Beyond Labels: Understanding the Complex Identities of Youth in the UK

Working Paper

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Introduction

Despite the growing number of diverse life experiences in the United Kingdom, there remains a significant gap in understanding when it comes to how intersecting social categories can change an adolescent's lived experience into something that is wholly unique from their peers. The number of young people with complex identities, created because of these intersecting experiences, is rising, but those in positions of authority — researchers, policy makers, organisations and planners — can fail to recognise the impact that this has. Within that context, this essay aims to examine the social and psychological effects that a complex identity has on the development of adolescents.

A person with a complex identity is a member of one social category but simultaneously identifies with other social categories in ways that are distinct from most members of their original social category. This is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of experiences. At a minimum, the majority of people will have a position in the social categories of ethnicity, gender, class, age, nationality, religion, location, occupation, disability and sexuality. Each of these social categories is imbued with a set of stereotypes that can be considered the "norm." An individual who does not align with these norms is likely to exhibit a complex identity.

The perceived stereotypes attached to social categories will change based on individual preference and societal expectations. However, a person with a complex identity will always be someone whose mix of social categories diverges from those expectations. This can also change dependent on the situation. For example, an Indian woman living in the UK may have a complex identity, while another Indian woman living in India may not. In this instance, it is important not to use definitive language because the totality of the latter's identity has not been described. If, for example, the latter had grown up in Singapore and only recently relocated to India, then she would be considered to have a complex identity. Although her ethnicity may align with that of the dominant culture, there may be discrepancies in other areas of her identity, such as her behaviours, traditions, and language.

An individual with a complex identity will experience the dominant culture in a manner distinct from someone who matches it completely. The unique dynamic that they have with the dominant culture may prompt unique internal conflicts that force them to find a balance between dominant and minority communities. This will affect their identity development in ways that may not be present in a 'dominant-aligned' person. It will also affect their perceived place in society. The social dynamic of the individual may

facilitate the introduction of new traditions into the dominant culture, or conversely, may result in isolation due to confusion about how to fit in. The manner in which the individual manages their complex identity may have a lifelong impact on their development. This may extend from the cultivation of self-worth to enabling researchers to predict the quality of intimate relationships that they can sustain. Every dynamic and every combination of social categories will be unique.

In the United Kingdom, the growing presence of minority groups is an observable trend in modern society. Not only has the Office for National Statistics increased the number of ethnicities that they recognise from 16 in 2001 to 19 in 2021, but they have also recorded an increase in the BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) population and a decrease in the white population (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Another significant increase can be found in the British population, aged 16 and over, who do not identify as heterosexual or straight (Office for National Statistics, 2023a). This number has increased by 1.6% over the previous five years. A third drastic change has been recorded within how people identify with religion. The results of the 2021 census revealed that less than half of the United Kingdom's population identified as Christian for the first time in history (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Despite this, those who identified as Christian remained the largest religious group, closely followed by those who identified as not having a religion. Other religions, such as Islam, remained a minority group although there was a 1.6% increase from the last census.

Alongside an increasingly diverse population, the United Kingdom also experienced a significant increase in hate crimes in 2023 with 103,920 more incidents than in 2013 (Home Office, 2023). The Metropolitan Police define hate crimes as being motivated by prejudice against characteristics such as gender, race, sexuality and religion (Metropolitan Police, n.d.). This increase indicates a breakdown in social cohesion and a divergence from Goal 16 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which the United Kingdom has adopted. This goal requires that adopters "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (United Nations, n.d.). An important aspect of this is the creation and maintenance of a socially cohesive society, which the House of Lords recognises as "one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy" (Brown, 2021). The organisation posits that this society may not be demographically homogeneous, yet it draws strength from its diversity, which consequently renders it less likely to experience conflict "when different interests collide" (Brown, 2021). The correlation between the increase in diversity and the increase in hate crimes indicate that the United Kingdom is struggling to achieve a consistently cohesive society as while different interests are colliding, they are also in conflict. It is for this reason, among others, that it is

important for people in positions of authority to understand how diversity is impacting societal interactions.

This paper aims to investigate the people that make up society within the United Kingdom, with a specific focus on young people and adolescents. By examining the lived experience of one of the youngest generations — members of society who have a growing abundance of different cultural, informational and behavioural influences — the underlying conflicts and challenges that come with having a complex identity can be highlighted. It is additionally relevant as adolescence is an incredibly important time for a person to develop their identity. The ages of 12-24 make up the middle ground between being functionally independent and completely reliant on one's parents. This paper does not intend to be a complete guide to this phenomenon, but rather the starting point which may assist or hint at how adolescents with complex identities turn into adults and what effect that has on society.

How are adolescent identities formed?

It is important to understand the theory behind adolescent identity creation to fully understand how having a 'complex identity' can cause the process to diverge or change from the 'norm'. However, it is also important to note that the study of identity can be complicated and ever changing, which means that the theories mentioned in this essay will not be exhaustive and they may not remain relevant in perpetuity. The following exploration is based on pre-existing theory to analyse how a complex identity may impact identity development. A significant body of the current literature in this area has informed the book Childhood and Society (Erikson, 1993). Erikson's theories, despite facing increasing criticism with the passage of time, remain the foundation for numerous researchers upon which they base their studies. In his book, Erikson proposes that there are eight distinct stages that individuals will undergo to form their identity. Each distinct stage has a 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' outcome.

