

Between Collectivism and Globalization: Adolescent Identity Formation and Educational Socialization in Russia and China

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Abstract- Adolescent identity development in non-Western transitional societies is shaped by the tension between institutionally promoted collectivism and the individualizing influence of global digital media. This paper examines how cultural values and educational systems jointly shape adolescent identity in Russia and China, two societies in which schools and families actively promote collectivist values. Drawing on secondary literature, this study combines Erikson's psychosocial identity theory, Triandis's individualism–collectivism framework, and the bicultural alternation model of LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton. Through this lens, it compares the roles of family, national identity, teachers, and peer groups in each country. It also considers digital environments as a source of individualizing pressure that is itself mediated by family and state regulation. The analysis suggests that adolescents do not simply replace collectivist identity with individualism. Instead, they appear to operate in two partially distinct registers: compliance within institutional settings and more individualized self-presentation in digital spaces. This pattern is produced through different mechanisms. In China, family, school, and nation form a mutually reinforcing chain of obligation, whereas in Russia, collectivism operates through institutions that function more independently of one another. The paper discusses the implications for educational policy and notes the limitations arising from its reliance on secondary sources and national-level generalization. It concludes that a single approach to globalization's effect on youth identity is unlikely to work equally well in both settings.

Keywords: adolescent identity, collectivism, educational socialization, digital individualism, bicultural identity, Russia, China.

I. Introduction

Adolescent identity development in non-Western transitional societies is shaped by the tension between institutionally promoted collectivism and digital individualism. In Russia, secondary schools promote civic-historical continuity (Zajda, 2017; Nazrullaeva et al., 2024), whereas in China, schooling and family socialization emphasize group-oriented values, including Confucian values such as filial piety (Chao, 1994; Leung et al., 2010; Hei et al., 2025). However, widespread access to global digital media challenges these top-down socialization efforts, as global media are a leading edge of globalization and young people are especially affected by them (Arnett, 2002). This contrast forces adolescents to navigate two conflicting realms. While schools demand compliance and collective alignment, online spaces encourage personal distinction and autonomy in learning. As a result, identity formation among adolescents in Russia and China rarely follows a simple path toward state conformity or Western



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individualism. Instead, adolescents adopt flexible identity strategies, balancing institutional compliance with personal agency depending on the context (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Zhang, 2025).

To our knowledge, few studies place Russian and Chinese schooling in direct dialogue; existing research tends to examine each system within its own national framework. Therefore, a comparative approach is needed to understand how differences in state ideology and schooling structures shape the way global digital trends influence youth identity. This paper examines how cultural values and educational systems jointly shape adolescent identity development in Russia and China. Section II outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on psychosocial identity theory, the individualism-collectivism framework, and the bicultural identity model. Section III analyzes the cultural influences on adolescent identity, focusing on the roles of family, collectivism, and national identity. Section IV examines the educational system, examining how teachers, peers, and classroom norms reinforce or complicate these cultural values. Section V considers digital environments as a source of individualizing pressure and how adolescents negotiate it alongside institutional expectations. Section VI discusses the comparative findings, their implications for educational policy, and the limitations of the study. Section VII concludes the paper.

II. Methodological Approach

This comparative narrative review is based on secondary literature. Sources were identified through Google Scholar and Web of Science, using combinations of keywords such as adolescent identity, collectivism, filial piety, digital media, Russia, and China. The search covered works published mainly between 2010 and 2025, supplemented by foundational theoretical texts (Chao, 1994; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Triandis, 1995; Erikson, 1968; Arnett, 2002). Studies were included if they addressed adolescents or schooling in Russia or China, or the influence of digital environments on youth identity, and were excluded if they focused on adults or other countries. Because few studies directly compare the two countries, sources were read separately for each country and then compared along four dimensions: family, national identity, school, and digital environments. Information on recent state regulation of digital platforms is drawn partly from legal documents and journalistic reporting rather than peer-reviewed research, as noted in the Limitations.

III. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives to analyze the identity formation of adolescents in Russia and China. Psychosocial Identity Theory. Erikson (1968) described adolescence as the period in which individuals try out different roles, values, and beliefs before settling into a stable sense of self. In collectivist, state-mediated societies such as Russia and China, this process cannot be reduced to personal exploration alone: schools and family structures actively push adolescents toward particular roles, so identity formation is bound up with external pressures from the start. Individualism–Collectivism Framework. Triandis (1995) distinguishes cultures based on whether the self is defined primarily through the in-group (collectivism) or as an independent, self-directed entity (individualism). This



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study treats both Russia and China as leaning toward collectivism at the institutional level, which is the context into which globalization introduces more individualistic values through digital media. Bicultural Identity Model. LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993) argue that people can operate competently in two cultural systems at once, without having to pick one over the other — what they call the alternation model. This is useful here because it gives us a concrete way to describe what adolescents in Russia and China appear to be doing: staying compliant in institutional settings like school while behaving more individually online. Together, these three perspectives allow the analysis that follows to move beyond a simple binary of “tradition versus globalization,” treating adolescent identity instead as a dynamic, context-dependent negotiation between these registers.

1. Cultural Influences On Adolescent Identity

Family remains the main channel through which collectivist values reach adolescents in both Russia and China, although the mechanisms differ. In China, filial piety continues to organize how adolescents relate to their parents and, by extension, to authority more broadly. Chao (1994) showed that Chinese parenting is better understood through the concept of “training” than through the Western category of authoritarian parenting — the emphasis is less on control for its own sake and more on care, concern, and involvement expressed through firm guidance. Leung et al. (2010), in a study of 231 fifth and sixth graders in Hong Kong, found that the two facets of filial piety related to adjustment in opposite ways: reciprocal filial piety was positively associated with life satisfaction and social competence, whereas authoritarian filial piety was negatively associated with self-esteem and social competence. Therefore, strong family obligation does not uniformly limit or support healthy adjustment; its effect appears to depend on the kind of filial belief involved. Adolescents in China may be expected to align personal goals with family expectations, particularly around academic achievement, and such alignment can become part of how they see themselves rather than something imposed from outside. In Russia, the picture is less uniform. Zhukova et al. (2023), in a study of 306 Russian families, found that parenting styles often differ between the two parents within the same family and that both agreement and disagreement between parents’ styles are related to children’s mental health problems. Parenting in Russia therefore appears less uniform than a single collectivist label would suggest. This may indicate that collectivism in the Russian case operates less through strict parental control and more through a general orientation toward group loyalty, historically reinforced at the level of the state rather than primarily through the family unit. National identity adds another layer to family socialization. In Russia, state-promoted narratives about history and civic belonging (Zajda, 2017; Nazrullaeva et al., 2024) extend the logic of collectivism from the family to the nation, encouraging adolescents to view personal identity as connected to a larger national story. In China, this extension occurs more directly through the family itself: because filial piety already frames the individual as embedded in a hierarchy of obligation, loyalty to the nation may follow the same logic rather than requiring a separate socializing institution. Both patterns point to the same underlying structure: adolescents’ sense of self is built through their obligation to a group, whether that group is primarily the family, as in China, or is extended more directly to the state, as in Russia; however, the specific channel through which this happens differs enough to



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matter for how adolescents later respond to individualizing pressures from outside these systems

2. Educational Implications For Adolescent Identity

Teachers and peers translate the broader cultural patterns described above into daily classroom practice, although studies available for Russia and China highlight somewhat different aspects of this process.

Research on Russian schools points to a gap between students and teachers understanding of good teaching. Semenova and Khanolainen (2025), in a mixed-method study of 53 high school students and 16 teachers, found that students saw teachers' ability to recognize individual differences while treating everyone equally as the most important teacher quality, whereas teachers valued professionalism and ethical conduct. This may reflect the tension between the school's standardized expectations and students' wish to be treated as individuals, which echoes the collectivism-versus-autonomy pattern visible at the national identity level.

