

Navigating Identity Shifts: A Review of International Students' (Re)construction of Self-Identities in Literature

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Abstract:

Studying abroad is increasingly becoming a popular choice for many students and their families. Pursuing a degree in a foreign country not only signifies academic achievements, as students are expected to complete their education within a new educational system, but it also contributes significantly to their personal growth and life accomplishments. International students face the challenge of adapting to a new environment, managing life's difficulties, and establishing connections within the host society. Adjusting to this new environment, rebuilding their lives in an unfamiliar place, and successfully earning a degree in a foreign country all require a strong and mature personality. When international students accomplish these tasks, they undergo a process of self-renewal and self-identification, meanwhile, they will have the chance to view their mother culture from a different angle and gain deeper understanding of it. The re-developed ethnic identity will also impact international students' self-identity as well. This transformative journey makes international students more resilient, boosts their self-efficacy, and ultimately shapes them into stronger and more mature individuals, paving the way for a successful life. This paper conducts an in-depth analysis of a wide range of research studies related to international students in order to examine the fundamental factors and processes influencing the self-identity of these students. The purpose of this systematic review is to provide an overview of current research findings and emerging trends concerning the self-identity of international students and its implications in their new environments, which enhances our understanding of international student self-identity. The insights derived from this paper can serve as valuable resources for educational institutions and local organizations seeking more effective strategies to bolster the self-resilience and self-efficacy of international students. Additionally, this research aims to identify gaps in current knowledge, paving the way for further exploration and investigation in this field.

Keywords:

International Student, Self-Identity, Ethnic Identity

1. Introduction

In pursuing education abroad, international students navigate both academic demands and the complexities of adapting to a new environment, contending with emotions like homesickness and loneliness. This transformative journey goes beyond academic growth, fostering a refined self-identity and resilient personality through the nuanced management of challenges. Additionally, the international student experience offers rich opportunities for cultural exploration, allowing them to appreciate their own roots and gain a profound understanding of their heritage in the context of cross-cultural interactions.

According to Rise, Sheeran, and Hukkelberg (2010), self-identity refers to prominent and lasting aspects of individual's self-perception [29]. It can also be considered as a way that people use to form themselves [22]. Self-identity is not like a fixed label that always shows or describes one individual in the same way; rather, self-identity changes with the new conditions arising in internal and external circumstances. For international students, a transformation of self-identity and perspective is crucial in their overseas experience. As they live and study in a new cross-cultural environment, they need to, and inevitably do, ask profound questions about their own identity in the new environment [21]. Living in a foreign country, international students may encounter challenges in communicating and interacting appropriately with the host culture, and poor communication and interaction will cause identity gaps for international students. Identity gaps are associated with negative impacts on international students, such as depression [16]

Studying across borders leads to profound changes in students and could impact international students' self-formation [22]. International students are not only pursuing educational credentials in foreign countries and under various educational systems but (for many of them) they are also immersed in different language environments and distinct cultural contexts. Marginson (2014) contended that during this phase of their lives, international students frequently experience a newfound sense of freedom [22]. The freedom mentioned here "was understood less as negative freedom, freedom from constraint, and more as positive freedom to do and to be." (p.2), and this sense of freedom will facilitate the reconstruction of self-identity for international students.

Self-identity is the view that individuals see themselves when they adopt the viewpoint of particular individuals or groups, which means that they integrate the significance and anticipations linked to a pertinent categorization into their own self-perception, individuals' self-identities may vary to their distinct roles, for example, one may show different identities when they as a teacher/student or a parent/child. Self-identity may also be impacted by culture and social circumstances. Waite-Jones and Rodriguez (2022) stated that "An individual's self-concept and level of self-esteem are influenced by their biology and culturally specific experiences" (p.79) [37]. Culture shapes people's self-concepts and self-definitions, the way people see themselves is impacted by the external environment and the interactions in different cultural practices and everyday lives [14].

