

# The Role of Cultural Orientation in Adolescent Identity Formation: Self-Construal as a Mediator

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## Abstract

Cultural context has become one of the key factors in identity formation. Differences in cultural orientation cause differences in self-construal which influence identity formation. This research examined the role of self-construal as a mediator of the role cultural orientation in identity formation. This study recruited 569 participants aged 18-21 years old. The Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale, Culture Orientation Scale, and Self-Construal Scale were used to measure identity formation, cultural orientation, and self-construal. The results indicated that interdependent self-construal could mediate the role cultural orientation in identity formation and that significant others are important in identity formation.

## Peran Orientasi Budaya dalam Pembentukan Identitas Remaja: Konstruksi Diri sebagai Mediator

### Abstrak

Konteks budaya menjadi salah satu faktor penting dalam pembentukan identitas. Perbedaan orientasi budaya dapat menyebabkan perbedaan konstruksi diri yang mempengaruhi pembentukan identitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji peran konstruksi diri sebagai mediator dari peran orientasi budaya dalam pembentukan identitas. Penelitian ini melibatkan 569 orang remaja yang berusia 18-21 tahun. Alat ukur *Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale*, *Culture Orientation Scale*, dan *Self-Construal Scale* digunakan untuk mengukur pembentukan identitas, orientasi budaya, dan konstruksi diri. Hasil penelitian mengindikasikan bahwa konstruksi diri interdependen dapat menjadi mediator dari peran orientasi budaya dalam pembentukan identitas dan orang lain yang signifikan penting dalam pembentukan identitas.

*Keywords: adolescence, cultural orientation, identity formation, self-construal*

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural context has become one of the key factors in identity formation. Different cultural contexts provide different opportunities for individuals to construct their identity (Côté & Levine, 2002; Phinney, 2005; Yoder, 2000). Although cultural context may have a role in identity formation, this role depends on individual identity formation (Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). This cannot be separated from the objective of identity formation, which prioritizes individual adaptation to a cultural context, and enables the individual to construct his/her identity based on their ideas about the perceived cultural

context (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Côté & Levine, 1988).

The significance of cultural context for identity formation has encouraged much research on the development of identity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). The majority of studies about identity formation and cultural context have been conducted in Europe (for example Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2012; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010; Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Meeus, Van De Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). Nevertheless, some studies have been conducted in an

Asian cultural context (for example Allen, Mohatt, Markstrom, Byers, & Novins, 2012; Berman, You, Schwartz, Teo, & Mochizuki, 2011). In Indonesia, Muttaqin and Ekowarni (2016) researched adolescent identity formation in an Indonesian context, particularly in Yogyakarta.

Studies of identity formation in various cultural contexts indicate the need for caution in generalizing results. This is because each cultural context has diverse concepts of identity formation (Berman et al., 2011; Ohnishi, Ibrahim, & Owen, 2001; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). Moreover, cultural orientation can influence the approach to identity formation (Côté & Levine, 2002). For example, a society with an individualistic cultural orientation will tend to promote identity formation through exploration and prioritize self-development. However, a society with a collective cultural orientation will tend to promote identity formation by group membership and prioritize interdependence between individuals (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006).

Previous studies have tried to explain the role of cultural context in identity formation by focusing on cultural orientation (Berman et al., 2014, 2011; Eryigit & Kerpelman, 2011; Ohnishi et al., 2001). However, to understand identity formation in a cultural context, self-construal must also be included. This is because self-construal is a manifestation of cultural orientation in constellations of thought, feeling, and behavior which are directly related to the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999). Therefore, this research examined self-construal as a mediator of the role of cultural orientation in identity formation.

