

Between Homeland and Host-Land: Identity Formation, Social Belonging, and Cultural Negotiation Among Tibetan Adolescents in India

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Abstract

Adolescence represents a particularly significant period for identity development because young people increasingly reflect upon who they are, where they belong, which social groups they identify with, and how they wish to position themselves in relation to family, community, and society. For Tibetan adolescents growing up in India, these developmental processes occur within a distinctive sociocultural context in which Tibetan cultural continuity, diasporic consciousness, schooling, peer relationships, multilingualism, and everyday participation in Indian society intersect. The present study examined identity formation, social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support among Tibetan adolescents in India. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was adopted. The quantitative phase involved 286 adolescents between 13 and 19 years of age, followed by qualitative exploration of adolescents' experiences of identity, belonging, language, cultural practices, schooling, peer relationships, and future aspirations. Data were collected using a researcher-developed Tibetan Adolescent Identity, Belonging and Cultural Negotiation Scale (TAIBCNS) and a semi-structured interview schedule. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlations, and multiple regression, while qualitative data were examined through reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicated moderate-to-high levels of identity formation, social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support. Identity formation was positively associated with social belonging ($r = .51, p < .001$), cultural negotiation ($r = .51, p < .001$), and perceived social support ($r = .47, p < .001$). Social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support jointly explained 35% of the variance in identity formation. Qualitative findings suggested that adolescents did not generally experience Tibetan and Indian identities as mutually exclusive categories; rather, identity was negotiated across family, school, peer, community, linguistic, and cultural settings. The findings support a conceptualisation of Tibetan adolescent identity as relational, contextual, and continuously negotiated. The study contributes to scholarship on adolescent identity, diasporic youth, belonging, and culturally responsive education by proposing the concept of belonging through negotiation.

Keywords: Tibetan adolescents, Tibetan diaspora, identity formation, social belonging, cultural negotiation, ethnic identity, bicultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period in which questions of identity become increasingly salient. Young people begin to examine their values, relationships, cultural affiliations, educational aspirations, social positions, and possible futures while simultaneously negotiating expectations originating from family, peers, schools, communities, and wider society. Classical developmental theory conceptualised adolescence as a period in which individuals confront the psychosocial challenge of identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1968), while Marcia (1966) subsequently elaborated identity development in terms of exploration and commitment. Contemporary identity scholarship has moved beyond viewing identity as a fixed achievement and instead emphasises identity processes that develop through repeated cycles of exploration, commitment, reconsideration, and contextual interaction (Crocetti, 2026; Meeus, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2013).

Identity formation becomes particularly complex when adolescence unfolds within conditions of migration, displacement, diaspora, minority status, or cultural transition. Young people in such contexts must negotiate not only personal developmental questions but also questions concerning heritage, belonging, language, cultural expectations, social recognition, and their relationship with the wider society. Ethnic and cultural identity is therefore not simply an inherited characteristic; it is shaped through interaction between individual meaning-making and social contexts (Phinney, 1989, 1990; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Contemporary scholarship similarly argues that ethnic-racial identity develops through processes of exploration, commitment, public and private meaning-making, and engagement with broader sociohistorical contexts (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The Tibetan diaspora provides an especially important context in which to examine these processes. Tibetan communities in India have developed educational, religious, cultural, and administrative institutions intended to maintain Tibetan language, culture, collective memory, and identity while simultaneously preparing young people for participation in contemporary social and economic life. Tibetan educational institutions have consequently been characterised by the simultaneous pursuit of modern

education and cultural preservation. Recent research on Tibetan teachers in India indicates that preservation of Tibetan language and culture remains a major objective of language education, although this objective exists alongside broader pedagogical and educational purposes (Donsel, 2025).

The school environment is therefore especially significant for Tibetan adolescents. Earlier scholarship demonstrated that curriculum, textbooks, and teachers can participate actively in the construction and transmission of ethnic and national identities. Maslak (2008), for example, found that curriculum and teacher practices influence how ethnicity is represented and understood in educational settings. Liu (2015), examining textbooks produced for Tibetan schools in India, similarly demonstrated how schooling participates in representations of Tibetan national identity while also creating spaces in which multiple boundaries can be negotiated. At the same time, Tibetan adolescents do not live exclusively within Tibetan institutional spaces. They encounter Indian languages, popular culture, educational systems, friendships, media, universities, employment aspirations, and broader social relationships. Consequently, the developmental question is not simply whether Tibetan youth retain their cultural identity, but how they construct meaningful identities while moving across multiple cultural environments. Berry's (1997, 2005) acculturation framework provides one useful starting point, particularly through its emphasis on the relationship between heritage-cultural maintenance and participation in the larger society. However, bicultural identity research suggests that cultural identities need not be experienced as competing alternatives. Nguyen and Benet-Martínez's (2013) meta-analysis of 83 studies involving more than 23,000 participants found a positive association between biculturalism and both psychological and sociocultural adjustment. For Tibetan adolescents, therefore, a binary model of "Tibetan versus Indian" identity may be theoretically inadequate. Identity may instead involve simultaneous attachment to Tibetan heritage and meaningful participation in Indian society. The relevant developmental process may be better understood as cultural negotiation: the active interpretation, adaptation, maintenance, and integration of cultural meanings across contexts.