International students from diverse countries and cultural backgrounds often face challenges and discomfort when they arrive in their host countries. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that amidst these challenges, they also encounter opportunities for personal growth [25]. To better adapt to the host society, previous research suggests that international students undergo changes in their self-identity in response to

evolving circumstances. Anandavalli et al. (2021), for example, write that international students reported experiencing self-discovery while studying abroad, with their experiences leading to increased self-reliance and boosted self-confidence [2]. Teng et al. (2023) asserted that changes in identity represent a fundamental adaptive strategy employed by learners to establish contexts for mutual identity verification [34]. A qualitative study conducted by Onosu (2021) confirmed that engaging in a cultural immersion experience supports the construction, conceptualization, and growth of one's self-identity [26]. Cultural experiences enabled international students to recognize commonalities shared by people, even in the presence of cultural distinctions. Consequently, this newfound understanding served as a source of empowerment and motivation for many participants. Accordingly, the newfound understanding will initiate a shift in their perspectives, transitioning from a narrow cultural viewpoint to a more global one. While this experience might have felt unusual and jarring for many participants, it compelled them to reevaluate their perceptions of both themselves and others. According to Onosu (2021), when individuals encounter unfamiliar situations, it prompts them to change from their usual thought patterns [26]. This experience can lead to the formation of new viewpoints. Mezirow (2009) proposed that individuals develop these viewpoints through a lifelong process of interaction and socialization [23]. These perspectives serve as the framework that shapes their beliefs, values, ideas, and perspectives. When individuals encounter disruptive events, it initiates a transformative learning process and establishes a new reference point [23]. This, in turn, prompts them to contemplate their beliefs, norms, values, ideas, and expectations. Through this process of reflection, individuals can develop fresh perspectives, which become central to how they relate to themselves, others, and society. Conversely, if individuals do not encounter or undergo experiences that challenge their perspectives, their viewpoints will remain unaltered.

What is more, international students living in a foreign country often undergo transformative experiences that lead to the development of new perspectives, which nurture new identities, and can occasionally result in identity conflict [44]. For example, Van De Mierop and Schnurr (2017) found that "simultaneous enactment of different identities may not always be in harmony but can often lead to potential conflict, especially when the expectations associated with the different identities clash" (p. 9) [36]. Sung (2022) also pointed out that identity conflicts can emerge not only from experiences in diverse social contexts but also when others neglect to recognize or respect the identities that individuals hold dear [44]. Consequently, reconciling these different identity conflicts becomes a significant individual task.

Identity conflict can be seen as a particular task for international students, who experience different cultural and educational backgrounds and often need to adapt to the normative values and beliefs of the host country. It is important to note that identity conflict is not always negative. In fact, individuals may explore new potentials as a result of the conflicts they encounter. Yuan et al. (2019) conducted an analysis of identity conflicts observed in Chinese higher education students, and their research revealed that these conflicts foster interactions among students, thereby offering new opportunities and directions for their identity development [42]. In other words, resolving identity conflicts is also a process of personal growth [44].

Ethnic identity can be considered an important factor in the development and reconstruction of self-identity for international students. When entering a new environment, newcomers, especially international students, typically face a range of

challenges in their daily lives, including acculturation, academics, and emotional well-being. Moreover, their temporary status often limits their access to certain social benefits and supports [30]. In such circumstances, local ethnic communities can play a pivotal role in assisting international students as they navigate the challenges of their new environment, facilitating connections that may have a lasting impact on their well-being and career opportunities and trajectory [1]. Furthermore, international students are likely to receive both emotional and practical support from these communities. In essence, ethnic communities serve as valuable pillars in aiding international students in their initial adjustment to the new environment, particularly during their early days in a foreign land. These ethnic communities may also reinforce international students' ethnic identity, which can be instrumental in helping them cope with emotions like homesickness and culture shock.

Self-identity at the personal level and ethnic identity often share a close and interconnected relationship. A study by Anderson (2020) highlighted this connection and revealed that international students perceive their identities as shaped by the cultural values, perspectives, and traditions of their home countries [3]. International students who participated in the study by Anderson emphasized the significance of their heritage and cultural values in influencing their identities, and expressed a deep appreciation for tradition while also exploring alternative ways of thinking. Ethnic identity is a form of identity rooted in a shared cultural heritage with a specific group of people [4]. It extends beyond self-recognition to encompass a sense of belonging, the pursuit of knowledge about one's ethnic group, and one's attitudes toward and involvement in the customs and activities associated with that ethnic community.

2. Research Methods

This study focuses on international students' self-identity and ethnic identity in a new environment. In this study, the bibliometric approach (Donthu et al., 2012; Wallin, 2005) and content analysis methods (Krippendorff, 2018) are employed. First, I used bibliometric to select relevant research about international students' self-identity and ethnic identity between 2013 to 2023. After the initial search, additional articles are selected from the reference lists. Second, I analysed the content of selected papers for further filtering and categorization based on common themes across the selected articles.

