

Measuring Cultural Impact and Mental Health Concerns in Youth

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SUMMARY

Adolescents in the United States often experience culture across multiple contexts, such as home and school, where expectations may differ. Navigating these dual cultural environments can shape identity development, influence future growth, and affect mental health. This study developed the Youth Identity & Community Engagement survey, a 22-question instrument that typically takes 5–10 minutes to complete, and two standardized metrics—the Culture Impact Index (CII) and Mental Health Concern Composite (MHCC), both scaled from 0–100%. Using 261 de-identified responses, mean CII was 67.9%, indicating moderate-to-high cultural impact, while mean MHCC was 20.3%, indicating that a notable proportion of youth experience culture-related emotional strain. CII remained stable across age groups, whereas MHCC was higher among participants aged ≥ 19 (23.1%) and lower among first-generation youth (17.1%). These results provide a practical and reproducible framework for comparing youth subgroups and supporting data-driven school and community interventions.

KEYWORDS

Bicultural Identity, Community Engagement, Cultural Impact, Data-Driven Analysis, Mental Health, Survey Instrument, Youth

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents, particularly those from multicultural or immigrant backgrounds, often navigate different cultural expectations at home and in school. These dual cultural experiences can influence identity formation, academic decisions, social belonging, and mental health outcomes. However, schools and youth programs often lack simple, data-driven tools to measure how culture affects students' daily lives and well-being.

To address this gap, this study developed the Youth Identity & Community Engagement survey and two composite indices: the Culture Impact Index (CII), which measures how strongly culture shapes identity and behavior, and the Mental Health Concern Composite (MHCC), which captures culture-related emotional strain and coping responses.

The key contribution of this study is a transparent and reproducible scoring framework that converts complex cultural experiences into standardized, interpretable metrics. This allows educators and community organizations to quickly identify subgroup differences, monitor trends over time, and design targeted, culturally responsive support strategies for youth.

METHODS

Study Design and Participants

This study analyzed de-identified responses from 261 youth who completed the Youth Identity & Community Engagement survey. Participants were recruited through two methods: the survey was distributed electronically to schools, and paper copies were handed out in person at Xilin Northwest Chinese School via flyers. Participants self-reported age and generational status (first-generation vs. other generations). Age groups were categorized as ≤ 13 (middle school), 14–18 (high school), and ≥ 19 (college and above), reflecting key educational transition stages.

Instrument Development

The questionnaire was designed and developed by our research team as a core contribution of this study to capture culture as a lived experience rather than solely a demographic trait. Items assess both positive cultural factors (e.g., pride, belonging, participation) and potential challenges (e.g., cultural pressure or conflict), incorporating identity-based and behavior-based indicators to support actionable interpretation.

Composite Score Construction and Standardization

The Culture Impact Index (CII) sums five items scored 0–4 (range 0–20), measuring how strongly culture influences identity, values, and participation. This index aggregates responses regarding cultural influence on daily choices, ethnic pride, value alignment with parents, and the frequency of experiencing both familial tension and systemic cultural conflict. The Mental Health Concern Composite (MHCC) combines five negative emotions (0–5) and two coping indicators (avoidance and help-seeking; 0–2), yielding a range of 0–7. It quantifies psychological impact by tallying reported feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger/frustration, confusion, and guilt/shame, while also factoring in conflict-avoidant coping strategies and whether the individual has sought professional mental health support.

Both indices were standardized to percentages: $CII\% = (CII/20) \times 100$ and $MHCC\% = (MHCC/7) \times 100$. CII 0% indicates no cultural influence, while 100% indicates culture strongly shapes all measured aspects of life. MHCC 0% indicates no culture-related distress or coping activation, while 100% reflects high levels of emotional strain and coping responses associated with cultural experiences.