In China, the classroom functions less through the individual teacher–student relationship and more through group-level norms. Hei et al. (2025) found that in classrooms with stronger group-oriented norms, aggressive behavior was more strongly linked to poorer academic and social outcomes than in more individually oriented classrooms, suggesting that the classroom's collective culture actively shapes how personal behavior is evaluated and sanctioned by others, not just by the teacher. This is consistent with the filial piety pattern discussed earlier: the group, not only the authority figure, becomes the mechanism through which conformity is enforced.

In both countries, the school reproduces the collectivist logic already present in the state and, in China, in the family, but through different channels: a teacher–student relationship that may not fully accommodate individuality in Russia and a peer-monitored group norm in China. This distinction matters for how adolescents in each country are likely to experience the pull toward digital individualism described earlier: Russian adolescents may experience it as a private discrepancy between what they want from a teacher and what the system provides, whereas Chinese adolescents may experience it more directly as a visible tension with their immediate peer group.

3 . Digital Environments And Individualizing Pressures

The preceding sections described the institutional side of adolescent socialization. This section discusses the second pressure: digital environments in which adolescents encounter content centered on self-expression and personal achievement. Online participation is now routine in both countries. In China, the fifth national survey of minors' internet use reported 193 million juvenile internet users in 2022 and a penetration rate of 97.2%, with the share of minors who frequently watch short videos rising from 40.5% to 54.1% between 2018 and 2022 (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2023). In Russia, a survey of 1,380 adolescents aged 12–17 found average online activity of 4–5 hours on weekdays, among the highest levels in a comparison with 18 European countries, together with a wide range of online activities (Soldatova & Rasskazova, 2023).



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These digital spaces are not an unmediated “global” environment. In China, the 2020 revision of the Law on the Protection of Minors, in force since June 2021, requires gaming, livestreaming, audio-video, and social platforms to provide time, permission, and spending management functions for minors (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, 2020). The State Council’s Regulations on the Protection of Minors in Cyberspace (2023, in force since January 2024) assign overall coordination to the Cyberspace Administration of China and extend responsibilities to schools, families, and market players (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). In Russia, independent reporting describes a similar tightening: from September 2025, the state-backed messenger Max was preinstalled on all phones and tablets sold in the country (Sokolova, 2025), and Roskomnadzor blocked at least 258 VPN services during 2025 (The Moscow Times, 2026). Parents also reported that teachers and school administrators pressed students to install it (Sokolova, 2025). In both countries, individualizing content reaches adolescents through channels that are shaped and entered by the state and the school.

Within these channels, adolescents engage in individualized self-presentation. Zhang (2025) interviewed Chinese adolescents and their parents in Shanxi Province and found that adolescents’ behavior on Douyin was driven by needs for belonging, self-identity, and social recognition, and that they managed a tension between “front-stage” performance and “back-stage” behavior, with family influence remaining visible throughout. For Russia, Rubtsova et al. (2018) studied 88 adolescents aged 15–18 and found that the structure of their VKontakte profiles was closely related to personality traits, which indicates that online profiles are a space of individual expression. Both studies are small and context-specific, and neither measures individualistic values directly.

Arnett (2002) offers a way to interpret this evidence. He argued that many young people worldwide develop a bicultural identity, combining a local identity with one linked to global culture, and that identity confusion may increase among young people in non-Western societies. This is close to the alternation model proposed by LaFromboise et al. (1993). However, the studies cited here document intensive use and individualized self-presentation, rather than a shift in values. The claim that adolescents comply in institutional settings while acting more autonomously online is therefore best treated as a plausible interpretation of the combined literature, and the registers may be less separate than the alternation model implies, since the family and state follow adolescents into digital space.

IV. Discussion

The evidence reviewed above supports a more qualified version of the paper’s central claim. Adolescents in Russia and China do not simply trade collectivist identity for individualism as they gain access to global digital culture. They appear to operate in partially distinct registers: they comply within institutional settings such as family and school, while engaging in more individualized self-presentation in digital spaces (Section V). This is consistent with the alternation model proposed by LaFromboise et al. (1993) and with Arnett’s (2002) account of bicultural identity under globalization. However, the registers are less separate than the model implies. Zhang (2025) shows



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that family remains present in Chinese adolescents' behavior on Douyin, and in both countries the state shapes the platforms through which individualizing content arrives (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2020; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023; Sokolova, 2025; The Moscow Times, 2026). The studies reviewed document intensive use and individualized self-presentation, not a shift in values; therefore, the two-register pattern is best read as a plausible interpretation of the combined literature rather than a demonstrated finding.

