

# Comparison of Self-Identity between Adolescents in Hakka and Cantonese Cultural Regions

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To explore the characteristics of self-identity among adolescents in Hakka and Cantonese cultural regions, and analyze the similarities and differences between the two.

**Method:** A stratified random sampling was used to select four hundred and eighty-five middle school students from Wuhua County, Meizhou City, Guangdong Province and 978 middle school students from Cantonese cultural areas. They were investigated with the Extend Objective Measure of Self-Identity Status-2 (EOM-EIS-2).

**Results:** (1) There were significant grade differences in the scores of identity diffusion and identity foreclosure among adolescents in Hakka cultural areas ( $F=-3.179, -4.734$ ; both  $P<0.05$ ). (2) There were significant grade differences in the scores of the three subscales of identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, and identity delay among adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas ( $F=6.136, 5.891, 8.244$ , all  $P<0.001$ ). (3) The scores of identity diffusion and identity foreclosure among teenagers in Hakka cultural areas were significantly higher than those in Cantonese cultural areas in the same grade ( $F=3.766, 63.377$ , both  $P<0.001$ ), while the scores of identity delay and identity acquisition were significantly lower than those in Cantonese cultural areas in the same grade ( $F=-2.039, -14.149$ , both  $P<0.05$ ). (4) The scores of male adolescents in Hakka cultural areas on identity foreclosure and identity acquisition were significantly lower than those of female adolescents in Hakka cultural areas ( $t=-2.570, -5.424$ ; both  $P<0.01$ ), while the scores of the four subscales of EOM-EIS-2 among male adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas were significantly higher than those of female adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas ( $t=3.748$  to  $7.289$ ; both  $P<0.01$ ). (5) The scores of identity diffusion and identity foreclosure among adolescents in Hakka cultural areas were significantly higher than those of same-gender adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas ( $t=4.199$  to  $62.573$ , all  $P<0.001$ ), while the scores of identity delay and identity acquisition were significantly lower than those of same-gender adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas ( $t=-2.534$ - $19.336$ , all  $P<0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** The development of self-identity among middle school students in the Hakka social and cultural context has its own characteristics, which may be attributed to regional economic conditions and subcultural characteristics.

**Keywords:** self-identity; teenagers; hakka culture; cantonese culture; comparative study

## Introduction

The concept of "self-identity" was first proposed by Erikson [1], who believed that self-identity is formed by the interaction of three types of factors: physiological, psychological, and socio-cultural environment of an individual. It refers to the organization and integration of various psychological dimensions such as motivation, behavior, ability, personality, beliefs, and experience to form a holistic understanding of the wholeness, continuity, and consistency of oneself, aiming at essentially the renewal and development of the connotation of self-awareness. Simply put, self-identity refers to an individual's ability to integrate, seek internal consistency and continuity within a specific environment, that is, a firm and coherent awareness of issues such as "who I am," "my development

direction," and "how I can adapt to society." Marcia, following Erikson's viewpoint, operationally defines self-identity from a phenomenological perspective: Self-identity refers to an individual's exploration of various possibilities and the development of individuality sense, as well as their role in society, cross experience and time consistency, and investment in self-identity. He further proposed the Theory of Identity States [2], setting two dimensions. One is crisis, which refers to the experience of individuals facing confusion in the process of self-exploration, and needing to make certain choices. The other is self-investment, which refers to the individual putting all their effort into achieving their goals, values, and ideals. According to whether an individual has experienced crisis and the degree of self-engagement, self-identity in youth can be divided

into four states: (1) Identity achievement, which is achieved by adolescents who have experienced exploration, carefully considered various identity issues, and chosen goals and directions for self-improvement. They have resolved identity crises, presented relatively stable commitments, and made firm and positive self-improvement towards specific goals, beliefs, and values. This is the most mature and advanced state of identity. (2) Identity procrastination refers to adolescents who are experiencing a crisis of identity, actively thinking about various possible choices, exploring their own value orientations, but have not yet reached their final commitment, and have not made high investments in specific goals, values, and ideologies; (3) Identity foreclosure, a type of adolescent who has not experienced explicit exploration but has made premature investments, which are unconscious and based on the expectations and suggestions of parents or authoritative figures; (4) Identity diffusion refers to individuals who do not have fixed commitments and do not actively seek to form them, have not experienced the exploratory stage, or are in a crisis of identity and have not been successfully resolved. These individuals are confused about their development direction, unsure of what to do, and have not made clear investments in established ideologies, values, social roles, and life goals. This is the most immature and low-level state of identity.