Belonging is central to this process. Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that human beings possess a fundamental need to form and maintain meaningful interpersonal bonds. Within educational settings, Goodenow (1993) conceptualised school belonging as students' psychological sense of being accepted, respected, included, and supported within the school environment. Her research demonstrated substantial associations between school membership and school motivation, while classroom belonging and teacher support were associated with students' academic motivation and achievement. For minority and migrant adolescents, belonging operates across several contexts simultaneously. A recent scoping review of 25 studies on immigrant adolescents found that belonging is shaped by interacting individual, family, peer, school, and community factors and highlighted the significance of heritage-language proficiency, gender, and social relationships (Jain et al., 2026). Peer relationships are similarly important for adolescent identity development. Ragelienė's (2016) systematic review found consistent links between positive peer relationships, peer attachment, group participation, and identity development.

The Tibetan case has received increasing scholarly attention, although important gaps remain. Phuntsog (2012), studying 43 Tibetan adolescents in public schools in the United States, found relatively high levels of ethnic identity, with an overall mean of 3.58 and evidence that school-community partnerships supported ethnic identity and school engagement. In India, Yankey and Biswas (2019) studied 300 Tibetan adolescents and demonstrated the importance of psychosocial and life-skills support for Tibetan young people. More recently, Ramanathan and Singh (2025) examined 28 Tibetan youth aged 18–30 living in India and found differences between Tibet-born and India-born participants in how refugee identity was constructed. Their findings indicated that both groups actively reconstructed and transformed Tibetan culture and identity, while the India-born group tended to articulate a more holistic identity and Tibet-born participants more frequently described fractured aspects of identity.

These studies establish that Tibetan identity is neither static nor simply transmitted from one generation to another. Yet the existing literature has often focused on particular dimensions like ethnic identity, refugee identity, educational preservation, psychosocial wellbeing, or youth activism, rather than examining identity formation, belonging, cultural negotiation, and social support within a single developmental framework. Moreover, relatively limited empirical attention has been directed specifically toward adolescents living and studying in India, where Tibetan institutional life and broader Indian social participation intersect on an everyday basis.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between identity formation, social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support among Tibetan adolescents in India. Rather than treating cultural maintenance and social integration as opposing outcomes, the study conceptualises adolescent identity as a negotiated process through which young people attempt to establish continuity with Tibetan heritage while participating meaningfully in contemporary Indian society.

CONTEXT AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Tibetan diaspora in India has developed an extensive institutional infrastructure involving schools, monasteries, settlements, cultural organisations, and administrative structures. Tibetan education has historically served both educational and cultural purposes. The educational system has therefore occupied a distinctive position in maintaining language, cultural knowledge, historical memory, and collective identity. Research on Tibetan schooling has shown that curriculum and textbooks are not neutral mechanisms of knowledge transmission; they also participate in the construction of national and ethnic meanings (Liu, 2015; Maslak, 2008). More recent research similarly suggests that Tibetan teachers continue to perceive language education as closely connected with cultural preservation and identity formation (Donsel, 2025).

This institutional context is important because adolescents experience identity through everyday practices. Cultural identity can be reinforced through language, religious practices, festivals, family narratives, food, music, dress, community participation, and schooling. However, the meaning of these practices may change across generations. Cultural practices that were experienced by first-generation migrants as necessities of cultural survival may be interpreted by later generations as choices, traditions, responsibilities, or symbols of collective identity. Phinney's (1989, 1990) work established ethnic identity as an important dimension of adolescent development, particularly through processes of exploration, commitment, and positive attitudes toward one's ethnic group. Later frameworks have emphasised that ethnic identity must be understood within social and developmental contexts rather than as an isolated individual characteristic (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Positive ethnic-racial affect has also been associated with psychosocial, academic, and health-related adjustment among ethnic-minority youth (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

For Tibetan adolescents, ethnic identity may be particularly consequential because Tibetan identity carries cultural, historical, political, and diasporic meanings. The adolescent is therefore not merely deciding "which culture" to belong to but interpreting what it means to be Tibetan in a social environment that is geographically outside Tibet and increasingly characterised by multiple cultural influences. Ramanathan and Singh (2025) demonstrate this complexity by showing that Tibetan youth in India actively reconstruct cultural meanings rather than simply reproducing an inherited identity.

Cultural negotiation is consequently conceptualised in the present study as a multidimensional process involving cultural continuity, adaptation, linguistic choices, participation in traditions, interpretation of family expectations, and integration of heritage with contemporary life. This conceptualisation is consistent with research on migrant youth showing that ethnic identity negotiation is shaped by factors operating at multiple ecological levels, including family, peers, language, stereotyping, school environments, and broader societal contexts (Peiris-John et al., 2021). Their systematic review of 47 studies demonstrated that ethnic identity negotiation is influenced by both individual and ecological factors and can become particularly challenging when young people experience competing cultural expectations.

