

Negotiating Two Worlds and Korean-American Bicultural Identity in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*

Farid Noor Romadlon^{a,*}, Abdulhamid Badru^b, Slamet Setiawan^c

^a Universitas Muria Kudus, Indonesia

^b Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

^c Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

*Corresponding author. E-mail address: ayikolau@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the representation and negotiation of Korean-American identity in the film *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) through a Cross-Cultural Understanding perspective. Focusing on the bicultural experience of the protagonist, Lara Jean Covey, the study examines how ethnic identity is constructed within multicultural spaces. A qualitative design with a film analysis approach was employed, and selected scenes, dialogues, and social interactions served as the primary data. The data were transcribed, coded, and grouped into themes following the logic of reflexive thematic analysis, and trustworthiness was supported through repeated viewings, theory triangulation, and thick description. The findings reveal six major themes of identity construction across family life, the school environment, and peer relationships. Lara Jean balances Korean collectivist family values, which emphasize emotional restraint and duty, with American high school norms that promote independence and open emotional expression. Her private love letters, the fake dating contract with Peter Kavinsky, and everyday practices such as shared Korean food illustrate how heritage and dominant culture coexist in her daily life. The study concludes that bicultural identity is a fluid and context-dependent process of integration and does not function as a fixed attribute. The film shows the protagonist harmonizing two cultural systems instead of experiencing a cultural clash, which highlights a dynamic integration strategy in everyday life. These findings are relevant to multicultural education and media studies.

Keywords: Acculturation, Bicultural Identity, Cross-Cultural Understanding, High-Context Communication, Korean-American Identity

INTRODUCTION

Migration, transnational family ties, formal education, and global media now expose young people to several value systems at the same time, which makes the construction of identity a more demanding developmental task than it was in culturally homogeneous settings. Adolescence is the period in which individuals begin to shape their sense of self, their social relationships, and their personal commitments, and these tasks become considerably harder for youth from immigrant families who must also negotiate the competing expectations of their heritage community and the society in which they live (Crocetti et al., 2024). For such adolescents, identity is formed and revised through repeated interaction in everyday settings such as the family, the school, and the peer group, and it is never fixed once and for all.

Research on acculturation has shown that these negotiations take place in specific life domains and do not follow a uniform pattern. Crocetti et al. (2024) followed 244 ethnic minority adolescents across three waves and reported that personal identity processes were related to cultural heritage maintenance and destination culture adoption in both the education and friendship domains, which led the authors to conclude that identity development and acculturation support one another over time. A complementary cross-sectional study of 355 adolescents in the United States found that national American identity was associated with higher academic engagement and self-esteem through its links with bicultural identity integration and global identity coherence (Safa et al., 2024).

From a Cross-Cultural Understanding perspective, the settings in which bicultural adolescents move often promote different communicative and relational norms. American high school culture generally values individualism, independence, self-expression, and open social interaction, whereas Korean family culture tends to prioritize the group over the individual and the family over the self, with an emphasis on duty, emotional restraint, and indirect communication. Filial piety, a Confucian-rooted value that stresses respect, obedience, and care toward parents, is described as a crucial element of adolescent socialization in East Asian contexts that include Korea (Han & Cheung, 2025). The difference between these frameworks can shape how Korean-American adolescents manage their emotions, their relationships, and their sense of belonging in daily life. An interview study with 24 Korean heritage speakers in the United States points in the same direction, since participants described establishing their cultural identity only after extensive confusion and conflict with their parents, peers, and the wider society (Yang et al., 2025).

Popular films that feature multi-ethnic adolescents make these cultural dynamics visible to large audiences and therefore serve as accessible texts for examining how identity negotiation is imagined and circulated in society. The Netflix film *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) is a clear example of such a text. Its protagonist, Lara Jean Covey, is a Korean-American teenager who attends an American high school while remaining closely tied to a household shaped by the memory of her Korean mother, and the narrative follows her as she moves between family traditions on one side and American norms of communication, visible emotion, and social interaction on the other.

Existing studies have approached related questions from different directions. Nguyen (2025) examined the documentary film series *Asian Americans* and argued that representational conflations portray Asian-Americans as a monolithic group, while also highlighting anti-essentialist critiques that draw attention to the intersectional complexity of Asian-American identities. This analysis offers a valuable account of identity politics in media discourse, yet its focus remains on historical and political contestation at a broad level, and it gives limited attention to how adolescents negotiate cultural expectations in the routines of family and school life.

The empirical studies discussed above approach adolescent biculturalism through surveys and interviews with real participants. Crocetti et al. (2024) and Safa et al. (2024) relied on quantitative designs to explain how identity processes and identity integration relate to acculturation and adjustment, and Yang et al. (2025) used qualitative interviews to capture how Korean heritage speakers interpret their own conflicts. These studies clarify the psychological and social mechanisms involved, but they do not show how such mechanisms are dramatized, symbolized, and made recognizable in a fictional narrative that reaches a global audience.