The physiology and psychology of teenagers are undergoing rapid and turbulent changes [1]. This kind of change shocks teenagers themselves, making them more sensitive to their own concerns, such as "who I am" and "what kind of person I want to be", which almost causes every teenager to ponder. Teenagers must integrate all knowledge about themselves and society, think deeply to answer it, make various exploratory choices based on it, and finally devote themselves to a certain life strategy. Once he does so, they achieve a satisfactory outcome in this stage of development, gain self-identity, have a full understanding of themselves, and form the virtue of loyalty. "Loyalty" means that a person has the ability to live according to social norms, despite its imperfections and disharmony. This does not require teenagers to accept imperfection. If a person loves their society, of course, they hope that their society will become better. However, "loyalty" means being able to find their place in the established reality, dedicate themselves in this position, realize their

value, and feel the meaning of their life while benefiting society [1-2].

If teenagers cannot achieve self-identity, it may lead to the diffusion or negative development of identity. If an individual finds it difficult to tolerate the loneliness in the process of establishing self-identity, or allows others to decide their own development direction, or obey others' opinions, or avoid conflicts, or procrastinate decisions, they will not be able to choose and adapt to the role of social life correctly. These individuals are unable to "discover themselves" and do not know what kind of person they truly are or what kind of person they want to become. They have not formed clear and solid self-identity, or rather identity diffusion. Negative identity refers to the identity formed by individuals that deviates from social requirements, resulting in roles that society does not recognize or accept [1-3].

It can be seen that the establishment of self-identity is related to a person's healthy development. It provides an appropriate reference frame for social comparison, helps individuals clarify "who I am", and enables them to experience a clear and consistent sense of personal control, free will, life value, life direction, goals, and meaning. It enables individuals to fully understand and unleash their potential, and better adapt to society. A large number of empirical studies have shown that individuals who obtain self-identity have a better level of mental health, followed by those with identity foreclosure, but the difference is not significant. The mental health levels of delayed and diffuse types are poorer, with diffusion type being the worst in some indicators and delayed type being the worst in others [4-7].

Previous studies have pointed out that social and cultural backgrounds and subcultures have a significant impact on the self-identity of adolescents [6-13]. Meizhou in Guangdong Province is the largest settlement of Hakka people. Except for Fengshun County, the rest of the area is a pure Hakka County (district) with a Hakka population of over 90%. Regarding the origin of Hakka people, most scholars believe that they are descendants of the "southern migration" of the Central Plains literati. Due to their unique migration history and impoverished and remote living environment, Hakka people have formed a unique cultural tradition. Their spiritual core is the collective consciousness of self-rescue and "going out", which is reflected in cultural elements such as Hakka language, Hakka consciousness, Hakka customs, as well as the personality traits of hard work,

patience, unity and mutual assistance, and emphasis on impartment and inheritance [14-15]. What is the impact of Hakka culture on adolescent self-identity? This study aims to answer this question by comparing the self-identity of middle school students in Hakka and Cantonese cultural regions.

## Objects and Methods

### Objects

**Hakka teenagers:** Five hundred middle school students were selected from Wuhua County, Meizhou City by stratified random sampling, and 485 valid questionnaires were collected, including 266 males and 219 females; 254 students in junior high school (93 in grade 7, 84 in grade 8, and 77 in grade 9), 231 in high school (82 in grade 10, 76 in grade 11, and 73 in grade 12); 89 from key middle schools and 396 from general middle schools; 156 urban students and 329 rural students.

**Teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas:** A stratified random sampling was used to select 1000 middle school students from three prefecture-level cities in Guangdong Province, including Guangzhou, Shaoguan, and Zhanjiang, and 978 valid questionnaires were collected, including 506 males and 472 females; 513 students in junior high school (181 in grade 7, 174 in grade 8, 158 in grade 9), and 465 in high school (189 in grade 10, 147 in grade 11, and 129 in grade 12); 196 from key middle schools and 782 from face-to-face middle schools; 550 urban students and 428 rural students.

### Tools

**The Extend Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status- 2, EOM- EIS- 2:** Compiled and revised by Bennion and Adams (1986) [16], and revised by Wang Shuqing et al. (2006) [17] into the Chinese version. There are a total of 64 items, divided into 4 subscales: identity diffusion (IDI), identity foreclosure (IFC), identity delay (IDE), and identity acquisition (IAC). Each subscale includes two dimensions: consciousness domain and interpersonal domain, with a total of 8 dimensions, and each dimension has 8 items. The Likert 6-point scoring method is used to score from 1 to 6 points corresponding to "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The higher the score, the more obvious the tendency on the item (subscales). A

score of  $\leq 48$  on a certain subscale is considered a low score, a score of  $>48$  but  $\leq 67.2$  on a certain subscale is considered a moderate score, and a score of  $>67.2$  on a certain subscale is considered a high score. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of each subscale is 0.735-0.834.

Adams et al. [16] developed a standard for dividing self-identity states using the  $M \pm SD$  score of each subscale as the dividing point, and dividing individuals into identity states based on their scores on the four subscales. (1) If only one of the four subscales has a score higher than its "dividing point", then the individual simply belongs to the identity state represented by that subscale; (2) If the scores of all four subscales are lower than their respective "dividing points", then the individual belongs to an undifferentiated delayed state; (3) If two or more subscales have scores higher than their corresponding dividing points, then the individual is in a transition state. Individuals in undifferentiated delayed state and those in simple delayed state exhibit similar performance in various aspects, therefore individuals in this state also belong to the delayed state. If the individual is in a transitional state, then when the individual transitions from a lower identity state to a higher identity state, he/she still belongs to the lower identity state.

**Self-compiled Personal General Information Questionnaire:** It includes four items, namely gender, grade, school category (key or general high schools), and origin.

**Data processing:** SPSS 20.0 software is used statistics analysis. The extra-group differences of quantitative data are calculated with independent sample t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), while the analysis of count data is conducted with frequency statistics.

## Results

### Grade differences in adolescent self-identity

#### Grade differences in self-identity among Hakka adolescents:

As shown in Table 1, there are significant grade differences in the scores of Hakka adolescents on the two subscales of identity diffusion and identity foreclosure ( $F=3.179, 4.734$ ; both  $P<0.05$ ).

**Table 1:** Grade Differences in EOM EIS-2 scores among Hakka Adolescents

Statistical quantity	Grade	IDI	IFC	IDE	IAC
	7 (n=93)	56.28±11.20	64.67±13.06	49.67±12.36	49.44±9.79
	8 (n=84)	63.67±10.10	66.00±15.51	53.00±12.48	50.66±12.57
	9 (n=77)	62.50±12.36	73.75±12.58	53.24±12.35	52.27±11.25
	10 (n=82)	58.52±10.50	71.21±11.26	53.47±9.99	53.36±11.65
	11 (n=76)	58.15±11.50	70.25±11.78	54.72±10.52	55.19±10.13
	12 (n=73)	55.15±12.06	70.05±11.74	56.46±10.93	53.02±12.40
F		-3.179*	-4.734***	2.153	1.781

Notes: \*P<0.05, \*\*P<0.01, \*\*\*P<0.001; the same below.

Post hoc comparison showed that there are significant differences (all P<0.05) in identity diffusion between Grade 7 and Grade 8, Grade 8 and Grade 12, and Grade 9 and Grade 12; There are significant differences (P<0.05) in the identity foreclosure between grade 9 and grade 7 (P<0.001), and grade 9 and grade 8.

### Grade differences in self-identity among adolescents in Cantonese cultural regions:

From Table 2, it can be seen that there are significant grade differences in the scores of adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas on the three subscales of identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, and identity delay (F=6.136, 5.891, 8.244; all P<0.001).