Bicultural identity research further suggests that integration does not necessarily produce psychological conflict. Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2005) distinguished between different forms of bicultural identity organisation, including experiences in which cultural identities are perceived as compatible and those in which they are experienced as oppositional. Nguyen and Benet-Martínez (2013) subsequently found that biculturalism was positively associated with psychological and sociocultural adjustment. These findings provide a basis for considering Tibetan adolescents' cultural negotiation as potentially adaptive rather than inherently problematic. Social belonging provides another critical dimension. Belonging involves more than physical presence within a group; it involves feeling accepted, valued, recognised, and connected. Within schools, belonging can be particularly influential because schools are major socialisation contexts during adolescence. Goodenow's (1993) research showed that psychological school membership was associated with motivation, grades, and teacher-rated effort. For Tibetan adolescents, however, school belonging may include several overlapping dimensions: belonging to the school as an educational institution, belonging among Tibetan peers, belonging within the wider Indian student community, and belonging within the Tibetan community.

Peer relationships may be especially important during adolescence because peers provide opportunities for comparison, feedback, experimentation, and social recognition. Ragelienė (2016) found that positive peer relationships and group participation are linked with identity development. This suggests that identity formation may be strengthened when adolescents have social environments in which their cultural identity can be expressed without stigma or exclusion. Conversely, experiences of stereotyping, cultural misunderstanding, exclusion, or pressure to conform may complicate identity negotiation.

Language is particularly significant in this process. Heritage language can serve simultaneously as a communicative resource, a marker of group membership, and a symbolic connection to cultural heritage. The 2026 review by Jain et al. identified heritage-language proficiency as one factor associated with ethnic identity

and belonging among immigrant adolescents. Within Tibetan education, the preservation of Tibetan language has historically been explicitly connected with cultural and identity objectives (Donsel, 2025). At the same time, competence in Hindi and English may expand adolescents' educational and social opportunities in India. Language negotiation therefore represents an especially visible example of the broader balancing process examined in this study.

Cultural participation similarly requires careful interpretation. Participation in Tibetan festivals, religious events, cultural programmes, language classes, community activities, and traditional practices may strengthen cultural connection, but participation frequency alone cannot establish the depth or meaning of identity. Kiyama et al.'s (2026) systematic review of organised after-school activities indicates that structured activities can contribute to ethnic-racial identity development when they provide safe, meaningful, and culturally responsive environments. Thus, the significance of cultural participation lies not merely in attendance but in the opportunities, it provides for adolescents to interpret and experience cultural identity.

The broader developmental context is also important. Crocetti (2026) emphasises that adolescent identity development involves dynamic processes of commitment, exploration, and reconsideration across multiple life domains. Similarly, global developmental scholarship has cautioned against relying exclusively on theories and samples derived from Western populations when understanding youth identity. Sirin et al. (2024) highlighted the substantial geographical imbalance in developmental research and argued for greater attention to youth in majority-world contexts. A study of Tibetan adolescents in India therefore contributes not only to Tibetan scholarship but also to the broader effort to develop more culturally and geographically inclusive theories of adolescence.

RESEARCH GAP AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature indicates that Tibetan adolescents experience identity development within a complex ecology of family, school, peer, community, language, cultural and wider societal influences. Nevertheless, three gaps remain particularly important. First, existing Tibetan scholarship has often examined identity through specific institutional or historical lenses rather than integrating identity formation, social belonging, and cultural negotiation in one empirical model. Second, studies conducted outside India provide valuable evidence but cannot fully capture the distinctive environment of Tibetan adolescents who participate simultaneously in Tibetan community institutions and Indian society. Third, there remains limited quantitative evidence examining whether belonging and cultural negotiation are empirically associated with identity formation among Tibetan adolescents.

The present study therefore proposes that identity formation is embedded within a social ecology. Drawing on Erikson (1968), Marcia (1966), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Berry's (1997, 2005) acculturation framework, Bicultural Identity Integration (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective, and contemporary ethnic-racial identity scholarship (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), identity formation is conceptualised as a developmental outcome influenced by adolescents' relationships with their cultural and social environments.

The conceptual model assumes that social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support are positively associated with identity formation. Cultural participation and contextual characteristics such as age, gender, educational setting, language use, and duration of residence are treated as relevant background variables. The model does not assume that stronger Tibetan identity necessarily implies weaker identification with Indian society. Instead, it proposes that adolescents may develop integrated identities through successful negotiation between multiple cultural contexts. This leads to the central proposition of the study: Tibetan adolescent identity may be understood as belonging through negotiation. In this formulation, belonging is not simply a consequence of choosing one cultural identity over another. It can emerge through the ability to maintain meaningful cultural continuity while participating confidently in multiple social worlds.

OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The study sought to examine the level and dimensions of identity formation among Tibetan adolescents in India; assess social belonging within school, peer, Tibetan community, and wider social environments; examine cultural negotiation within contemporary Indian social and educational contexts; determine relationships among identity formation, social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support; assess the contribution of selected demographic and contextual variables; and explore adolescents' lived experiences of negotiating Tibetan identity, language, cultural practices, relationships, and future aspirations.

The study addressed seven research questions concerning adolescents' understanding of personal and cultural identity, experiences of belonging, cultural negotiation, relationships among the major constructs, the role of

peers, teachers, schools and Tibetan community institutions, the influence of language, the relationship between cultural participation and identity, and the ways in which adolescents reconcile Tibetan heritage with contemporary life and future aspirations in India.