Taken together, the reviewed studies show that cultural identity has been investigated in media research and in adolescent development research, but the two lines of work have rarely

been brought together. To the authors' knowledge, only a limited number of studies indexed in major scholarly databases examine how Korean-American identity is represented and negotiated within American high school culture in a popular teen film. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the representation of Korean-American identity in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) through a Cross-Cultural Understanding perspective, and it is guided by one question concerning how Korean-American identity is represented in the film.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design with a film analysis approach to examine how bicultural identity is represented in a fictional teen film. A qualitative design was appropriate because the aim was to interpret the meanings attached to cultural practices and social interactions without reducing them to numerical measures, and qualitative methods are widely regarded as suitable for gaining in-depth insight into complex phenomena (Lim, 2025). Such a design also treats the researcher's interpretive position as an analytic resource that must be handled with reflexive care (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Within this design, the film was treated as a cultural text in which language, narrative, visual detail, and social interaction jointly represent identity categories, an approach that has also been used to examine how Asian American identity is constructed and contested in screen media (Nguyen, 2025).

The primary data source was the film *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), and the analysis focused on the representation of Korean-American cultural identity through the protagonist, Lara Jean Covey, and through her interactions with her family and peers. The data comprised selected scenes, spoken dialogues, social interactions, and visual representations such as costumes and cultural symbols. These data were situated in two main settings, namely the American high school environment and the multicultural family household, which together provided the contrasting contexts needed to observe how identity is negotiated.

Data were gathered through a systematic documentation technique. The film was first viewed repeatedly to build a comprehensive understanding of the narrative context and to identify moments of cultural interaction that were relevant to the research focus. Critical dialogues were then transcribed, and specific scenes were purposively selected according to four thematic parameters, which were family dynamics, school interactions, cultural conflicts, and identity negotiation. The selected scenes were interpreted in relation to the narrative sequence in which they appear, so that the original structure of the film was preserved during analysis.

The analytic procedure followed the logic of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The transcribed dialogues and selected scenes were first reduced to the segments that bore directly on cultural representation, and these segments were then coded and grouped into prominent cultural themes, which resulted in the six themes presented in the findings. The themes were subsequently interpreted through the lens of Cross-Cultural Understanding, with particular attention to bicultural identity integration (Safa et al., 2024) and to the orientations of heritage culture maintenance and destination culture adoption (Crocetti et al., 2024). Combining these perspectives with the Cross-Cultural Understanding framework allowed the bicultural phenomena in the film to be interpreted from more than one theoretical position.

To ensure trustworthiness and analytical rigor, three strategies were applied. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, which was achieved by repeated viewings and careful documentation of each relevant scene. Theory triangulation was employed by integrating the complementary perspectives on bicultural identity and

acculturation described above. Finally, thick descriptions of the selected scenes and interactions were provided in the analysis so that readers can judge the soundness of the interpretations and the conclusions drawn from them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results through selected scenes, dialogues, and character interactions in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). The analysis identified six major themes that map onto the construction of Korean-American identity across family life, the school environment, and peer relationships, and these themes show how Lara Jean Covey negotiates her bicultural identity through ordinary experiences. Table 1 summarizes the findings, and each theme is then discussed in turn.

Table 1 Summary of Findings

Theme	Evidence from the Film	Main Finding
Family as a Site of Cultural Preservation	Family interactions and Dr. Covey says, "We're a team, remember?"	Korean family values emphasize togetherness and collectivism.
Emotional Expression Through Love Letters	Lara Jean writes private love letters instead of expressing her feelings directly.	Emotional restraint reflects her cultural background.
American High School Culture	School gossip, popularity, and the fake dating relationship.	American teenage culture encourages openness and social interaction.
Identity Negotiation Through Peer Relationships	Lara Jean's relationship with Peter Kavinsky.	She negotiates between Korean family values and American social expectations.
Bicultural Identity in Daily Life	Family traditions, food, and discussions about heritage.	Korean culture remains present in everyday family life.

FAMILY AS A SITE OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND COLLECTIVISM

The strongest representation of Korean-American identity in the film is anchored in the private sphere of the family. After the death of their Korean mother, the Covey household becomes a deliberate site of cultural preservation that is guided by collectivist values, and this is evident in the way the family operates as an interdependent unit. When Margot, the eldest sister, prepares to leave for college in Scotland, the emotional weight of her departure is shared by the entire family and is not treated as an individual milestone.