**Table 2:** Grade Differences in EOM-EIS-2 scores among Teenagers in Cantonese Cultural Regions

Statistical quantity	Grade	IDI	IFC	IDE	IAC
	7 (n=181)	53.52±12.72	41.76±13.30	60.81±13.46	56.83±13.07
	8 (n=174)	56.35±16.43	39.08±15.42	62.14±16.77	58.73±16.59
	9 (n=158)	54.29±13.96	38.54±12.21	57.28±13.33	55.91±12.65
	10 (n=189)	53.05±15.32	40.15±13.33	57.78±12.97	56.63±13.45
	11 (n=147)	51.88±13.56	37.04±12.61	60.55±14.85	56.95±15.34
	12 (n=129)	48.74±10.87	34.69±11.16	67.66±13.49	59.99±14.92
F		6.136**	5.891**	8.244**	1.463

Post hoc comparison showed that there is a significant difference (P <0.01) in the score of identity diffusion between Grade 8 and Grade 12; There is a significant difference (P <0.01) between Grade 7 and Grade 12 in terms of identity foreclosure; There are significant differences in terms of identity delay between Grade 7 and Grade 12 (P<0.01), Grade 8 and Grade 12 (P<0.05), Grade 9 and Grade 12 (P<0.001), Grade 10 and Grade 12 (P<0.001), as well as Grade 11 and Grade 12 (P<0.01).

### Comparison of self-identity among adolescents of different grades in two cultural

**regions:** From Table 3, it can be seen that the scores of identity diffusion and identity foreclosure among Hakka adolescents are higher than those of adolescents in the same grade in Cantonese cultural areas, with statistical significance (t=3.766 to 63.377, both P<0.001), while the scores of identity delay and identity acquisition among Hakka adolescents are lower than those of adolescents in the same grade in Cantonese cultural areas, and the differences are statistically significant (t=-2.039 to -14.149, all P<0.05).

**Table 3:** Comparison of EOM-EIS-2 scores among adolescents of different grades in two cultural regions

Statistical quantity	Grade	Area	IDI	IFC	IDE	IAC
	7	Hakka (n=93)	56.28±11.20	64.67±13.06	49.67±12.36	49.44±9.79
		Cantonese (n=181)	53.52±12.72	41.76±13.30	60.81±13.46	56.83±13.07
		t	3.766***	23.588***	-14.149***	-9.260***
	8	Hakka (n=84)	63.67±10.10	66.00±15.51	53.00±12.48	50.66±12.57
		Cantonese (n=174)	56.35±16.43	39.08±15.42	62.14±16.77	58.73±16.59
		t	8.006***	40.353***	-11.207***	-12.233***
	9	Hakka (n=77)	62.50±12.36	73.75±12.58	53.24±12.35	52.27±11.25
		Cantonese (n=158)	54.29±13.96	38.54±12.21	57.28±13.33	55.91±12.65
		t	10.024***	52.437***	-3.468**	-3.998**
	10	Hakka (n=82)	58.52±10.50	71.21±11.26	53.47±9.99	53.36±11.65
		Cantonese (n=189)	53.05±15.32	40.15±13.33	57.78±12.97	56.63±13.45
		t	7.246***	60.944***	-4.875**	-3.474*
	11	Hakka (n=76)	58.15±12.06	70.25±11.78	54.72±10.52	55.19±10.13
		Cantonese (n=147)	51.88±13.56	37.04±12.61	60.55±14.85	56.95±15.34
		t	8.443***	63.377***	-7.258***	-2.039*
	12	Hakka (n=73)	55.15±11.50	70.05±11.74	56.46±10.93	53.02±12.40
		Cantonese (n=129)	48.74±10.87	4.69±11.16	67.66±13.49	59.99±14.92
		t	7.722***	41.763***	-12.259***	-7.378***

**Gender differences in adolescent self-identity****Gender differences in self-identity among Hakka adolescents:** From Table 4, it can be seen

that male Hakka adolescents scored lower than female Hakka adolescents on the two subscales of identity foreclosure and identity acquisition, with statistical significance ( $t=-2.570, -5.424$ ; both  $P<0.01$ ).