**Identity formation, cultural orientation, and self-construal.** Identity formation is an individual dynamic process that periodically constructs and revises identity (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, et al., 2012). A three dimensional model of identity that was developed by Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus (2008) proposed that identity was formed from continuous interaction between commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus et al., 2010). Commitment is an individual process that involves making choices in the identity domain (Crocetti, Fermani, Pojaghi, & Meeus, 2011; Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008). In-depth exploration is an individual process that seeks additional information through discussion with others to reflect upon the chosen commitment (Crocetti, Rubini, Berzonsky, & Meeus, 2009; Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, et al., 2012). The reconsideration of commitment is an individual process that fixes or changes the previously chosen commitment when the

individual makes another choice related to identity that is more satisfying (Crocetti et al., 2011; Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus, 2013; Crocetti, Sica, Schwartz, Serafini, & Meeus, 2013).

A three-dimensional model of identity assumes that an adolescent already has a commitment to an essential identity domain (for example ideology and interpersonal), meaning that young people do not form their identity from the beginning. Usually, a chosen commitment is internalized from parents or other authority figures. Individuals may explore the chosen commitment deeply to compare it with their objectives and potential. If the previously chosen commitment is considered no longer appropriate, then the individual may reconsider their commitment and choose another commitment (Crocetti et al., 2011; Crocetti, Jahromi, et al., 2012; Crocetti, Sica, et al., 2013).

Identity formation cannot be separated from cultural entanglement in the macrosystem of a specific living space which influences individual development (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2002; Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2004; Santrock, 2011). The concept of cultural orientation is often used to understand the self as an individual in different cultures (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Furthermore, Triandis (2001) explained that there are two types of cultural orientation, namely individualistic and collective. The individual in an individualistic culture emphasizes individual freedom over collective freedom, thus a personal goal is more important than a collective goal (Jandt, 2009; Triandis, 2001). Western cultures such as America are often used as an example of an individualistic culture (Sugimoto, 1998; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Yamaguchi, Kuhlman, & Sugimori, 1995). However, an individual in a collective culture pays more attention to collective wellbeing, thus prioritizes collective goals over personal objectives (Jandt, 2009; Triandis, 2001). Asian countries, including Indonesia, are often used as examples of collective cultures (Sugimoto, 1998; Trafimow et al., 1991; Yamaguchi et al., 1995).

Different cultural orientations may cause different self-construal which comprises thought, feeling, and action related to the self as a response to perceived cultural orientation (Singelis et al., 1999). Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2003) stated that there are two types of self-construal, namely independent and interdependent. Independent self-construal is an individual approach to defining the self which prioritizes separation from other people to enable the individual to have full control and responsibility for their actions to achieve personal needs and desires (Harrington & Liu, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). However, interdependent self-construal is an individual approach to defining the self which prioritizes relationships with other people (Harrington & Liu, 2002). An individual with interdependent self-

construal tends to behave according to norms that maintain harmonious relationships and feelings of mutual dependence with other people that are considered important for their group (Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

Cultural orientation does not have a direct role with identity formation but with self-construal. This is because an individual with an individualistic cultural orientation tends to use independent self-construal while an individual with collective cultural orientation tends to have an interdependent cultural orientation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003). Individuals with an individualistic cultural orientation who use independent self-construal will try to maintain independence and dare to take risks when a decision is taken (Cukur, De Guzman, & Carlo, 2004; Gardner, Reithel, Foley, Coglisier, & Walumbwa, 2009; Komarraju & Cokley, 2008). Therefore, the individual of an individualistic cultural orientation is able to evaluate and internalize identity formation (Eryigit & Kerpelman, 2011). In contrast, individuals with a collective cultural orientation who use interdependent self-construal will consider significant figures and collective goals when making decisions (Berman et al., 2011; Gouveia, de Albuquerque, Clemente, & Espinosa, 2002; Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). No wonder that the decision making during identity formation is more tentative, since it is not accompanied by an exploration process (Berman et al., 2011; Eryigit & Kerpelman, 2011).

In general, this research aims to examine the role of self-construal as a mediator of cultural orientation during identity formation. To achieve this objective, this research examines several hypotheses, namely: (1) independent self-construal is a mediator of individualistic cultural orientation during identity formation, (2) independent self-construal has a role in collective cultural orientation during identity formation, (3) interdependent self-construal has a role in individualistic cultural orientation during identity formation, and (4) interdependent self-construal has a role in collective cultural orientation during identity formation.