Table 1

	Successful	**Unsuccessful**
Infancy (Stage 1)	Trust	Mistrust

Early Childhood (Stage 2)	Autonomy	Shame
Play Age (Stage 3)	Initiative	Guilt
School Age (Stage 4)	Industry	Inferiority
Adolescence (Stage 5)	**Identity**	**Confusion**
Early Adulthood (Stage 6)	Intimacy	Isolation
Middle Age (Stage 7)	Generativity	Stagnation
Old Age (Stage 8)	Integrity	Despair

Erikson did not specify an age range for his different stages, but some modern literature places a relevant adolescent as being between the ages of twelve and twenty-four (Sokol, 2009). This is the age range that this essay will refer to. As pictured in Table 1, the relevant stage is stage 5, and the conflict is between identity and confusion. These terms refer to whether the adolescent has found their role in society by the time they leave this stage. If they believe that they fit into society and can picture themselves participating in it, then they have achieved the 'identity' status. If they remain confused as to their place in society, then they have achieved the 'confusion' status. The ways that an adolescent might try to reach one of these statuses include (a) searching for likeminded groups who might share the same opinions, attitudes, characteristics and style, (b) identifying someone that they look up to and trying to emulate them and (c) identifying someone that they dislike and trying to distance themselves from coming across like them.

If the adolescent secures the successful outcome of 'identity', this means that the adolescent has meaningfully cultivated their skills of fidelity and devotion (Erikson, 1993, p.247) by remaining faithful to their in-groups, ideals and idols. This may be evident in the form of romantic relationships, where they are successfully monogamous and an active participant in the intimate relationship. In contrast, the unsuccessful outcome of 'confusion' means that the adolescent has not been able to fully cultivate these skills. This may manifest as an inability to settle, difficult fitting into society or psychotic episodes (Erikson, 1993, p.235). An example might be a person who feels as though they cannot find a home and so are constantly moving, or it might be someone who struggles to maintain close relationships. These implications emphasise the importance of achieving the successful outcome, as it is clear that these factors can have lifelong consequences.

Erikson's framework is useful in understanding how an adolescent's identity can develop but is broad and leaves space open for other theories. One such theory is the Ego Identity Status Paradigm (Marcia, 1966). This theory labels four different statuses that an adolescent might achieve while in Stage 5 of Erikson's framework, with each one being an indication of whether the adolescent is more likely to achieve identity or confusion. Listed in order of the status that is most likely to achieve identity to the status most likely to achieve confusion, these are identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure and identity diffusion. The factors that are considered when assessing which status an adolescent has achieved are exploration and commitment. The former refers to the extent that the adolescent has explored their identity options, and the latter refers to whether they have committed to any identifying choice.

Table 2

	Exploration	Commitment	Consequences (Adams, Bennion. & Huh. 1987b: Bourne, 1978a. 1978b)
Identity Achievement	HIGH	HIGH	• Has good interpersonal relationships • High levels of intimacy • High levels of intelligence
Moratorium	HIGH	LOW	• High levels of anxiety • Holds anti-authority sentiments
Foreclosure	LOW	HIGH	• Low levels of anxiety • Good relationship with their parents • High need for social approval • High levels of conformity
Identity Diffusion	LOW	LOW	• Low levels of intimacy • Generally withdrawn

			• Has difficulty with commitment to others

A theoretical example of how an individual might explore and commit is a young man, Femi, who is considering how he wants to introduce himself to people at university. Throughout school he has introduced himself as a person from Egypt. He knows he is doing this because many of his school friends knew him when his family arrived from Egypt. By contrast, it is likely that none of his university friends would have known him then. Therefore, he is considering the option of saying that he is from Birmingham, which is where he grew up. This process is Femi exploring his options. If he decides that he *will* introduce himself as a person from Birmingham, he is making a commitment. The following table demonstrates what his process will look like in order to achieve the different statuses.

Table 3

	Exploration	Commitment
Identity Achievement	Femi has considered that he could introduce himself in a different way to his peers in university. He has weighed up the benefits of saying that he is from Egypt versus he is from Birmingham.	Upon consideration of his options, Femi has decided to say that he is from Birmingham.
Moratorium	Femi has considered that he could introduce himself in a different way to his peers in university. He has weighed up the benefits of saying that he is from Egypt versus he is from Birmingham.	Femi does not know how he should introduce himself to new people.
Foreclosure	Femi has not considered that he could introduce himself in a	Femi is going to continue to say that he is from Egypt.

	different way to his peers in university.	
Identity Diffusion	Femi has not considered that he could introduce himself in a different way to his peers in university.	Femi does not know how he should introduce himself to new people.

In addition to this paradigm, another important process when it comes to achieving 'identity' is found within the mindset of the adolescent. This can be measured in a number of ways, with one tool being the self-concept clarity scale (SCC) which can be seen as a way to identify what stage an adolescent is at (Campbell et al, 1996). The scale measures the extent to which an adolescent's identity is internally consistent, clearly defined, and stable. It is solely concerned with how the adolescent views themselves and not what their actions may signal to the rest of society. Those with a high level of SCC tend to have higher self-esteem, agreeableness and conscientiousness alongside a lower level of neuroticism – anxiety, emotional instability and self-doubt. Crocetti has connected the scale to an adolescent's identity status (Crocetti, 2023). The higher the adolescent's SCC is, the more likely they are to have reached identity achievement and therefore, the successful outcome of Erikson's fifth stage. Although this is not as analytical as the other two theories, the scale is a useful indicator of whether an adolescent has or will achieve the 'identity' status.