Bibliometric analysis of peer-reviewed literature is a method commonly used in research to examine a vast quantity of research outputs and data. The advantage and advancement of bibliometric analysis benefited from its strength in managing substantial amounts of scientific data and generating significant research influence. It allows researchers to analyse scholarly work within a particular field and explore subcategories or specific topics within that area. Moreover, available bibliometric software makes bibliometric analysis an effective method for summarizing and categorizing literature [10].

In this stage, the University of Windsor Leddy Library's electronic database was the primary resource for searching out articles. Specifically, the following databases were accessed: Google Scholar, ProQuest Social Sciences, Gale Cengage Academic OneFile, and Taylor & Francis Journals Complete.

The keywords used for article search were international student self-identity, international student ethnic identity, study abroad, self-resilience, and self-efficacy. These keywords ensured a comprehensive search for relevant peer-reviewed

publications. A total of 50 articles published between 2013 and 2023 were identified. Of these, 37 were the most relevant to the purpose of this study and therefore were analyzed as source of data using content analysis approach [17].

Through searching out the relevant research papers, I identified two angles to look into international students' self-identity. One is about the maturity of their personalities and the other is their ethnic identity. The maturity of international students' personality focuses on individual growth, which is how international students become stronger and more adaptable to challenges and changing environments, while racial identity focuses on the impact of their home culture and racial community on the development of international students' self-identity. Both personal growth in a new environment and a sense of belongingness to their home culture will impact international students' their feelings and the maturation and redefinition of their personalities, which will further impact their achievements in their abroad journey. Furthermore, subcategories under these two main angles were identified through analysing the content of selected papers.

3. Results and Discussion

According to Marginson (2014), the self-formation process is complex and cannot be simplified because it involves multiple factors such as education, finances, career, family, culture, social interactions, language, and more [22]. It cannot be distilled into a single measurement on a universal scale. This indicates that it is essential to integrate and synthesize these various components to comprehend the self-formation process and, the result of the process, the self-identity of an individual international student.

3.1. Intercultural Interaction and Communication

Intercultural interaction and communication with the host country impacts international student's self-identity [19]. In transitional situations like studying abroad, it is crucial to have a greater capacity for reflection in order to maintain a strong self-identity and remain mindful of the new set of norms and expectations [41]. To better adapt to and have effective cultural interactions in the host society, international students show behaviours that are geared to the local culture when interacting with another ethnic group. Ye and Edward (2017) posit that international students' endeavour to interact with the local people to tell them more about their home country demonstrates their intercultural competence [41]. These actions promote the building of students' personal capital, offering chances for self-improvement, and building their self-identities.

The effects of intercultural interaction on self-identity are not only seen in long-term programs such as master's programs and Ph.D. programs that usually take more than one year, but also in short-term programs such as short-term exchange programs. In one study on the impact of short-term programs (5-week in this case) on international student self-efficacy, cultural intelligence, and adjustment in their host country, Nguyen, Jefferies, and Rojas, (2018) found that studying abroad aided the students who participated short-term programs in their personal growth and enhanced their intercultural skills [24]. Nonetheless, instances of feeling marginalized and not fully belonging, can potentially contribute to the formation of personal and social identity and raise awareness of racism and other forms of oppression.

3.2. Diverse Constraints Abroad Due to Temporary Status

Being strangers in their host countries, international students often have a feeling of being discriminated again, exploited (international student tuition is about three times that for domestic/ Canadian students), or bothered [40]. Such feelings, whether perceived or real, can erode international students' self-esteem and sense of belonging (Tran, 2017). As Tran puts it, "International students' non-citizenship status in the host country has [sometimes] led to less than equal entitlement and protection, exclusion and discrimination" (p. 6) on campus, in the workplace, and the host society in general [35]. Therefore, international students have frequently found themselves compelled to reaffirm and redefine their identities as they adapt to a new educational and social environment [44]. That is, many international students, placed in novel and unfamiliar situations, tend to encounter challenges in shaping their identities.