## 2. Methods

**Participants.** The research participants were 569 adolescents aged 18-21 years old ( $M = 17.16$  years old,  $SD = 0.58$ ) which consisted of 262 (46%) males and 307 (54%) females. Participants had diverse ethnic backgrounds including Javanese (37.3%), Chinese (30.4%), Balinese (2.8%), Bataknese (2.1%), Arabic (1.1%), Maduranese (1.1%), Banjarnese (0.9%), mixed (12.1%), others (9.0%), and no answer (3.3%). The majority of the participants had grown up in big cities (57.8%) as well as small cities (36.4%) and the rest in villages (5.8%). The research participants studied at a private university in Surabaya.

**Instruments. Identity formation.** The Indonesian version of the *Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale* (U-MICS; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Muttaqin, 2017) was used, which consists of 26 items that measure identity formation, namely commitment (10 items, for example, "My education gives me security in life"); in-depth exploration (10 items, for example "I often try to find out what other people think about my best friend"); and the reconsideration of commitment (6 items, for example, "I often think it would be better to try to find a different education") in the educational domain and relationships with friends. U-MICS responses were rated using a Likert-type scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Cultural orientation.** The *Culture Orientation Scale* (COS; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) was utilized to measure cultural orientation, namely individualistic (8 items, such as "I'd rather depend on myself than others" and "It is important that I do my job better than others"), collective (8 items, such as "To me, pleasure is spending time with others" and "It is important to me that I respect the decisions made by my groups"). COS responses were rated using a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree).

**Self-construal.** The *Self-Construal Scale* (SCS; Singelis, 1994) consists of 30 items that were utilized to measure independent self-construal (15 items, such as "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects") and interdependent self-construal (15 items, such as "I have respect for the authority figures with whom I interact"). SCS responses were rated using a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Data analysis.** Data analysis was performed using a Structural Equation Modelling approach using IBM SPSS Amos 21 program (Arbuckle, 2012). The structural model was developed by three items parceling for each construct. The item parceling procedure can be conducted with a construct of more than five items that involves many numerical samples (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994). In detail, the individualistic and collective cultural orientation construct consisted of two parcels which contained three items, and one parcel which contained two items. Meanwhile, the independent and interdependent self-construal construct consisted of three parcels which contained five items; while the commitment and in-depth exploration construct consisted of two parcels of three items and one parcel of four items. Finally, the reconsideration of commitment construct consisted of three parcels which contained two items.

The analysis of two models was performed; a direct effect model and mediator model. A direct effect model was developed using the path from cultural orientation

(individualistic and collective) to identity formation (commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment). A mediator model was developed using the path from cultural orientation (individualistic and collective) to self-construal (independent and interdependent) and identity formation (commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment). In addition, the path from self-construal (independent and interdependent) to identity formation (commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment) was examined.

The evaluation of each model considered several model accuracy indices which consisted of *Goodness of Fit Index* (GFI), *Comparative Fit Index* (CFI) and *Root Mean Square Error of Approximation* (RMSEA). A model is considered accurate if the GFI and CFI are bigger or similar to 0.9 (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Cole, 1987) and RMSEA score is less than 0.1 (Cudeck & Browne, 1992). Furthermore, an examination of self-construal as an effective mediator of the role of cultural orientation in identity formation was conducted by comparing the path coefficient obtained by a direct effect model and mediator model using the Sobel test (Sobel, 1982).

### 3. Results

The result of the model accuracy index in the direct effect model and mediator model is reported in Table 1 and indicates that both models highly correspond to the data. This is because both models have higher or similar to 0.9 GFI and CFI score (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Cole, 1987) and a RMSEA score less than 0.1 (Cudeck & Browne, 1992).

**Table 1. Model fit indices**

Model	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	GFI	RMSEA
Direct effect	4.119	0.915	0.928	0.074
Mediator	3.093	0.923	0.917	0.061

In Table 2, the standardized coefficient path between constructs of the direct effect and mediator model is presented (see also figure 1). The direct effect model shows that individualistic cultural orientation can

directly predict the reconsideration of commitment while collective cultural orientation can directly predict commitment and in-depth exploration. The mediator model shows that cultural orientation (individualistic and collective) can predict self-construal (independent and interdependent).