Analytic Approach

Descriptive statistics were computed overall and by subgroup. Comparisons were reported using mean percentage scores to enable interpretability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant characteristics are summarized in **Table 1.1**. Respondents were primarily high school aged (87.7%), with smaller middle school (7.3%) and the college and above group (5.0%). The sample was predominantly Asian (98.9%), which is important when interpreting generalizability and highlights the value of future replication with more racially diverse sampling. Additionally, the vast majority of responses were collected from individuals residing in suburban areas, reflecting the primary recruitment locations of the participating schools and organizations.

Table 1.1 Summary of Participant Characteristics (N = 261)

Variable	Summary
Age Group, n (%)	
Middle school (≤ 13)	19 (7.3%)
High school (14–18)	229 (87.7%)
College & above (≥ 19)	13 (5.0%)
Race, n (%)	
Asian	258 (98.9%)
Other	3 (1.1%)
Generation Status, n (%)	
First-generation	41 (15.7%)
Other generations	220 (84.3%)

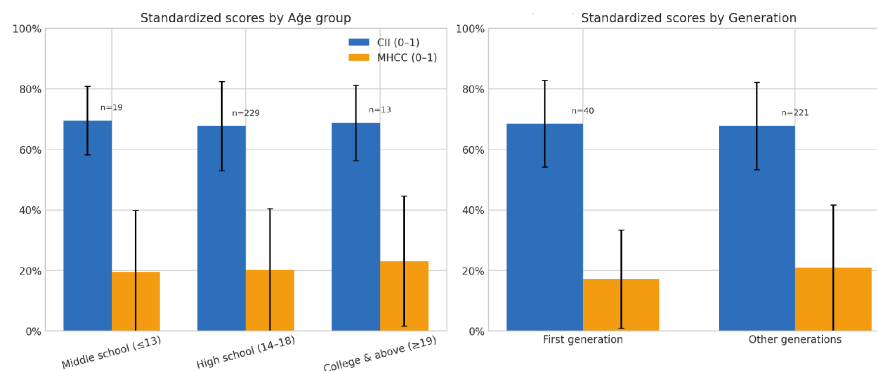
As shown in **Figure 1.1**, the mean CII was 67.9%, indicating moderate-to-high cultural impact on how youth think, make decisions, and engage in daily life. This suggests that culture plays an important role in shaping many aspects of adolescents' experiences, rather than just a small part. This level of impact was

consistent across age groups (69.5% for ≤ 13 ; 67.7% for 14–18; 68.8% for college and above), showing that culture continues to matter throughout different stages of growing up. CII was also similar between first-generation youth (68.5%) and other generations (67.8%), indicating that the overall influence of culture is widely shared across backgrounds.

Mean MHCC was 20.3%, indicating that a notable proportion of youth experience culture-related emotional challenges, such as stress, confusion, or pressure, along with efforts to cope. It shows that these challenges are present and important. MHCC was higher among participants in the college and above group (23.1%) compared to younger groups (~19–20%), suggesting that cultural pressures may become more noticeable during major life transitions, such as entering college or gaining independence. MHCC was lower among first-generation youth (17.1%) than other generations (20.9%), which may reflect differences in how youth experience, express, or report stress, rather than a true absence of challenges.

Together, CII and MHCC provide a simple and practical way to understand youth cultural experiences. CII shows how strongly culture influences daily life, while MHCC shows whether that influence is linked to stress or emotional struggle. Because both are measured on the same 0–100% scale, they are easy to compare across groups and over time. This makes the framework useful for schools and community programs to identify when cultural experiences are meaningful and when additional support may be needed, especially during important transitions like moving into college.

Figure 1.1 Culture Impact Index (CII%) and Mental Health Concern Composite (MHCC%) by age group and generational status.



CONCLUSIONS

This study introduces a novel and reproducible framework to quantify cultural impact and related emotional challenges among youth using the CII and MHCC. Results show that culture plays a significant role in daily life, while a notable proportion of youth experience culture-related stress. This approach provides a practical tool for schools and communities to compare groups and guide culturally responsive support, especially during key transitions such as entering college.

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