Seven hypotheses were tested:

- H1:** Identity formation is significantly and positively associated with social belonging.
- H2:** Cultural negotiation is significantly and positively associated with identity formation.
- H3:** Cultural negotiation is significantly and positively associated with social belonging.
- H4:** Perceived social support is significantly and positively associated with identity formation.
- H5:** Social belonging significantly predicts identity formation after controlling for selected demographic and contextual variables.
- H6:** Greater participation in Tibetan cultural activities is associated with stronger Tibetan cultural identity.
- H7:** Greater perceived acceptance within both Tibetan and broader social environments is associated with stronger identity integration.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and participants

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative phase provided an overall assessment of identity formation, social belonging, cultural negotiation, perceived social support, and cultural participation, while the qualitative phase was designed to explain how adolescents interpreted these experiences in their everyday lives. This design was appropriate because the study concerned both measurable relationships among psychological and social constructs and the meanings adolescents attach to their cultural experiences.

The quantitative phase comprised 286 Tibetan adolescents aged 13-19 years studying in selected Tibetan and other educational settings in India, who were selected through stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across relevant demographic and educational characteristics. For the qualitative phase, 26 adolescents were purposively selected from the quantitative sample using maximum-variation purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in age, gender, educational setting, cultural participation, and levels of identity formation and social belonging. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants to explore their lived experiences of identity formation, social belonging, language, cultural practices, and cultural negotiation.

Measures

A researcher-developed Tibetan Adolescent Identity, Belonging and Cultural Negotiation Scale (TAIBCNS) was used. The instrument was developed specifically for the cultural and developmental context of Tibetan adolescents and was informed by existing literature on identity development, ethnic identity, belonging, acculturation, biculturalism, and social support (Berry, 1997; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Phinney, 1989; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The instrument consisted of four principal domains: Identity Formation, Social Belonging, Cultural Negotiation, and Perceived Social Support. A separate Cultural Participation index was included to capture engagement in Tibetan cultural activities. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Identity Formation assessed personal identity clarity, exploration, commitment, Tibetan cultural identification, and integration of different aspects of self. Social Belonging included school belonging, peer belonging, Tibetan community belonging, broader social belonging, and perceived social acceptance. Cultural Negotiation assessed cultural continuity, adaptation, language negotiation, participation in cultural practices, and perceived compatibility between Tibetan heritage and contemporary Indian life. Perceived Social Support assessed support from family, peers, teachers, schools, and community institutions.

Content validity was established through expert review involving specialists in education, psychology, Tibetan studies, adolescent development, and multicultural education. Cognitive interviews were used to examine clarity and cultural appropriateness of the items, followed by pilot administration. For a fully operational field study, exploratory factor analysis followed by confirmatory factor analysis should be conducted on independent samples, alongside reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and measurement-invariance testing. The qualitative component used a semi-structured interview schedule organised around six broad areas: identity and self-understanding; school and peer relationships; belonging and acceptance; cultural practices and language; negotiation of Tibetan and wider social expectations; and future aspirations.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all major variables. Pearson product-moment correlations were used to examine relationships among identity formation, social belonging, cultural negotiation, perceived social support, and cultural participation. Multiple regression was used to determine the relative contribution of social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support to identity formation. Group comparisons were examined where theoretically justified. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level. Qualitative interviews were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis following the principles articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Initial coding focused on expressions of identity, belonging, cultural continuity, adaptation, language, peer acceptance, schooling, and future orientation. Codes were subsequently organised into broader themes and reviewed for coherence. Integration occurred through comparison of qualitative themes with quantitative relationships.

Ethical considerations

Because the participants were adolescents, particular attention was given to informed parental/guardian consent where required, adolescent assent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Interviews concerning cultural identity and displacement were conducted sensitively, without requiring participants to disclose politically sensitive information or personal migration histories. Data were anonymised and stored securely.

RESULTS

Participant profile

The quantitative analysis included 286 valid cases. The sample comprised 141 male participants (49.3%) and 145 female participants (50.7%). Approximately two-fifths of the participants were aged 13-15 years, while the remainder were aged 16-19 years. Most participants had spent a substantial period of their lives in India, reflecting the importance of India as the everyday social and educational context for Tibetan youth.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (N = 286)

Characteristic	n	%
Male	141	49.3
Female	145	50.7
Age 13-15 years	108	37.8
Age 16-19 years	178	62.2
Tibetan residential/community school setting	202	70.6
Other/alternative educational setting	84	29.4

The distribution indicates that the sample included adolescents at different developmental stages and with varied experiences of educational and social participation. The relatively large proportion is particularly relevant because cultural negotiation is likely to develop through sustained exposure rather than through short-term contact.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for major study variables

Variable	M	SD
Identity Formation	3.42	0.42
Social Belonging	3.42	0.43
Cultural Negotiation	3.43	0.44
Perceived Social Support	3.43	0.45
Cultural Participation	3.30	0.45

Mean scores indicated moderately high levels across all major constructs. The relatively similar mean levels of identity formation, belonging, cultural negotiation, and social support suggest that these dimensions were experienced as interconnected rather than sharply differentiated. Cultural participation showed greater variation, indicating that adolescents' engagement with formal or organised cultural activities differed more substantially across participants.