Moreover, individualistic cultural orientation has a significant coefficient path to the reconsideration of commitment while collective cultural orientation has a significant coefficient path to commitment and the reconsideration of commitment. Meanwhile, interdependent self-construal has a significant coefficient path to identity formation (commitment, in-depth exploration, and the reconsideration of commitment). Moreover, a significant positive relationship between individualistic cultural orientation and collective cultural orientation was found, both in the direct effect model ( $r = 0.410$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and in the mediator model ( $r = 0.407$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The Sobel test result is reported in Table 3 and indicates that only independent self-construal is a significant mediator of the role of cultural orientation (individualistic and collective) in identity formation (commitment, in-depth exploration, and the reconsideration of commitment). This indicates that cultural orientation (individualistic and collective) predicts interdependent self-construal, and interdependent self-construal predicts identity formation (commitment, in-depth exploration, and the reconsideration of commitment).

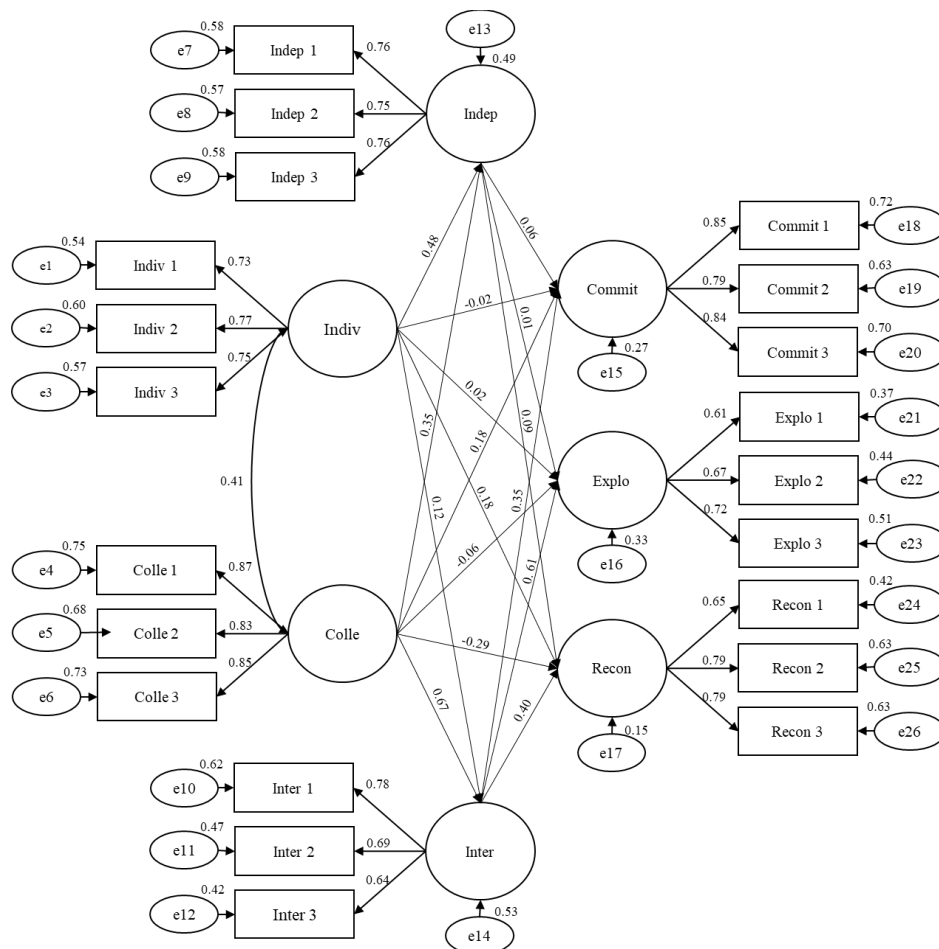
### 4. Discussion

This research examined the role of cultural orientation in identity formation with self-construal as a mediator. The result of the direct effect model indicates that individualistic cultural orientation can directly predict the reconsideration of commitment while collective cultural orientation can directly predict commitment and in-depth exploration. Furthermore, interdependent self-construal is a significant mediator of the role of cultural orientation (individualistic and collective) in identity formation (commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment). This indicates that both individualistic and collective cultural orientation