**Table 4:** Comparison of EOM-EIS-2 scores between male and female Hakka adolescents

Statistical quantity	Gender	IDI	IFC	IDE	IAC
	Female (n=266)	57.77±11.80	68.32±12.81	53.44±11.21	50.53±10.57
	Male (n=219)	57.37±10.62	71.37±11.82	54.43±10.91	56.30±11.81
	t	0.372	-2.570**	-0.929	-5.424***

**Gender differences in self-identity among adolescents in Cantonese cultural regions:**

From Table 5, it can be seen that male adolescents

from Cantonese cultural areas scored higher than female adolescents from Cantonese cultural areas on the four subscales of EOM-EIS-2, with statistical significance ( $t=3.748$  to  $7.289$ , all  $P<0.001$ ).

**Table 5:** Comparison of EOM-EIS-2 scores between male and female adolescents from Cantonese cultural regions

Statistical quantity	Gender	IDI	IFC	IDE	IAC
	Female (n=506)	55.40±14.97	40.29±13.66	2.01±14.77	60.09±14.38
	Male (n=472)	50.79±13.27	35.33±12.31	8.31±12.86	57.75±13.47
	t	6.632***	7.289***	6.075***	3.748***

**Comparison of self-identity between adolescents of the same gender in two cultural regions:**

As shown in Table 6, Hakka adolescents scored higher in terms of identity diffusion and identity foreclosure than adolescents of the same gender in Cantonese cultural areas, with statistically

significant differences ( $t=4.199$  to  $62.573$ , all  $P<0.001$ ); The scores of identity delay and acquisition were lower than those of adolescents of the same gender in Cantonese cultural areas, and the differences were statistically significant ( $t=-2.534$  to  $-19.336$ , all  $P<0.05$ ).



**Table 6:** Comparison of self-identity among adolescents of the same gender in two cultural regions

Statistical Gender quantity	Area	IDI	IFC	IDE	IAC
Male	Hakka (n=266)	57.77±11.80	68.32±12.81	53.44±11.21	50.53±10.57
	Cantonese (n=506)	55.40±14.97	40.29±13.66	62.01±14.77	60.09±14.38
	t	4.199***	35.781***	-15.586***	-19.336***
Female	Hakka (n=219)	57.37±10.62	71.37±11.82	54.43±10.91	56.03±11.81
	Cantonese (n=472)	50.79±13.27	35.33±12.31	58.31±12.86	57.75±13.47
	t	11.672***	62.573***	-6.965***	-2.534**

## Discussion

### Grade differences in self-identity among adolescents in two regions

The results of this study indicate the following 6 points: First, the identity foreclosure of Hakka adolescents is at a high level, while the identity foreclosure of adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas is at a low level. Second, the diffusion, delay, and acquisition of identity in two cultural regions are all at a moderate level. Third, there is a significant difference in the identity diffusion between Hakka teenagers in Grade 7 and Grade 8, Grade 8 and Grade 12, as well as Grade 9 and Grade 12, while there is a significant difference in the identity diffusion between teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas in Grade 8 and 12. Fourth, there is a significant difference in identity foreclosure between Hakka teenagers in Grade 9 and Grade 7, Grade 9 and Grade 8, while there is a significant difference in identity foreclosure between teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas in Grade 7 and Grade 12. Fifth, there is no statistically significant difference in the identity delay among Hakka teenagers in various grades, while there is a significant difference in the identity delay between teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas in Grade 7 and Grade 12 ( $P < 0.01$ ), Grade 8 and Grade 12, Grade 9 and Grade 12, Grade 10 and Grade 12, as well as Grade 11 and Grade 12. Sixth, there is no grade statistically significant difference in identity acquisition between adolescents from Hakka and Cantonese cultural regions. The above results suggest development of self-identity among adolescents from two cultural regions has a different process, specifically manifested in the following 4 points. First, adolescents in Hakka cultural areas are prone to self-identity diffusion in Grade 8 and Grade 9, while adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas show no significant differences in Grade 7 to Grade 11, but significant improvement in self-identity diffusion in Grade 12. Second, the level of identity foreclosure among teenagers in Hakka cultural areas significantly increases in Grade 9, while identity foreclosure

among teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas significantly decreases in Grade 12. Third, the levels of identity delay among teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas during Grade 9 and Grade 10 significantly decrease, while the middle school stage is not a critical period for the development of identity delay among teenagers in Hakka cultural areas. Finally, the middle school stage is not a critical period for the development of identity acquisition among young people in Hakka and Cantonese cultural regions.