While studying abroad offers international students opportunities to engage with the host society and explore different cultures through interactions with their peers, it also presents challenges. Sobkowiak's research (2019) suggests that the academic journey abroad may not provide sufficient chances for students to fully immerse themselves in the host society, particularly for those in short-term programs [31]. To overcome this limitation, international students must actively seek opportunities to learn about foreign cultures from local and other international peers surrounding them. This active engagement is crucial for enriching their experiences, broadening their horizons, and contributing to a culturally diverse personality. On a positive note, the expanded knowledge and broader perspective gained from exposure to different cultures can enhance international students' self-identity, fostering the development of more mature and well-rounded personalities [31].

3.3. Educational Background and Personal Experience

Education serves as a vital factor that affects individuals' interaction with their inner selves and the outer world [22], and the past learning experiences of international students profoundly influence their early interactions within a new culture [28]. The development and engagement of international students' self-identity are influenced not only by external factors but also by internal elements such as their personalities, life experiences, and educational levels. These internal factors play a significant role in shaping their new identities. Notably, these differences become more pronounced when we consider international students from various age and educational level groups. While a considerable amount of research has concentrated on international students pursuing Bachelor's and Master's degrees, some valuable studies have focused on Ph.D. students (Gao, 2019, 2021; Soong et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2021). This broader research perspective provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of the process of self-identity formation among international students during their study abroad experiences. Soong et al. (2015) conducted an autobiographical research to illustrate the transformation of doctoral students as they engage in self-reflection regarding their management of academic, personal, and cultural identities within the context of international doctoral education. In comparison to Bachelor's and Master's students, Ph.D. students tend to be more mature both in terms of their personality and academics. However, they often face greater stress due to personal life and academic demands. In this research, Soong et al. (2015) analysed challenges encountered by international Ph.D. students, some difficulties are commonly faced by international students, such as restriction, marginalization, and unrecognised prior (academic) experiences. Soong et al. concluded that international Ph.D. students who participated in their study often

mediated the multiple identities emerging during their doctoral study. This process is described as “process of self-empowerment and re-construction of oneself as a flexible and reflexive human being” (p.11).

3.4. Language

The language barrier is an unignorable challenge for international students, which impacts their interactions within campus and off campus. As language works not only as a tool that international students complete their studies in different linguistic settings but also as an important medium through which international students express and receive information and make social and emotional interactions with the host society. Wilczewski and Alon (2023) stated that proficiency in the host language enhances students’ understanding of the host culture, diminishes their sense of uncertainty, and fosters effective intercultural communication. Conversely, the deficiency and unfamiliarity in the local language make it harder for international students’ adjustment and strengthen the feeling of otherness. Previous research (Dewi Zakiya et al., 2022) found that language acquisition and proficiency are closely related to an individual’s social practice with the host society, and that these two are mutually reinforcing.

3.5. International Student’s Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity is a form of identity rooted in a shared cultural heritage with a specific group of people (Phinney, 1996, as cited in Batterton and Horner, 2016). It extends beyond self-recognition to encompass a sense of belonging, the pursuit of knowledge about one’s ethnic group, and one’s attitudes toward and involvement in the customs and activities associated with that ethnic community [4].

Living and studying in a new environment often fosters a stronger ethnic identity tied to one’s home country or culture among international students [8,5]. This ethnic identity can serve as a buffer, helping international students confront the challenges they encounter in the host society. In a study conducted by Glass, Gómez, and Urzua (2014), researchers identified obstacles faced by non-European international students when it comes to engaging in recreational activities. The findings highlighted that students from Eastern/South-Eastern Asia encounter more limitations in this regard compared to their counterparts from Southern Asia and the Middle East/North Africa [13]. Furthermore, non-European students tend to form closer friendships with fellow co-nationals rather than host nationals. Additionally, this group of non-European students expressed a lower sense of connection to their universities in comparison to their European peers. Such disconnection can lead to feelings of loneliness among international students. In contrast, a strong sense of belonging to their mother country offers comfort and reinforces their ethnic identity. The importance and effectiveness of finding solace in their ethnic identity and a sense of ethnic belonging are particularly pronounced during times of special significance.