In the next section, these three tools will be used as a foundation to explore how an adolescent with a complex identity may adhere to or diverge from the understood developmental process. The lack of recognition surrounding complex identities in research may mean that some findings of this essay are correlative or lacking in further sources but are nonetheless a useful prompt in considering the lived experience of individuals with a complex identity.

How does having a complex identity affect an adolescent's development?

An adolescent with a complex identity will go through the same process as their peers with additional considerations. Of course, no development of identity will be completely the same, but the literature has identified various factors to consider when analysing the development of an adolescent with a complex identity.

Identity Negotiation

An adolescent must conduct 'Identity Negotiation' as a part of their exploration and commitment process. This refers to how an adolescent may resolve the conflict of having different cultural influences, expectations, and norms. The way that an adolescent chooses to do this may have an impact on their social situation. For example, when 'third culture kids' (people who have grown up in a country that is different from their and/or their parent's passport issuer) change their accent depending on who they are talking to, they may be doing this to fit in (Benjamin & Dervin, 2015). To them, it is a part of their identity to be adaptive and flexible for the benefit of their current group, however this may translate differently to those who are not third culture kids. External parties may interpret these habits as a sign of deception which will then lead to the third culture kid being rejected from social groups.

This negotiation may also be involuntary and prompted by the adolescent's surroundings. For example, this conflict might surface due to a person immigrating (Esteban-Guitart et al, 2015). One woman was a psychologist in her home country. However, her new country did not recognise her qualifications and she was unable to get a job in her field, working instead as a waitress. This caused an internal conflict for the participant as she struggled to decide on how she should label herself. Through this change her place in society was altered and her previous identification commitment was no longer valid. This forced her to reconsider how she defined herself and put her one step back on the aforementioned ego identity status paradigm (Marcia, 1966). This situation might be replicated for adolescents in other areas, such as moving to a country where no one plays their favourite sport. The dissonance in this case might be the change from being known as a 'sporty' and 'successful' student, to being someone who does not play the popular sport and perhaps has more difficult socialising because of it.

In comparison, Tiffany Lytle in her poem "*Is My Body My Own?*" describes how people's perspective of the integration between her ethnic and cultural backgrounds has forced her to consider who she is (Lytle, 2023). In her blurb, she describes not being 'Cambodian enough' for Cambodian dance, but not being 'American enough' for commercial dance success. She believes that this rejection has forced her to constantly alter her body to suit the different aesthetics required by each medium. This is both a form of conscious identity negotiation but also one that appears to be necessary in her sector. It demonstrates that this negotiation is not only relevant in social situations but can have real consequences for people's professional lives. Within the literature, there are various theories and frameworks that explain the mental process behind identity negotiation. This paper will highlight two: acculturation and the bicultural identity integration framework.

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the changes that occur when one culture meets another (Spielberger, 2004). The meeting of cultures may have an impact on both separate cultures and on the individual that has prompted the meeting. This meeting does not have to be a physical connection, but rather it could take place in an individual's mind just as easily as it could occur by hosting two separate religious holidays on one day. John Berry has identified four different acculturation techniques; integrate, assimilate, separate or be marginalised (Berry, 1992).

Table 4

	Original Culture	New Culture	Example
Integrated	RETAINED	JOINED	Indonesian woman who mixes socially with everyone and values all traditions or celebrations.
Assimilated	REJECTED	JOINED	Indonesian woman who avoids Indonesian people and events, choosing instead to participate only in events that are traditional to the UK.
Separated	RETAINED	REJECTED	Indonesian woman who refuses to mix socially with anyone who is not British-Indonesian or Indonesian.
Marginalised	REJECTED	REJECTED	Indonesian woman who is rejected by people in the UK because of her accent but does not value or participate in her original culture. She does not appear to fit into either culture.

Every technique will influence a person's status on the aforementioned 'ego identity paradigm'. For example, an adolescent who uses the 'separated' or 'assimilated' techniques may have low levels of exploration. This would make it more likely that they will achieve the 'foreclosure' status and therefore not reach the successful stage of 'identity achievement'. As mentioned before, they may face a high need for approval and social conformity but have a good relationship with their parents. In comparison, a person who is marginalised may have low levels of both exploration and commitment due to their isolation from all relevant cultures. This makes it more likely that they will achieve 'identity diffusion'. It is worth reiterating that the potential consequences for this status include being withdrawn and having low

levels of intimacy. Therefore, it may be inferred that the process of identity negotiation for someone with a complex identity may negatively impact them in any attempts to reach 'identity achievement' and therefore reach the successful outcome of 'identity' in Erikson's framework. Only one of the four options in Berry's theory, assimilation, appears to imply high levels of exploration and commitment.

Bicultural Identity Integration

The Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) Framework is a tool for researchers to highlight how an individual views their different cultures and to what extent they believe that their different cultures intersect and overlap (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). The framework has two different categories. The first is the discrepancy between cultural conflict and harmony. This measures the extent to which the individual believes their cultures can coexist in peace. The second category is cultural distance or overlap. This measures the extent to which the individual believes that their cultures are similar to each other. A person can have high or low BII, with high level of overlap and a high level of harmony indicating that the person has a high level of BII.

