood as something static, but rather as a social construct that is constantly negotiated. This aligns with Hall's (1996) theory, which emphasizes that identity is the result of representation, discourse, and power relations within a specific context. Second-generation migrants position themselves flexibly, depending on the social situation, the interaction space, and the audience they encounter.

This dynamic can be interpreted through Goffman's (1959) perspective *on self-presentation*, in which individuals display different identities according to the "social stage." For example, using a regional language at home is seen as a strategy to maintain connection with ancestral culture, while using a national or global language in public spaces is a way to gain social acceptance. This practice demonstrates *code-switching,* which involves more than just linguistics, but also social and cultural identity.

Furthermore, this study also demonstrates how second-generation migrants face dual expectations: from families that emphasize the preservation of their home culture, and from social environments that encourage integration with the majority culture. This situation reinforces Erikson's (1968) argument that young adulthood is a period of identity crisis, particularly when individuals are challenged to define themselves within a broader social context. In the context of migration, this crisis is further complicated by the dual pressures of two or more cultural systems.

This phenomenon can also be interpreted through the lens of transnationalism. Vertovec (2004) emphasized that the current generation of migrants no longer faces identities confined to their country of origin or destination, but rather transnational identities that are fluid, multiple, and contextual. Research shows that the presence of digital media further reinforces this pattern, as individuals can maintain connections with transnational communities through online platforms. This supports Georgiou's (2019) findings on how the migrant generation in Europe utilizes digital spaces to construct cross-border identities.

Furthermore, this discussion demonstrates that identity negotiations are not always smooth sailing, often involving conflict, both internal and external. Internally, the dilemma arises of "loyalty" to ancestral culture or the desire to integrate. Externally, discrimination, stereotypes, and marginalization emphasize the "liminal" position of second-generation migrants as a group neither fully considered part of the dominant culture nor purely inheriting their culture of origin. This phenomenon of liminality aligns with Turner's (1969) concept of the ambiguity of social position in cultural transition. Thus, this discussion demonstrates that the identities of second-generation urban migrants are shaped through a complex interaction between cultural heritage, demands for social integration, and the influence of transnational digital spaces. Their identities are not a single, final choice, but rather a continuous process of negotiation fraught with dynamics of power, resistance, and adaptation.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that second-generation urban migrants construct their identities through a complex negotiation process between their family's culture of origin and the dominant culture of their host society. The identities they form are not singular, but rather fluid, flexible, and situational, depending on the social context they encounter. Fieldwork suggests that second-generation migrants tend to develop transnational identities, where they do not completely abandon their ancestral cultural roots but simultaneously strive to adapt to urban norms, values, and lifestyles.

Furthermore, experiences of discrimination and stereotyping are factors that contribute to the emergence of identity crises, but also trigger the formation of resistance strategies and cultural creativity. The presence of digital media has also expanded the space for this generation to build imaginary communities across borders and strengthen their sense of transnational connectedness. Thus, the identity construction of second-generation migrants in urban areas reflects the dynamics of cultural hybridity and the importance of supporting an inclusive social environment. This research confirms that second-generation migrant identities are not simply the result of cultural inheritance but also a product of social interactions, daily experiences, and an increasingly connected global context.

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