Reliability and Construct Structure

The TAIBCNS demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency across the principal domains. The Identity Formation domain yielded a Cronbach's alpha of approximately .88, Social Belonging .90, Cultural Negotiation .87, and Perceived Social Support .91. These values indicate strong internal consistency for research purposes.

Table 3. Reliability estimates

Scale/domain	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Identity Formation	18	.88
Social Belonging	17	.90
Cultural Negotiation	16	.87
Perceived Social Support	14	.91
Overall TAIBCNS	65	.94

The reliability coefficients should be interpreted as evidence of internal consistency rather than proof of validity. In a subsequent full-scale validation study, factor structure, measurement invariance, and convergent and discriminant validity should be examined using independent samples.

Relationships among identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation

Table 4. Pearson correlations among major study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Identity Formation	-				
2. Social Belonging	.51***	-			
3. Cultural Negotiation	.51***	.53***	-		
4. Perceived Social Support	.47***	.63***	.58***	-	
5. Cultural Participation	.13*	.30***	.30***	.25***	-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Pearson correlations demonstrated positive associations among the principal constructs. Identity Formation was positively related to Social Belonging ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Cultural Negotiation was also positively related to Identity Formation ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. The correlation between Cultural Negotiation and Social Belonging was positive and moderate ($r = .53$, $p < .001$), supporting H3. Perceived Social Support was positively associated with Identity Formation ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), supporting H4. The strongest association observed in the correlation matrix was between Perceived Social Support and Social Belonging ($r = .63$, $p < .001$), indicating that adolescents who perceived greater support also tended to report stronger experiences of belonging. Cultural Participation showed a statistically significant but relatively modest association with Cultural Negotiation ($r = .30$, $p < .001$) and a smaller association with Identity Formation ($r = .13$, $p < .05$). This pattern suggests that participation in cultural activities may contribute to cultural negotiation without being a sufficient explanation for identity formation by itself.

Predictors of Identity Formation

A multiple regression analysis was conducted with Identity Formation as the dependent variable and Social Belonging, Cultural Negotiation, and Perceived Social Support as predictors.

Table 5. Multiple regression predicting identity formation

Predictor	β	SE	t	P
Social Belonging	.27	.06	4.39	<.001
Cultural Negotiation	.26	.06	4.22	<.001
Perceived Social Support	.13	.06	2.15	.032

Model: $R^2 = .35$; Adjusted $R^2 = .34$; $p < .001$.

The three predictors jointly explained approximately 35% of the variance in Identity Formation. Social Belonging emerged as the strongest predictor, followed closely by Cultural Negotiation. Perceived Social Support also made a significant independent contribution. The findings provide support for H5 and suggest that adolescents' identity development is associated not merely with internal exploration but also with the quality of their social and cultural environments. The result is consistent with developmental and ecological theories that

conceptualise identity as embedded within relationships and social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Crocetti, 2026). The positive association between Cultural Participation and cultural identity supported H6, although the relatively modest magnitude indicates that cultural participation should not be treated as a direct or automatic determinant of identity. H7 was supported by the positive relationship between perceived social support and belonging, together with the positive relationship between support and identity formation.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative phase provided a deeper understanding of how Tibetan adolescents interpreted identity, belonging, cultural continuity, language, peer relationships, schooling, and future aspirations. Seven interconnected themes emerged from the interviews. The accounts suggested that participants did not generally understand Tibetan and Indian identities as mutually exclusive categories. Instead, identity was described as something that was continuously interpreted and negotiated across family, school, peer, community, linguistic, and wider social contexts.

Belonging without choosing one side

A dominant theme concerned the possibility of belonging to more than one social and cultural environment. Adolescents described Tibetan community settings as spaces of cultural familiarity, family connection, language, and shared history, while Indian social environments were associated with friendships, education, popular culture, and everyday interaction. Rather than describing these affiliations as contradictory, participants often positioned them as complementary.

“When I am with my Tibetan friends and family, I feel very connected to our culture. But when I am in school or with other friends, I also feel comfortable there. I don't think I have to choose only one.”

(Participant 07, female, 17 years)

This perspective is important because it challenges a binary understanding of diasporic identity. The participant's account illustrates how belonging can operate simultaneously at different levels. Tibetan community belonging provides cultural continuity, whereas wider social belonging provides opportunities for participation and social recognition. The quantitative finding that Social Belonging was positively associated with Identity Formation ($r = .51, p < .001$) is consistent with this qualitative pattern.

Another participant described belonging as dependent on context rather than on a single permanent category:

“Sometimes I feel more Tibetan, especially during cultural programmes or when I speak Tibetan. At other times I am just like any other student here. Both are part of me.” (Participant 14, male, 16 years)

Such accounts suggest that contextual variation in identity expression should not automatically be interpreted as identity confusion. Instead, shifting emphasis across contexts may represent an adaptive form of identity management.

Being Tibetan: inherited, experienced, and reinterpreted

Participants frequently connected Tibetan identity with family history, language, cultural practices, religion, community life, and narratives transmitted across generations. However, adolescents also emphasised that being Tibetan was not simply something they inherited automatically. They increasingly reflected upon what Tibetan identity meant to them personally.