Table 5

	CONFLICT	HARMONY
DISTANCE	Low BII – "It is *unlikely* that a British person is also a Christian, these social categories *do not* share the same values."	Moderate BII – "It is *unlikely* that a British person is also a Christian, although these social categories *do* share the same values."
OVERLAP	Moderate BII – "It is *likely* that a British person is also a Christian, but these social categories *do not* share the same values."	High BII – "It is *likely* that a British person is also a Christian, these social categories *do* share the same values."

An adolescent's level of BII may influence how they conduct themselves in social situations (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). For example, a low level of BII might cause an adolescent to constantly switch between identities when they are in their respective social groups due to the perceived differences. As a result, they may find it more difficult to 'commit' under the definition of the 'ego identity status paradigm' as they will have to change again when they interact with another social group. In comparison, a high level of BII makes it more likely that the adolescent's identity is one that has been 'merged' from their different social groups. They may find it easier to commit and have likely explored their options but may find it difficult to find peers who understand them due to the uniqueness of their identity.

Identity Denial

Identity Denial in this context refers to external sources denying that the individual belongs in one or more of their social categories (Cárdenas, Verkuyten & Fleischmann, 2021). This may take the form of the dominant culture rejecting the individual's place within it, but it may also occur within minority communities who believe that the individual is too different and possibly too similar to the dominant culture. In post-apartheid South Africa, for example, both can be seen at the same time. Adhikari documented a prevalent sentiment among people of colour, who stated that "first we were not white enough and now we are not black enough" (Adhikari, 2005). This quote highlights never quite feeling the sense of belonging in either category, an isolation that is encouraged by the way that those around them perceive them.

Denial may also manifest in a more nuanced form, based on assumptions rather than social structure. For instance, the Royal Society has documented that individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are underrepresented in the United Kingdom's STEM education programmes (Royal Society, 2014). Consequently, an assumption may be made that anyone enrolled in a STEM education programme is not from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background. This assumption may be reinforced if those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have attempted to assimilate with their peers, adopting the appropriate attire and mannerisms. If lecturers or advisors tailor their sessions to the perceived demographic of their classes, those from a privileged socioeconomic background, then the lack of support for other circumstances is also a form of denial. By failing to teach for disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, the institute is denying their existence within the cohort.

Identity denial is particularly prevalent within adolescent social groups in the form of rejection. As previously stated, the adolescent age is characterised by a period of socialisation and the search for one's place in society. Consequently, groups are more inclined to reject individuals who do not align with the fundamental social norms of the group. Erikson calls this a defence mechanism (Erikson, 1993). This may result in internal pressure for an adolescent to conform, but it may also manifest as minor rejections, where their peers have identified an anomaly in the individual and conducted internal policing of conformity. An adolescent with a complex identity may not be able to find peers that share the same experiences as them which means that it may be harder for those around them to understand some of the things that they do. They may try to hide parts of themselves like one girl in Lauren Houghton's study who begged her friends not to share that she was a first-generation immigrant (whereas they were all second-generation immigrants) (Houghton et al, 2020). This self-denial is done out of the predicted rejection that the adolescent might face if open about their identity.

The fear of rejection impacts an adolescent's ability to explore and commit. If they are rejected by a social group that emulates certain characteristics, it might be difficult to commit to them. Likewise, it is difficult to explore anything too distant from a core social group if that social group is looking to reject any anomalies. On a theoretical level, this has an impact on the adolescent's position on the aforementioned SCC scale (Campbell et al, 1996). It may be challenging to conceptualise an internally consistent, clearly defined and stable identity when others are consistently disagreeing with one's self perception. Additionally, if an individual experiences confusion or rejection when exhibiting characteristics from one culture in a social group of another culture, they may perceive a significant distance or conflict between the cultures. This will lower their BII score. As discussed earlier, it is predicted that a low BII score and low position on the SCC scale leads an adolescent further away from achieving 'identity' under Erikson's framework. Therefore, identity denial is yet another negative phenomenon that might impact the development of an adolescent with a complex identity.

Case Study

The presence of Islamophobic hatred in the UK is a powerful example of how ignorant the nation can be when it comes to complex identities. The UK Government does not recognise a formal definition of Islamophobia (House of Commons, 2023a). Despite that, the phenomenon is prevalent in modern British society. In February 2024, the charity Tell Mama reported over 2000 anti-Muslim cases that have occurred

in the UK since October 2023 (TellMAMA, 2024). This is a 335% increase from the same time last year. The recorded abuse included crimes such as hate speech, vandalism, assault, and threats. Several incidents demonstrate an unwillingness to accept Muslims in the UK. For example, a Twitter (X) user was banned from the platform for posting a poll which asked, "Who'd win in the upcoming civil war in Britain?" and making the options *British* or *Muslim*. In another recorded incident a Muslim individual was told to "f*** off to a Muslim country". The presence of this abuse highlights the existence of a sentiment that Muslim individuals and Muslim values do not 'fit' in a Western Society. This has implications for Muslim adolescents with a complex identity, particularly those who are growing up in the UK and would call themselves as British.