One’s living experiences in their mother country and immersion in their native culture significantly contribute to the formation of their ethnic identity and also play a role in shaping their self-identity, while the experiences and perceptions they received in the host society help with the self-identity process as well. Studying abroad provides international students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in different cultures, ultimately leading to transformations in their identities. Biwa (2022) introduces the concept of multicultural identity, rooted in self-identification, which pertains to individuals adept at navigating and seamlessly integrating two or more

cultures, enabling them to function effectively within diverse cultural contexts. Biwa emphasizes the mutual reinforcement of multicultural identity and cultural adaptation. As stated in the article, “Sojourners can benefit from unpacking the meaning-making processes involved in their ever-evolving and expanding identity” (p. 7) [7]. Likewise, Anderson (2020) described the phases that Muslim international students experience their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities. This research underscored four phases of Muslim international student experiences: during Phase 1 their identities were shaped by the cultural values, perspectives, and traditions of their home countries. In Phase 2, as they faced challenges and obstacles, they discovered unexpected opportunities for personal growth and development. During Phase 3, Muslim international students expressed a strong connection to their heritage and cultural values as integral components of their identities; and in Phase 4, they acknowledged the importance of tradition while also exploring alternative ways of thinking and living [3].

4. Conclusions

4.1. Research gaps

During my literature review about international student’s self-identity, and the link between self-identity and self-efficacy, I have found extensive articles on how learning abroad experiences contribute to these students’ self-formation and personal growth; as well as their academic experiences, career prospects, and overall health and wellness. A significant amount of research has been conducted in the most popular destinations for international students like the U.S. (e.g., Quinton, 2020; Suh et al., 2023), the U.K. (e.g., Tran, 2015; Barron et al., 2010), and Australia (e.g., Lin et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2015), while there is comparatively less research in the Canadian context. Despite Canada being a popular destination with similarities in language and educational systems, its unique multicultural and socially tolerant background, emphasized by official policies (Kubota, 2015), sets it apart [18].

Therefore, conducting research in this Canadian context is valuable and can be highly beneficial for international students and educational institutions they attend. Furthermore, there exists a noticeable research imbalance between international students in non-English-speaking countries and those in English-speaking countries. It is essential to acknowledge that diverse cultural backgrounds in different countries lead to unique experiences and emotions among international students, influencing their multifaceted self-identity formation process. As a result, research in this area has the potential to become more comprehensive and enriched. Additionally, one’s self-identity may be linked to their choice of majors and future career prospects. Further research could delve into the impact of their academic and career development experiences during their studies.

4.2. Conclusions and Implications

This systematic review provides an overview of current research findings and emerging trends concerning the self-identity of international students and its implications in their new environments, which enhances our understanding of international student self-identity. The insights derived from this paper can serve as valuable resources for educational institutions and local organizations seeking more effective strategies to bolster the self-resilience and self-efficacy of international students.

Studying and living abroad shape one's identity, values, and beliefs. Marginson (2014) defined international education as 'a process of self-formation' in which students manage their lives reflexively [22]. There is a substantial body of research that shows that international students are highly likely to develop new self-identities when studying abroad. Studying abroad will make an individual's self-identity change considerably because the huge changes in lives at each angle shape people's thinking patterns. International students who study cross the border commonly experience extensive changes emerging in their lives, consequently, these changes from all aspects of their lives change their identities, such as their perspectives, expectations, and assumptions of self and others. Delving into the self-identity of international students and its various influences is a multifaceted and enduring endeavour.

Self-identity is highly personal, challenging to quantify, and susceptible to external factors, making it subject to variation in different contexts [15]. Educational institutions and staff can work on facilitating interactions and communications between students with diverse cultural backgrounds, providing multiple 'international social spaces', such as dormitories and classrooms. Within these settings, students have the opportunity to immerse themselves in distinct cultures and engage with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Various places within universities or colleges may afford international students the chance to assume multiple roles, including those of discoverers, ambassadors, and negotiators, which, in turn, impact their identity development. Regarding the services and resources offered by institutions to promote their students' success on campus, it is important not only to offer what students need but also to ask them for their input on what would help students succeed, and workers who work with international students should acknowledge international students' ability to build and rebuild their self-identities and grow stronger personalities. This way, universities can identify what international students think would improve their success and create a campus environment that supports their achievements [25]. International students are not simply influenced by their surroundings, they actively participate in the process of cultural adaptation and identity formation. They make choices based on their backgrounds and interactions with various cultural communities. Institutions should aim to comprehend why international students opt for particular cultural identities and, accordingly, can introduce policies, initiate programs, and organize activities to foster positive and successful acculturation experiences.

Conflicts of Interest

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