Marcia [2] and Erikson [18] believe that there is a specific developmental path for an individual's self-identity state, which is from diffusion to foreclosure or delayed state, and finally to the identity acquisition. The diffusion of identity is the initial stage of self-identity development, and the key reason is the insufficient exploration and experimentation of individuals, the lack of clear and sufficient understanding of themselves and society, the inability to correctly combine their own situation with the requirements of society, form a firm and clear commitment to life, and the failure to make positive life investments. Relatively speaking, teenagers in Hakka cultural areas passed through the stage of "identity diffusion" earlier: Their identity diffusion scores rapidly increased from grade 7 to grade 8, and they are in a significant development stage of identity diffusion; From Grade 8 to Grade 11, it is in the platform stage; The significant decrease in grade 12 indicates that their self-identity has developed towards a higher stage. The scores of identity diffusion among adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas from grade 7 to grade 11 are all at a moderate level, with no significant grade difference, and decrease significantly only in grade 12, entering the stage of identity foreclosure or delay. It can be seen that the level of identity diffusion among teenagers in Hakka cultural areas is higher than that among teenagers from Cantonese cultural areas in the same grade. The difference in development between the two lies in their different life tasks. The awakening of self-awareness and the surge of various instinctual

impulses among students of Grade 7 and 8 in their early youth have contributed to the crisis of self-identity among teenagers, and the rapid changes in the body prompt teenagers to urgently want to know themselves, putting them in constant self-exploration and extreme self-attention. However, the Hakka cultural region is located in a remote mountainous area. Although the area is vast, the resources are poor, the living conditions are harsh, the content of life is poor, and the lifestyle is monotonous. For teenagers, besides going to school, they also engage in simple agricultural work. They have limited opportunities to participate in social practice, and the form of practice is also single, with insufficient exploration and experimentation, which can easily lead to confusion, uncertainty about their life roles, and doubts about the consistency and continuity established in previous stages, leading to a rapid increase in the level of identity diffusion. However, the harsh and impoverished family conditions require young people to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. Most young people need to make life plans and commitments before graduating from junior high school, that is to say, deciding whether to continue education or work or farm, and this decision-making process prompts them to overcome the diffusion of identity. Therefore, after grade 9, the development of identity diffusion tends to flatten, while in grade 12, due to facing more complex and important choices and commitments, their identity diffusion significantly decreases again. Relatively speaking, due to richer economy, better living conditions, more advanced information, wider social contact, and more opportunities to participate in social practice, teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas have more opportunities for self-exploration than Hakka teenagers in the same grade. On the other hand, for teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas, the main life task is "going to school", and the issue to consider is "how to get into better high schools and universities". They do not need to make firm commitments or active investments. At the same time, heavy learning tasks make it difficult for them to fully explore themselves and society. Faced with diverse social environments and multiple choices, they may also have limited experience and judgment abilities to make independent and firm commitments, resulting in feeling confused and at a loss. Therefore, the level of identity diffusion is relatively high, and this state continues until grade 12. Facing high school graduation, students in grade 12 need to make choices

between further education and employment, and need to make choices among numerous professions or majors. This significant (or key) process of life to some extent encourages teenagers to actively explore themselves and society and improve their level of commitment, thereby overcoming the identity diffusion and foreclosure, and developing to a higher stage of self-identity.