The existence of the British-Muslim (and adjacent) complex identity is at odds with the two previously mentioned instances of abuse. One does not have to choose between *British* or *Muslim*, both characteristics can exist within one person or country. The different elements of the adolescent's identity co-exist. An adolescent may choose to separate their identities and code switch when they feel it is appropriate, but this does not erase their experiences in both communities. The suggestion that an adolescent would have to choose between them misunderstands the concept of a complex identity. It presumes that adolescents can only be a part of one of the social categories, ignoring the fact that they are not even the same type of social category – the descriptor of '*British'* refers to a nationality whereas '*Muslim'* refers to an individual's religion. The aforementioned discrimination hinges on the assumption that Muslim values are not compatible with Western society despite research on complex identities that suggest otherwise.

In fact, a number of studies carried out by Olivia Spiegler demonstrate that a strong Muslim identity can be *vital* in cultivating a strong British identity (Spiegler, 2021). In these studies, she measured the way Muslim adolescents, in Western societies, perceived the strength of their respective identities. The qualifiers were a strong identity in one of the categorisations, a strong identity in both categorisations and a moderate identity in both categorisations. In her first study which used British adolescents as participants, Spiegler found that adolescents whose strongest identity was their religious identity *also* had a strong national identity.

Furthermore, it was likely that the strong religious identity was the *reason* for the strong national identity. In her paper, she theorised that this could be because the strong religious identity provides a foundational base for identity. In other words, such an adolescent will struggle less in a confusing social situation because they are able to draw on a normative cultural expectation which they can then follow. Not only does this increase the extent to which they see themselves as British, but it also increases the

stability of their identity. The adolescents who fit this descriptor had fewest identity conflicts out of the four groups that Spiegler identified, meaning that they were the most secure about both their British and Muslim identities.

Spiegler's second study looked at Muslim participants in America (Spiegler, 2021) in a longitudinal study over three years that recorded the strength of adolescents' identities. The study found that those who had an equally strong religious and national identity did not see any growth in either identity over the three years (Group 2). In contrast, those who started with a strong Muslim identity had the most growth in terms of their national identity (Group 1) which resulted in both identities being strong. In some cases, the strong Muslim identity decreased as the national identity increased (Group 3). This supports the findings of the first study which demonstrates that having a strong religious identity is beneficial to the growth of a strong national identity. Notably, it also highlights that while some adolescents do decrease their religious identification as they identify more with their nationality, this is not the largest group. In fact, the largest group, with 78% of participants, is the one that maintains both a religious and national identity.

The results of these studies are in direct contrast to the sentiments behind the Islamophobic abuse that Tell Mama has recorded. Not only do they demonstrate that having a strong Muslim identity does *not* prevent an adolescent from also having a strong British identity, but they also suggest that a strong British identity may be a *consequence* of having a stronger Muslim identity initially. This suggests that complex identities may behave in unexpected ways, bolstering belongingness and cultural understanding that may seem confusing to those who do not share the identity. It also emphasises the need for more research in this area. If a strong Muslim identity increases the strength of a British identity instead of creating incompatibility, what other underlying logical fallacies may be present in the minds of the public (of whom authorities are generally a part of)? More research into the ways that different elements of identity interact may be beneficial for organisations to understand the needs of their clients; governments to understand the needs of their citizens and parents to understand the behaviours of their children.

When undertaking this research, it is important to remember that 'Muslim' and 'British' are not the only identities is at play. The framework of intersectionality recommends that researchers look at race, class, and gender as well (Crenshaw, 1991). Houghton looks at all of these elements and immigration status (Houghton et al, 2020). Here Houghton compares British, Muslim, Second Generation Immigrant, Female adolescents living in the UK ("*The Example*") to other, very similar, groups. The research demonstrates

how an adolescent's life can differ just by changing one social category. The following tables are a visual representation of some of the changes that occur.

Table 6

The Example (British, Muslim, Second Generation Immigrant, Female adolescents living in the UK)	Bangladeshi Female in Bangladesh
Refers to first generation Bangladeshi immigrants into the UK as 'Freshis'. This term has negative connotations.	Refers to first generation Bangladeshi immigrants into the UK as 'onion cutters' or 'Londoni'. These terms have fewer negative connotations.
Prefers to conceal the extent to which her family participates in Bangladeshi culture e.g. eating rice.	Embraces Bangladeshi culture as a normal part of life.
Only thinks of themselves as 'dressing like a Bangladeshi girl' when they are dressed up for special occasions like a wedding.	Thinks of themselves as dressing similarly to other Bangladeshi girls.
Has more friends of different ethnicities *according to the way the researcher defined ethnicity.*	Has fewer friends of different ethnicities *according to the way the researcher defined ethnicity.* In contrast to the researchers, she thinks of her friend group as being very ethnically diverse.

Table 7

The Example (British, Muslim, Second Generation Immigrant, Female adolescents living in the UK)	Muslim Bangladeshi Female in Bangladesh
There is a *strong* underlying assumption that she will eventually wear a hijab all the time. Around 86% of her peers will also wear a hijab all the time.	There is a *moderate to weak* assumption that she will eventually wear a hijab all the time. Around 26% of her peers will also wear a hijab all the time.