**Table 2. Standardized path coefficients**

	Direct effect model			Mediator model				
	Commit	Explo	Recon	Indep	Inter	Commit	Explo	Recon
Indiv	0.023	0.062	0.241***	0.485***	0.121*	-0.024	0.02	0.175*
Colle	0.499***	0.427***	0.066	0.346***	0.668***	0.184*	-0.059	-0.286**
Indep						0.061	0.001	0.088
Inter						0.396***	0.608***	0.353***

Note. Indiv = individualistic. Colle = collective. Indep = independent. Inter = interdependent. Commit = commitment. Explo = in-depth exploration. Recon = reconsideration of commitment. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$



**Figure 1. Mediator model**

*Note.* Indiv = individualistic. Colle = collective. Indep = independent. Inter = interdependent. Commit = commitment. Explo = in-depth exploration. Recon = reconsideration of commitment

**Table 3. Sobel test results**

Paths	Unstandardized indirect effect	Standardized indirect effect	z
Indiv - Indep – Commit	0.013	0.030	0.833
Indiv - Indep – Explo	0.001	0.001	0.994
Indiv - Indep – Recon	0.026	0.043	1.072
Colle - Indep – Commit	0.011	0.021	0.830
Colle - Indep – Explo	0.001	0.001	0.017
Colle - Indep – Recon	0.023	0.030	1.066
Indiv - Inter – Commit	0.019	0.043	2.027*
Indiv - Inter – Explo	0.031	0.074	2.134*
Indiv - Inter – Recon	0.029	0.048	2.006*
Colle - Inter – Commit	0.129	0.357	3.986**
Colle - Inter – Explo	0.211	0.406	5.012***
Colle - Inter – Recon	0.202	0.026	3.832***

Note. Indiv = individualistic. Colle = collective. Indep = independent. Inter = interdependent. Commit = commitment. Explo = in-depth exploration. Recon = reconsideration of commitment. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

lead an individual to use interdependent self-construal during identity formation which includes commitment, in-depth exploration, and the reconsideration of commitment.

The effectivity of interdependent self-construal as a mediator of cultural orientation during identity formation cannot be separated from Markus and Kitayama's (1991) explanation of the concept of self-construal. An individual with a collective cultural orientation, such as in Indonesia, will use interdependent self-construal to consider the needs and desires of other people in their group when defining themselves (Jetten et al., 2002; Kashima et al., 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; van Baaren, Maddux, Chartrand, de Bouter, & van Knippenberg, 2003). Such an individual will consider the needs and desires of other people when making a commitment, during in-depth exploration, and when reconsidering commitment. In fact, previous studies have explained how identity formation in a collective culture emerges from group membership (for instance family, society, nation) (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Cross et al., 2003).

In an Indonesian context, the research results are not surprising. This is due to the tendency of Indonesian adolescents to maintain interdependent relationships with other people, such as parents or friends (Nilan, Parker, Bennett, & Robinson, 2011; Sartana & Helmi, 2014). Indonesian adolescents often conform to parental desires and hopes as an embodiment of respect (Moffatt, 2012; Suardiman, 2011). In fact, Indonesian adolescents tend to ignore personal desires in favor of common interests as an embodiment of harmonious value (Koentjaraningrat, 2004; Suseno, 1999). Although there is a tendency to fulfill other people's desires by neglecting personal desire, the results of this research indicate that this does not lessen Indonesian adolescents' opportunities to conduct in-depth exploration. This finding is contrary to previous studies which found that the exploration of identity feels less appropriate in a collective cultural context, which tends to accentuate the importance of relationships (Cross et al., 2003; Luyckx et al., 2006).