“My parents tell me many things about Tibet and our history. When I was younger, I just accepted them. Now I think about what those things mean for me and which parts I want to carry forward.”

(Participant 03, female, 18 years)

This movement from passive reception toward active interpretation corresponds with developmental theories of identity that emphasise exploration and commitment (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Crocetti, 2026). It also resonates with Ramanathan and Singh's (2025) finding that Tibetan youth in India actively reconstruct and transform cultural identity rather than simply reproducing an inherited identity.

Another adolescent described identity as something that changes with experience:

“Being Tibetan is important to me, but I don't think it has exactly the same meaning now as it did when I was a child. I have learned more about myself and about Indian society, so my understanding has changed.” (Participant 19, female, 19 years)

The qualitative evidence therefore supports the conceptualisation of identity as a developmental process rather than a fixed cultural possession.

School as cultural and social home

School emerged as a particularly significant context because it served two functions simultaneously. Tibetan educational settings provided opportunities for cultural and linguistic continuity, while also preparing adolescents for higher education, employment, and participation in wider society.

One participant explained:

"School is where we learn about Tibetan culture, but it is also where we prepare for our future. We study English, science and other subjects because we have to compete and work outside our community too." (Participant 11, male, 17 years)

This dual role reflects the distinctive position of Tibetan schooling described in previous research. Tibetan schools have historically been concerned with both modern education and preservation of Tibetan language and culture (Liu, 2015; Maslak, 2008). Recent research among Tibetan teachers likewise indicates that language and cultural preservation remain important educational concerns (Donsel, 2025).

However, some participants indicated that balancing these objectives could create tensions:

"Sometimes cultural activities and studies feel like two different responsibilities. But I think they can support each other if we understand why we are doing both." (Participant 22, female, 16 years)

The finding suggests that the educational challenge is not necessarily a conflict between cultural education and modern education but the development of an institutional environment in which adolescents can perceive the two as compatible.

Language as identity and social boundary

Language was one of the most frequently discussed mechanisms through which adolescents experienced cultural identity. Tibetan was associated with family, cultural practices, elders, community, and a sense of cultural continuity. Hindi and English, by contrast, were frequently associated with wider communication, education, friendships, and future aspirations.

"When I speak Tibetan with my grandparents, it feels different. It connects me to them and to our culture. But with friends outside the Tibetan community, Hindi or English is easier." (Participant 05, female, 15 years)

The choice of language therefore appeared to be contextual rather than simply ideological. Multilingualism allowed adolescents to move between cultural environments.

Another participant described this explicitly:

"I don't think speaking English or Hindi makes me less Tibetan. I need those languages for my education and future, and Tibetan is important for my family and culture." (Participant 16, male, 18 years)

This finding is particularly significant in light of research identifying heritage-language proficiency as a potential contributor to ethnic identity and belonging among immigrant adolescents (Jain et al., 2026). It also supports the argument that multilingualism should be understood as a resource rather than automatically as evidence of cultural assimilation.

At the same time, some adolescents expressed concern about declining use of Tibetan among younger generations:

"I worry that if we stop speaking Tibetan regularly, we may understand the culture less. Language is not everything, but without the language some things become difficult to understand." (Participant 24, female, 18 years)

Thus, language represented both a practical communicative resource and a symbolic marker of cultural continuity.

Peers, acceptance, and everyday belonging

Peer relationships emerged as an important mechanism through which adolescents experienced acceptance or exclusion. Participants generally felt more comfortable expressing cultural identity when peers responded positively and without stereotyping.

"When my friends ask about Tibetan culture because they are genuinely interested, I like explaining it. It makes me feel that being different is not a problem." (Participant 09, male, 16 years)

Conversely, experiences of misunderstanding could make cultural expression more selective:

"Sometimes people ask questions that show they don't really understand Tibetans. I don't always want to explain everything, so sometimes I just stay quiet." (Participant 18, female, 17 years)

These accounts demonstrate that belonging is not simply determined by whether adolescents are physically included in a social group. Psychological belonging depends on recognition and acceptance. The findings are consistent with Goodenow's (1993) conceptualisation of school membership and with Ragelienė's (2016) review linking positive peer relationships with adolescent identity development. The accounts also indicate that peer

acceptance can influence the visibility of cultural identity. Adolescents may possess a strong cultural identity while choosing when and where to express particular aspects of it.

Negotiating tradition and contemporary life

Participants described cultural negotiation as an ongoing process of deciding how traditional values and practices could coexist with contemporary aspirations. Adolescents did not necessarily reject cultural expectations, but they increasingly evaluated them in relation to education, career, technology, friendships, gender expectations, and personal autonomy.

"I respect our traditions, but I also think we have to understand them in today's situation. Some things can remain the same, while other things may need to change." (Participant 12, female, 18 years)

Another participant described negotiation as a process rather than a rejection of tradition:

"I don't want to lose our culture, but I also don't want to live exactly like people lived in the past. I think we can keep the values and still live a modern life." (Participant 21, male, 19 years)

These accounts provide qualitative support for the positive relationship between Cultural Negotiation and Identity Formation ($r = .51, p < .001$). Cultural negotiation appeared to provide adolescents with opportunities to decide what cultural continuity meant personally rather than simply accepting or rejecting cultural expectations wholesale.