If she chooses to, she begins to wear the hijab daily at the age of 12.	If she chooses to, she begins to wear a hijab daily at the age of 18.
If she chooses to practice wearing a hijab before fully committing to it, she starts to do this at age 4.	If she chooses to practice wearing a hijab before fully committing to it, she starts to do this at age 19.
Prefers to identify herself in terms of her religion and *rejects* any identification with her ethnic culture.	No preference stated.

Table 8

The Example **(British, Muslim, Second Generation Immigrant, Female adolescents living in the UK)**	**The Archetype *but* They Are a First-Generation Immigrant**
Reaches the adrenarche stage of puberty at the same age (7) as white British girls in the UK and Bangladeshi girls in Bangladesh.	Reaches the adrenarche stage of puberty at an earlier age (5) compared to white British girls in the UK and Bangladeshi girls in Bangladesh.
Begins to practice wearing the hijab at age 4.	Begins to practice wearing the hijab at age 5.

Complex identities are the accumulation of several different social categories. Houghton's research demonstrates this by showing that just because an adolescent may share one social category with another, does not mean that they share the same values or beliefs. It is notable that "*The Example*" differs from Bangladeshi females living in Bangladesh in a number of unique ways. One example is the different way in which they perceive themselves. In this study, the British Bangladeshi females claimed that they were only dressing like Bangladeshi females when they were in specific dress. In contrast, the local Bangladeshi females did not make this distinction. Another notable example is the way that the participants viewed religion. *The Example* reported that there was a strong underlying assumption that they would eventually wear the hijab, whereas local Bangladeshi girls reported that this assumption was weaker than it was in the UK. Houghton noted that the average age that *The Example* began to practise

wearing the hijab was age four, whereas it was age nineteen for the local Bangladeshi girls. In other words, the recognition that both groups have Complex Identities makes it clear that social research may not be transferable despite the similarities in gender, ethnicity and religion.

The paper also shows that *The Example* differs greatly from another who may be the same on paper, with the caveat of being a first instead of a second-generation immigrant. This has social implications, such as beginning to practice wearing the hijab at a younger age, and biological implications which suggests that these social dynamics do not operate in isolation. There is also a change to the internal dynamics between members of the community which, again, indicates that not all research will be transferable despite the adolescent's similarities.

The implications of non-transferable research will affect researchers and the public. An in depth understanding of complex identities may help a researcher better identify the limitations of their study and adapt accordingly. It might be the difference between the research question "How do Bangladeshi girls view religion?" versus "How do *Second Generation, British* Bangladeshi girls view religion?". Houghton demonstrates that the groups view religion very differently and it can be inferred that considering the separate groups to be one and the same may have produced a very mixed result. The recognition of complex identities introduces greater nuance into research. If academics are also teachers, this will also be helpful in planning lessons.

The public may learn more about the Muslim community through school, especially if they do not have very many opportunities to do so in their daily life. Many schools offer a 'religious education' class. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) has recently published a report on the effectiveness of these courses (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2024). The report found that while some educators recognise the nuances of different religions, there are still instances where educators are teaching misconceptions or generalising an entire community. Furthering the knowledge of how complex religious communities can be may increase the accuracy with which people are taught. This greater understanding may also impact how non-Muslim adolescents analyse the social situations around them. For example, the report notes that one religious education class could not discuss Muslim women's participation in sport due to a lack of knowledge imparted to them during the classes. If information gaps are not filled, it leaves the gap open to misunderstandings, generalisations, and assumptions, some of which may be incorrect, such as the aforementioned Twitter (X) user's belief that the categories 'British' and 'Muslim' are in opposition.

A greater understanding may also increase academics willingness to teach controversial subjects. The OFSTED report notes that a great majority of curriculums did not equip their students with enough information to discuss controversial or sensitive subjects. This also leaves information gaps which may be filled with incorrect information. For example, one student Religious Education student reported that "Christians don't like gay things" which is an opinion that OFSTED believes was created due to the student being taught generalisations. In depth research, such as Houghton's report, provides nuance that generalisation may miss. Houghton notes that her research suggests that British Bangladeshi Muslims seem to be rejecting their ethnicity in favour of their religion. In a classroom this may be a controversial or sensitive subject despite being socially relevant. However, a larger body of research that confirms this finding may make academics more comfortable talking about the subject and, as a result, leave students better informed.

Contemporary Factors Affecting Complex Identities in the United Kingdom

There are a number of contemporary factors that may be influencing the development of complex identities in the UK. Without more research on the subject, it is difficult to pinpoint any one factor, but correlative studies and evidence have suggested that the factors of globalisation and the internet are playing a major role in the lives of the young people concerned. Both phenomena are present in the everyday lives of young people, whether it is in the form of signing up for a school club or observing a Chinese restaurant on a walk down the street. The following section will examine the impact that these factors might have on the development of a complex identity and demonstrate why is important that authorities are aware of the phenomenon.

Globalisation

The United Kingdom has become increasingly interconnected with the rest of the world, sharing culture, traditions and norms. A case in point is the premiere of the Korean television show 'Squid Game' was the

most streamed show in the United Kingdom. The UK also has some more permanent influences such as people who visit or relocate to the nation. The Office for National Statistics estimates that the total number of people who were immigrating long term into the UK at the end of the year of June 2023 was 1.2 million (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). By contrast, the number of British people living permanently in another country is 5.5 million (BBC, n.d.). Not only does this mean that the UK has welcomed people with different cultures, traditions and norms, but it also means that British citizens have the same influence on other nations around the world. This makes it increasingly likely that different cultures will meet, clash and possibly merge to create new cultures and new individuals with complex identities. This makes it more important than ever that governments understand the nuances behind the identities of their citizens. New cultures within populations may require new ways to mitigate conflict, allocate resources, educate citizens and so on.