These findings indicate that identity formation cannot be separated from the role of significant others. For instance, parents who maintain proximity, involvement, and communication while supporting their adolescent may help the adolescent's identity formation (Ávila, Cabral, & Matos, 2012; Bosch, Segrin, & Curran, 2012; Schwartz, Mason, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2008). The familial role is not confined to parents, but support from relatives also has a role in identity formation (Crocetti, Branje, Rubini, Koot, & Meeus, 2017; Wong, Branje, VanderValk, Hawk, & Meeus, 2010). In fact, other people outside the family also have a role in identity formation. An adolescent who has high quality friendships and establishes good communication with

their friends is well supported during identity formation (Doumen et al., 2012; Morgan & Korobov, 2012). Moreover, proximity and intimacy with a partner also play a role in identity formation (Ávila et al., 2012; Johnson, Kent, & Yale, 2012; Kerpelman et al., 2012; Wängqvist, Carlsson, van der Lee, & Frisén, 2016).

The unexpected findings of this research was the indirect role of independent cultural orientation in interdependent self-construal during identity formation. The emergence of an individualistic cultural orientation in Indonesian adolescents is obviously a surprising thing, considering Indonesian people are famous for their collective cultural orientation. However, some possibilities could explain this finding. The first possibility refers to Oyserman et al.'s (2002) opinion which explained that each individual has a need to establish a relationship and obtain advice from other people, while at the same time having a need to be a unique individual when defining themselves. Therefore, it is not surprising that an individualistic cultural orientation has emerged in Indonesian adolescents, because this research also found a positive correlation between collective and individualistic cultural orientation.

Another possibility is due to the influence of globalization has caused a shift from collective cultural orientation to an individualistic cultural orientation. For instance, the earlier generation of Chinese society was a collective culture, but the current generation is more accepting of an individualistic culture (Li, Zhang, Bhatt, & Yum, 2006; Rao, Singhal, Ren, & Zhang, 2001). Chen and Berman (2012) explained that the influence of globalization in Chinese society is evident in the young Chinese generation who enjoy more global forms of entertainment, and spend their free time watching Western movies, consuming fast food, or on the internet (playing games and interacting via social media). In fact, a similar shift has occurred in the young Indonesian generation, so it is possible that the influence of globalization has led to the emergence of an individualistic cultural orientation in Indonesian adolescents.

Although these findings can be used to understand adolescent identity formation in an Indonesian context, there are several limitations to this research. Firstly, this research only involved participants during the last stage of adolescence, hence the findings are less appropriate for those in early and middle adolescence. Moreover, identity formation during early, middle, and late stage adolescence is different (Muttaqin & Ekowarni, 2016). Secondly, most of the research participants grew up in cities. No research has explored the differences between identity formation in urban and rural contexts; however, in general, city dwellers will adapt more quickly to globalization than those living in villages. Finally, this research was performed with participants of diverse ethnic origin but did not consider specific cultural

influences on upbringing that may play a role in identity formation. Each cultural context may have particular norms related to identity formation. Consequently, caution is needed when generalizing the findings of this research.

## 5. Conclusion

This research concluded that differences in identity formation are not only due to the role of cultural orientation, but also self-construal. Specifically, this research clarifies our understanding of adolescent identity formation in an Indonesian context. Although an individualistic cultural orientation has begun to emerge in Indonesian adolescents despite their collective cultural orientation, they still consider relationships with other people in their group when forming their identity. This means that the roles of significant others (such as parents, relatives, friends, or a partner) remain extremely important in the formation of Indonesian adolescents' identity.

Further research should follow up the findings of this research by observing the role of significant others (such as parents, relatives, friends, partner) in adolescents' identity formation. The research should compare the role of significant others and explore their roles in identity formation in-depth. In addition, further research should consider participants' backgrounds in relation to their stage of development, domicile, and ethnicity. The research could compare different developmental stages, domiciles, and ethnicities, rather than focusing on one specific developmental stage, domicile, or ethnicity.

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