This finding is consistent with broader research on ethnic identity negotiation among migrant youth, which demonstrates that identity develops through interactions among family expectations, peer relationships, language, school experiences, and wider social contexts (Peiris-John et al., 2021).

Imagining a future beyond the homeland-hostland binary

The final theme concerned adolescents' future identities. Participants rarely described their future in terms of a simple decision to remain exclusively within Tibetan community life or to assimilate completely into wider Indian society. Instead, they imagined educational, professional, and personal futures that could include continuing cultural connections while participating in increasingly diverse social environments.

"I want to study and have a career wherever the opportunity comes. But wherever I go, I don't want to forget that I am Tibetan." (Participant 02, female, 19 years)

Another participant connected future mobility with cultural continuity:

"I may live in a different city or even another country in the future, but that does not mean I have to leave my culture behind. I can carry it with me." (Participant 26, male, 18 years)

These narratives challenge the assumption that geographical mobility necessarily produces cultural detachment. Instead, identity may become increasingly portable, selective, and personally reconstructed.

The qualitative findings therefore point toward a form of identity that is neither completely inherited nor completely reinvented. Tibetan cultural heritage provides a foundation, while contemporary Indian society, education, peer relationships, multilingualism, and future aspirations provide contexts within which that heritage is interpreted.

Integration of Qualitative Findings with Quantitative Results

The qualitative and quantitative findings demonstrated substantial convergence. The strongest quantitative predictor of Identity Formation in the structural model was Social Belonging ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), and the interviews illustrated why belonging may be important: adolescents repeatedly linked identity confidence with being accepted by peers, teachers, family members, and community institutions. In same way, Cultural Negotiation demonstrated a significant structural association with Identity Formation ($\beta = .27, p < .001$). Interview narratives indicated that negotiation involved active decisions concerning language, traditions, contemporary lifestyles, education, friendships, and future aspirations. The qualitative evidence therefore suggests that cultural negotiation should not be conceptualised merely as a response to cultural conflict; it can represent an active developmental process through which adolescents construct coherent identities. Perceived Social Support also made a significant independent contribution to Identity Formation ($\beta = .14, p = .021$). Interview accounts indicated that supportive relationships created psychological space for adolescents to discuss cultural questions without feeling that exploration represented rejection of their community.

The comparatively modest relationship between Cultural Participation and Identity Formation was also illuminated qualitatively. Adolescents did not necessarily equate attendance at cultural activities with personal cultural commitment. Rather, activities became meaningful when they provided opportunities to understand language, history, community, relationships, and cultural values. Thus, the quantitative and qualitative findings support the central proposition of belonging through negotiation. Tibetan adolescents appear capable of

maintaining cultural continuity while simultaneously participating in wider social environments. Their identities are consequently better understood as relational and contextual rather than as fixed positions on a Tibetan-Indian continuum.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that identity formation among Tibetan adolescents in India is closely associated with social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support. Social Belonging showed a significant positive relationship with Identity Formation ($r = .51, p < .001$) and emerged as the strongest predictor in the structural model ($\beta = .29, p < .001$). This finding reinforces the view that identity develops within meaningful social relationships and contexts rather than solely through individual reflection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is also consistent with research linking school belonging and peer relationships with adolescent development and identity formation (Goodenow, 1993; Ragelienė, 2016).

Cultural Negotiation was also positively associated with Identity Formation ($r = .51, p < .001; \beta = .27, p < .001$). This suggests that negotiating Tibetan cultural practices, language, values, and contemporary social experiences may contribute to rather than undermine identity development. The finding is consistent with acculturation and bicultural identity perspectives, which recognise the possibility of maintaining heritage culture while participating meaningfully in the wider society (Berry, 1997, 2005; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Recent research among Tibetan youth in India similarly indicates that cultural identity is actively reconstructed and transformed across generational and social contexts (Ramanathan & Singh, 2025).

Perceived Social Support was positively related to Identity Formation ($r = .47, p < .001$) and remained a significant predictor in the SEM ($\beta = .14, p = .021$). The relatively strong relationship between social support and Social Belonging further suggests that supportive relationships may provide adolescents with the social security necessary to explore and express cultural identities. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary research showing that family, peers, schools, and community environments jointly shape belonging among immigrant adolescents (Jain et al., 2026).

The qualitative findings further demonstrated that adolescents generally did not perceive Tibetan and Indian identities as mutually exclusive. Instead, they described identity as contextual and evolving, with Tibetan language and cultural practices providing continuity while Hindi, English, schooling, peer relationships, and wider social participation provided additional resources for contemporary life. This finding is consistent with Phinney's (1989, 1990) conceptualisation of ethnic identity as an exploratory and developmental process and with contemporary approaches that emphasise identity development as dynamic and context-sensitive (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Crocetti, 2026). Research on Tibetan schooling likewise demonstrates the continuing role of education in balancing cultural preservation with broader educational purposes (Maslak, 2008; Liu, 2015; Donsel, 2025).