A notable example that demonstrates why an understanding of complex identities can be helpful is the 2021 Census. Here The Office for National Statistics (ONS) attempted to record the number of transgender people in the United Kingdom (House of Commons, 2023c). The ONS states that 0.5% of people reported that their gender was different from the sex they were registered at birth but noted that it was uncertain about the accuracy of these statistics. The notes point out that a disproportionate number of people who said that their gender was different also said that they did not speak English very well. The ONS offered several theories for this result. Firstly, they suggest that this result could be a consequence of the respondent's understanding of English, as the same respondents reported that their English was poor, and they may not have understood the question fully. Secondly, they theorise that people who already identify as transgender may be relocating to the United Kingdom. This might account for the number of respondents for whom English is not their first language but who nonetheless identity as transgender.

In both theories, mobilisation and therefore globalisation are important factors to consider when gathering data used to create policies for transgender people in the United Kingdom. The intersection between non-fluent respondents and people who identity as transgender may be an unidentified complex identity. This is especially important if one considers that more adolescents in the UK are identifying as being a part of the LGBTQ+ community. If the first theory is true and respondents did not understand what they were being asked, then this may reveal a compositional flaw in the way that the census was written. Are the questions sufficiently clear enough to translate to those whom English is not their first language? Do the sentences or phrases used correspond to slang or sayings in another language and therefore are communicated poorly? Furthermore, this may mean that the statistic is not accurate,

and it would be useful to discover what margin of error has occurred. If the number of transgender or transgender adjacent people is overestimated, will the government respond with an over allocation of resources for people who do not exist? If the second theory is true, this may have implications for the language that guidance is written in; the community groups that are used to publicise resources; the pre-existing cultures that transgender person might have and so on. This may also mean that there 0.5% or more people living in the UK are transgender or transgender adjacent. All this information is beneficial when it comes to running matters of the state. Considering the different factors at play in the respondent's lives and recognising that a person can be a part of more than one minority group, may help to create more accurate surveys and therefore record more accurate data.

The increase in diversity requires both governments, communities and organisations to adapt. The impact that further globalisation will have on a population is predicted to (a) increase the number of individuals that share a similar complex identity, (b) increase locations that individuals can receive their information and in-groups, (c) increase the types of complex identities and (d) increase awareness around differences.

The Internet

Ofcom estimates that 93% of UK households had access to the internet in 2023 (House of Commons, 2023b). This means that the majority of adolescents will have some sort of access to the internet, whether this is at home, school or through public Wi-Fi. The ease with which adolescents can access the Internet has had an impact on identity development. This is true for all adolescents, not just those with a complex identity, but the impact does differ.

Firstly, the Internet has changed how adolescents socialise and has permitted the discovery of new in-groups. Adolescents can connect with more people than they could ever hope to in an offline space. At any one time, one person can be connected to thousands of people who have no connection to one another. Adriana Manago calls this 'networked individualism' (Manago, 2015). Although the individual may feel part of a group, members of the group may not be connected to each other. This promotes mobility, the ability to switch from one group to another without disruption, and independence. The individual is then able to customise their experience to suit their needs. The ability to do this positively impacts the individual's ability to explore. In the past, an individual might be limited to the opinions and attitudes of

those in their immediate circles but now they can seek communities that will reflect a different perspective. This can lead to more complex identities, formed with the input of hundreds of unrelated perspectives, as well as less rejection as adolescents become clear on what traits are accepted within groups and where they can go to display other traits. This is especially true if the adolescent joins temporary groups, one example being a gaming team that lasts for the length of the game, where they can 'test out' different attitudes or mannerisms in the knowledge that they may never talk to these people again.

Secondly, social media has been able to influence how and when an adolescent might explore their identity. In some respects, social media encourages identity stagnation. When an adolescent signs up for an account, they are asked to define themselves for the observation of their peers. They must choose several things that they believe represents them such as a profile picture, a username and a friend list. This could force an adolescent to contemplate their identity as complete at a young age (Granic, Morita & Scholten, 2020). This discourages exploration, especially if the adolescent has a public social media page where their friends and family can see if they change any aspect of their account. It may leave an adolescent feeling 'stuck'. This is especially true for an adolescent with a complex identity who has had to navigate between potentially conflicting identities in order to define themselves. How does constant connection with everyone impact someone who embraced their mother's culture in their previous country, but has now moved and wants to embrace their father's culture in their new country? Will they be prevented from changing the tone of their social media, like Granic et al suggests that they will be, due to fear of judgement from their old friends? Is this an obstacle to the adolescent exploring their alternatives e.g. new friends?

However, social media may also encourage commitment. Numerous design choices mean that adolescents are constantly committing to a sense of humour, a belief, a fashion sense, an attitude and so on, when they 'like' a post. This acts as a signal to themselves which then informs their understanding of their identity (Madden, Lenhart & Cortesi, et al., 2013). This is especially likely when one considers the strong algorithms on social media that cater a person's media to what the algorithm believes they will interact with the most (Perra & Rocha, 2019). If they 'like' videos made by Japanese creators, then they may get shown more Japanese created videos. The constant affirmation may assist an adolescent in committing to a choice for example, a Japanese-British adolescent may choose to separate rather than integrate or assimilate due to the abundance of Japanese media that they consume.