Similarly, due to the fact that most teenagers in Hakka cultural areas need to make life plans before graduating from junior high school, this prompts them to form clear and definite life commitments and start to invest in life. Also, due to Hakka people's emphasis on family impartment and inheritance, the life philosophy and lifestyle of their parents have been deeply ingrained in their children's hearts since childhood. In situations where social contact is narrow and there are not many possible choices and opportunities to explore themselves and society, a considerable number of Hakka teenagers recognize and inherit the lifestyle of their parents, and do not engage in independent and in-depth self-exploration, or end exploration prematurely. This leads to a sustained high level of identity foreclosure among Hakka teenagers after grade 9, and the level of identity delay and acquisition is not very high throughout the entire middle school stage, and the differences between grades are not significant. Due to their strong personal consciousness, most teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas have been paying attention to meeting their personal needs since childhood and tend to determine their life plans through self-exploration [19]. Therefore, their level of identity foreclosure has always been low, and significantly lower than that of Hakka teenagers in the same grade. In grade 12, due to the enhancement of autonomy, improvement of independent thinking ability, and deepening of exploration and experimentation, the level of identity foreclosure has further decreased, and the level of identity delay and acquisition significantly increases with the level of commitment. However, due to their limited social experience and many possible choices, they are still constantly exploring. Many teenagers are still unable to make a firm commitment to life and actively invest in achieving identity acquisition. Therefore, identity acquisition has not reached a high level throughout the entire middle school stage, and it is until the third year of high school that identity delay reaches a high level.

Due to the lower level of exploration and experimentation among teenagers in Hakka cultural

areas compared to those in Cantonese cultural areas, and their significantly higher levels of life commitment and engagement, the levels of identity diffusion and foreclosure among Hakka cultural area teenagers are significantly higher than that of Cantonese cultural area teenagers in the same grade, while the levels of identity delay and identity acquisition are significantly lower than those of Guangdong cultural area teenagers in the same grade [6-8].

On the other hand, although the developmental process of self-identity among adolescents in the two regions is different, their identity acquisition throughout the middle school stage is at a moderate level, consistent with previous research results [6-8, 20-21], indicating that self-identity has not yet matured in the middle school stage.

### Gender differences in self-identity among adolescents in two regions

The scores of male adolescents in Hakka cultural areas in the two subscales of identity foreclosure and identity acquisition are lower than those of female adolescents; while male adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas scored higher than female adolescents in various subscales of EOM-EIS-2. This suggests that female adolescents in Hakka cultural areas have clearer life commitments than male adolescents, which may be the result of self-exploration (i.e. identity acquisition) or based on expectations and suggestions from parents or authoritative figures (i.e. identity foreclosure). Compared with female adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas, the development of self-identity among male adolescents in Cantonese cultural areas tends to be more diversified. The gender differences in self-identity among adolescents in two regions may be related to their physical and mental development, as well as their parents' parenting beliefs. Due to poor living conditions, Hakka middle school students are in the early and middle stages of puberty, while female students develop about two years earlier than male students. The earlier physical development, poor family conditions, coupled with parents' preference for boys over girls, which prompts them to make life commitments earlier than male students [22]. As a result, their scores of identity foreclosure and acquisition are higher than those of male Hakka teenagers. On the other hand, most of them agree with traditional beliefs instilled in them by their parents, such as "being a good husband and educating children" and "a woman without talent is virtuous",

and prematurely take "a housewife" as their life commitment. There are also some girls who hope to change the monotonous living conditions of poverty and actively explore and make certain independent commitments (i.e., identity acquisition) [14-15]. Due to superior living conditions, most teenagers in Cantonese cultural areas experience physiological precocious puberty, with middle and later stages of adolescence in middle school. At this period, the gap in physiological maturity between male and female students narrows, and the level of self-awareness is comparable. In addition, parents have high expectations for both boys and girls, reaching the level of "hoping for their children to succeed" [22]. However, compared to girls, boys have more opportunities to participate in social practice, richer practical content, wider and deeper exploration, and make clearer and more firm commitments, which leads to their higher level of self-identity in all aspects than girls.

### Conclusion

This study finds that there are significant regional differences in the development of self-identity among adolescents, as well as significant grade and gender differences. The key reason for this is that male and female middle school students in different regions and grades have different opportunities and approaches to social practice, which leads to differences in the breadth and depth of their explorations.

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