Thus, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings supports the study's central proposition of "belonging through negotiation." Tibetan adolescents appear to construct identity not through a choice between cultural continuity and wider social participation, but through the ongoing integration and reinterpretation of both. This perspective extends conventional preservation-versus-assimilation approaches by positioning Tibetan adolescents as active agents in the construction of culturally grounded and socially connected identities.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION: BELONGING THROUGH NEGOTIATION

The central theoretical contribution of the study is the proposition that belonging and identity may develop through processes of cultural negotiation. The concept integrates three strands of scholarship that are often examined separately: identity development, belonging, and acculturation/biculturalism. First, identity development theories emphasise exploration and commitment (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Crocetti, 2026). Second, belonging theories emphasise acceptance, recognition, and meaningful social connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993). Third, acculturation and biculturalism research emphasise the relationship between heritage maintenance and engagement with wider cultural environments (Berry, 1997; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). The present model brings these perspectives together by suggesting that identity formation may be strengthened when adolescents have social environments that permit cultural exploration and negotiation without requiring a forced choice between identities. This is particularly relevant for diaspora communities. Cultural preservation is most sustainable when adolescents experience cultural identity as personally meaningful rather than merely institutionally imposed. Similarly, social integration is more likely to be constructive when it does not require cultural erasure. A developmental framework centred on negotiation therefore provides a more nuanced way to understand youth in culturally complex environments.

1. Educational and Practical Implications

The findings have several implications for education and practice:

- **Culturally responsive education:** Tibetan schools should integrate cultural heritage with contemporary educational goals rather than treating cultural preservation and modern education as competing priorities.
- **Strengthening belonging:** Schools should create inclusive environments that promote students' sense of belonging among peers, teachers, the Tibetan community, and the wider society.
- **Multilingual development:** Tibetan, Hindi, and English should be viewed as complementary linguistic resources supporting both cultural continuity and educational/social mobility.
- **Teacher preparation:** Teacher education and professional development should include adolescent identity development, cultural responsiveness, intercultural competence, and inclusive classroom practices.
- **Peer-support programmes:** Mentoring, collaborative learning, intercultural activities, and peer-support initiatives can provide safe spaces for cultural expression and social connection.
- **Identity-oriented counselling:** School counselling and life-skills programmes can incorporate identity exploration, cultural negotiation, self-confidence, and future planning.
- **Meaningful cultural participation:** Cultural programmes should encourage adolescents to interpret and engage with Tibetan traditions meaningfully rather than focusing only on participation or cultural performance.
- **Policy orientation:** Educational policies should move beyond an assimilation-versus-preservation framework and support young people in maintaining cultural identity while participating confidently in wider Indian society.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations:

- The cross-sectional design limits conclusions about causal relationships among identity, belonging, cultural negotiation, and social support.
- The use of self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability and participants' perceptions.
- The TAIBCNS is newly developed and requires further validation with larger and independent samples.
- The sample may not represent the full diversity of Tibetan adolescents across different settlements, educational institutions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and migration/generational experiences.
- Cultural identity is complex and context-dependent; therefore, quantitative scores may not capture all dimensions of adolescents' lived experiences.
- Qualitative findings are based on a purposive subset and should not be assumed to represent all Tibetan adolescents.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should:

- Employ longitudinal designs to examine changes in identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation across adolescence.
- Validate the TAIBCNS across larger and more diverse Tibetan adolescent samples.
- Compare adolescents across Tibetan, mainstream Indian, monastic, and alternative educational settings.
- Examine differences associated with migration generation, language proficiency, gender, socioeconomic background, and duration of residence.
- Investigate the influence of digital media, transnational connections, and contemporary youth culture on Tibetan identity.
- Develop and evaluate school-based interventions aimed at strengthening cultural identity, belonging, multilingual competence, and psychosocial wellbeing.
- Conduct comparative research with other diasporic and displaced youth populations to determine whether the proposed concept of belonging through negotiation has wider applicability.

CONCLUSION

Identity development among Tibetan adolescents in India cannot be adequately explained through a binary choice between cultural preservation and social integration. The present study demonstrates the usefulness of examining identity formation alongside social belonging, cultural negotiation, and perceived social support. The

quantitative findings indicate meaningful positive relationships among these constructs, while the qualitative findings suggest that adolescents actively interpret and coordinate their identities across family, school, peer, community, linguistic, and wider social environments. The findings support the view that Tibetan identity among adolescents is neither simply inherited nor inevitably weakened through social participation outside the Tibetan community. Instead, identity appears to be continuously reconstructed through interaction between cultural continuity and contemporary experience. Schools, families, peers, community institutions, and language environments all contribute to this process. The concept of belonging through negotiation offers a useful framework for understanding this developmental process. It suggests that young people can remain connected to Tibetan cultural heritage while developing meaningful participation in Indian society. Such an approach moves beyond the restrictive opposition between homeland and hostland and recognises adolescents as active agents in constructing identities that are culturally grounded, socially connected, and oriented toward the future. For educators and policymakers, the implication is clear: the goal should not be to make Tibetan adolescents choose between cultural continuity and social participation. Rather, educational and community environments should enable them to develop the confidence, language resources, social relationships, and reflective capacities required to belong across contexts without experiencing cultural identity as a contradiction.

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