The combination of the lack of exploration and the strong encouragement to commit may lead adolescents to increasingly achieve the foreclosure status. However, although Granic et al argues that the

offline world and the online world can no longer be treated as separate environments, it is possible that the adolescent will be exposed to other views outside of the internet (Granic, Morita & Scholten, 2020), for example, in a politics class or a conversation between their parents. The internet is just another factor that must be considered when analysing how modern Complex Identities are formed.

Limitations

This paper provides an overview of the 'Complex Identity' phenomenon and is therefore limited in scope. It does not claim to be exhaustive in its coverage of the subject matter. Instead, it aims to provide an understanding of the phenomenon, while acknowledging that it does not cover all available theories nor delve deeply into the frameworks mentioned. The paper may be incomplete for the reader's purposes and requires additional research.

Furthermore, this paper was written with limited access to professionally published materials. The used sources are primarily open access studies, books and government documents. As a consequence, the pool of knowledge that was available to inform this paper may not have included the most relevant nor widely cited papers that are vital to this area of research. This may also mean that newer, pay gated materials were not taken into consideration.

In addition to this, the meaning of 'Complex Identity' used in this paper is unique to the author. This means that the author used key terms to search for and identity the appropriate research. However, it is possible that relevant materials were not identified or analysed due to the omission of certain key words such as dual identity, bicultural identity, mixed heritage and so on.

The length of this paper has meant that generalisations have had to be made and a limited number of experiences were focused on. The paper may not capture the nuances within the discussed identities, although the paper has aimed to use non-definitive language throughout.

The Future

The information that is currently available regarding complex identities is limited. The primary focus for the future of complex identities is recognition and expansion. The ability to connect separate communities with shared experiences will be vital in recognising overarching themes that may be affecting today's youth. This may take the form of in-depth literature reviews that connect pre-existing studies to complementary research that tackles a similar subject matter. For example, are studies that address the experience of 'bicultural children' relevant to those that discuss the experiences of those who have dual identities? Can these mean the same thing in different circumstances? The recognition that there are shared experiences within different categories will be beneficial in bolstering the available information surrounding complex identities. Not all experiences can be condensed under a singular term, but the understanding that some processes affect more than one group of people may emphasise the importance of further research and allocation of resources to this end.

Future research into how different dynamics can affect adolescent growth may benefit from a focus on and ample consideration of the different influences that may be imposed upon participants. Such studies would benefit from the expertise of lived experience or peer researchers. A peer researcher may understand the nuances in identity better than a researcher of a different generation and background. This may enable researchers to have a better insight into the limitations of their studies, as well as understand the reasons for any discrepancies. However, an understanding of the complexities will also inform the understanding that the lived experience of one peer researcher will not necessarily be applicable to all the participants of a study. The mere fact that a peer researcher shares an ethnicity with a group of participants does not mean that they define themselves in the same way or that they have had the same experiences. They may, however, be able to identify the experiences that cause the diversions with insight that another researcher might not have.

Furthermore, the exploration of individuals with complex identities should provide additional insight for those who are studying a minority's interactions with a dominant culture. For example, the dynamic between individuals and their minority communities can be just as important as the dynamic between them and the dominant culture when it comes to exploring identity denial. A study that solely attributes an individual's reaction to a phenomenon in the dominant culture may miss the nuances of the individual's identity. For example, a study that tries to understand the reaction of "The Example" in the case study chapter of this paper may misattribute her rejection of ethnic identity to be solely caused by discrimination from the dominant culture. This ignores the social pressure from her own ethnic identity,

Muslim British Bangladeshi, that has its own form of policing identity which includes prioritising their religious identity to the detriment of their ethnic identity.

In addition to this, it would be interesting to read an analysis of complex identities through another framework's lens. Although quite well known, Erikson's eight stages are not the only explanation for how people develop their identities, and the use of another theory may lead to further revelations concerning complex identities. There are also countless complementary tools that may elaborate or even contradict some of the findings of this paper. The furtherance of this type of analysis will be a valuable addition to the theory surrounding the term 'complex identity' which may in turn be beneficial for the purposes of integration and understanding.

Ultimately, the knowledge surrounding complex identities is a steadily growing field that requires more investment so that authorities can make informed decisions about how to adapt to them. When undertaking any future research, it is vital to understand that not all results will be transferable. Several findings may be restricted to the unique communication of social categories that are contained with the participants. Much like the study of identity, this may mean that the information bank must be flexible and constantly updated.

Ultimately, the potential psychological and social consequences of having a complex identity mean that it is important for authorities to understand the phenomenon. This is especially true as contemporary factors make it more likely that an adolescent will have or will develop a complex identity. The ability to comprehend and adapt to this phenomenon may promote social cohesion as more citizens perceive merging cultures as 'harmonious'. Failing to take this into account may have serious consequences from a rise in hate crimes to an over or under allocation of resources for different social groups. To achieve this goal, it is vital that more researchers investigate this topic to build an evidence base that can be widely disseminated.. In pursuit of that, this essay aimed to provide a basic overview of the form that further research may take and a foundation upon which to base it.

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