The comparison across Sections III and IV shows that this pattern is produced through different mechanisms in each country. In China, the logic of obligation runs from family to school to nation. Filial piety, group-oriented classroom norms, and national loyalty may reinforce one another; therefore, an adolescent who has internalized respect for parents may be more readily primed to accept the authority of teachers and, by extension, the state (Chao, 1994; Leung et al., 2010; Hei et al., 2025). The Russian case looks different. Collectivism operates through institutions that do not always align with each other. State-promoted national narratives (Zajda, 2017; Nazrullaeva et al., 2024) exist somewhat apart from family dynamics, which differ even between parents within the same family (Zhukova et al., 2023). They also exist apart from the teacher-student relationship, which students themselves describe as insufficiently individualized (Semenova & Khanolainen, 2025). Chinese adolescents therefore encounter a more unified collectivist system, whereas Russian adolescents encounter a more fragmented one. One possible implication is that digital individualism meets less structural resistance in Russia, where no single chain of family, school, and state reinforces collectivist norms. This remains a hypothesis. The sources reviewed do not compare how the two groups of adolescents actually respond to digital individualism, and the recent tightening of state control over digital platforms in Russia (Sokolova, 2025; The Moscow Times, 2026) points in the opposite direction, toward greater institutional mediation of the online space.

There is a practical implication here for education policy. Collectivist socialization in China works partly because family, school, and state reinforce each other. Any attempt to give Chinese students more room for individual expression would probably need to involve changes across this whole chain, not just in the classroom. Russia's fragmentation points to a different kind of opportunity: since the teacher-student relationship appears to operate somewhat apart from family dynamics and state narratives, the gap students report between the teacher they want and the teacher they get could plausibly be addressed through teacher training and classroom practice, without needing changes to national curriculum content.

V. Limitations

This analysis relies on secondary literature rather than original data, so it identifies patterns and plausible mechanisms rather than causal relationships. The source base is also uneven. The Chinese sources used here focus mostly on family and classroom dynamics, while the Russian sources focus more on school and state-level narratives. This difference in emphasis may make the Chinese case look more internally consistent simply because it has been studied from that angle. Both countries are also treated here at a national level, which overlooks meaningful regional and urban-rural variations that



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probably affect how strongly these patterns actually hold. Finally, this is a fast-changing area. Youth access to specific digital platforms and state regulation of that access keep shifting in both countries, so conclusions drawn from recent studies may not hold for long. The evidence on adolescents' online behavior is also limited. The Chinese qualitative study cited here covers a single province (Zhang, 2025), and the Russian study of online self-presentation involved 88 adolescents (Rubtsova et al., 2018). Neither measures individualistic values directly, and the survey data on use (CNNIC, 2023; Soldatova & Rasskazova, 2023) describe how much adolescents go online rather than what identity they construct there. Some of the evidence on state regulation of Russian digital platforms comes from journalistic reporting rather than peer-reviewed research. Several of the empirical studies are also small or regionally limited: Semenova and Khanolainen (2025) surveyed 53 students and 16 teachers, Leung et al. (2010) studied 231 children in Hong Kong, and Hei et al. (2025) drew on one region in east China.

VI. Conclusion

Adolescent identity development in Russia and China responds to comparable pressures: institutional collectivism on one side and digital individualism on the other. The two systems channel these pressures differently. China relies on a chain that connects family, school, and nation. Russia relies on institutions that function more independently of each other. In both countries, digital environments are partly mediated by the state; therefore, the contrast between a collectivist school and a free internet is a simplification. This difference matters for anyone designing educational policy in either country: a single approach to globalization's effect on youth identity is unlikely to work equally well in both settings because the collectivist structure it needs to balance is not built the same way in each. Future research should measure adolescents' values and identity directly across offline and online contexts in both countries.

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