A pivotal scene that captures this collectivist orientation occurs when Dr. Covey, a white American father who strives to keep his daughters connected to their maternal roots, reminds them of their solidarity by saying, "*We're a team, remember?*" Through the lens of Cross-Cultural Understanding, this line goes beyond simple parental reassurance because it evokes the traditional Korean emphasis on family cohesion, shared responsibility, and filial devotion (*hyo*), a value that research on East Asian adolescents treats as central to family socialization (Han & Cheung, 2025). The home therefore functions as a cultural sanctuary in which the sisters implicitly agree to care for one another. Lara Jean, for instance, takes over Margot's domestic responsibilities without treating them as a burden, which reflects an ingroup-oriented mindset in which the well-being of the family takes precedence over

individual convenience. The family setting thus operates as a physical home and as a living repository of Korean cultural values that are passed down and maintained across generations.

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION, PRIVACY, AND HIGH-CONTEXT COMMUNICATION

Lara Jean's handling of her romantic feelings shows how biculturalism intersects with emotional expression. At the start of the film she writes intense and deeply personal love letters to every boy she has loved, yet she does not send them or voice her feelings openly. She keeps them in a teal hatbox that once belonged to her Korean mother. From a Cross-Cultural Understanding perspective, the hatbox is a powerful cultural artifact because it symbolizes both a container of heritage and a habit of emotional restraint. Her preference for writing letters she never intends to send is consistent with high-context communication, in which emotions are often internalized and kept within the private sphere in order to maintain harmony and protect one's self-image or "face" (*kibun*).

The conflict begins when her younger sister, Kitty, secretly mails the letters. This act breaches Lara Jean's carefully constructed private sphere and places her in the low-context and highly expressive reality of her American surroundings. On discovering the exposure, Lara Jean reacts with severe panic and declares, "*This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me.*" Her intense embarrassment reveals a deep discomfort with public emotional exposure. The distress caused by the mailed letters therefore reflects more than teenage awkwardness, since it marks a cultural rupture in which a private, high-context coping mechanism is suddenly exposed to an environment that demands explicit, low-context confrontation.

AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL CULTURE AND SOCIAL PERFORMATIVITY

In sharp contrast to the protective and collectivist atmosphere of the Covey household, the American high school in the film appears as an individualistic, low-context, and performative space. The cafeteria, the hallways, and the gossip culture form an ecosystem in which social currency, visibility, and outspokenness are prioritized. After the letters are distributed, Lara Jean becomes the center of public attention against her will. Students in this environment are accustomed to open social exposure and expect direct communication about personal relationships, which contrasts with her usual avoidance.

The cultural negotiation reaches its peak when Lara Jean enters a "fake dating" contract with Peter Kavinsky. From a cultural standpoint, a written agreement to perform a romantic relationship reflects a pragmatic, individualistic, and transactional approach that is typical of the American teenage social dynamics depicted in the film. Peter uses the arrangement to make his former girlfriend jealous, while Lara Jean uses it to convince Josh, her sister's former boyfriend, that she has no feelings for him. Lara Jean nevertheless accepts this highly American social performance for a collectivist reason, which is to protect her relationship with her sister. The arrangement illustrates the importance of social image, reputation management, and audience perception in dominant American youth culture, and it compels Lara Jean to take part in the extroverted social rituals that she previously avoided.

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION THROUGH PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Lara Jean's negotiation of her bicultural identity is strongly mediated by her developing relationship with Peter Kavinsky. At first their interactions are bound by the terms of the fake dating contract, which represents a superficial engagement with her peers. Peter gradually acts as a cultural bridge, however, because he repeatedly challenges her high-context

communication style and encourages her to verbalize her thoughts and to step out of her internal emotional world.

A significant breakthrough occurs during the school ski trip, a typical setting of American teenage socialization. In an intimate moment Peter tells her, *"You don't have to pretend with me."* This line marks a turning point in her intercultural communication, because it encourages Lara Jean to loosen her defensive emotional restraint and move toward the American ideal of candor and emotional transparency. Through Peter she learns that expressing her feelings explicitly does not betray her identity or remove her protective boundaries. She slowly adapts to the low-context expressiveness of American teenage life while keeping her core values, which shows a dynamic negotiation in which she does not assimilate fully and instead expands her communicative repertoire.

BICULTURAL IDENTITY IN DAILY LIFE AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

The film represents bicultural identity through the integration of heritage into everyday practices and avoids dramatic cultural clashes. Lara Jean's biculturalism is woven into her lifestyle and reflects a state of cultural hybridity. Several scenes show Korean culture in the household without making it the central conflict of the plot. The family regularly eats Korean food alongside American meals, and a notable symbol of this hybridity is the Korean yogurt drink (Yakult) that Lara Jean introduces to Peter, who enjoys it and later buys it for her. This small exchange normalizes her heritage within the dominant American sphere and turns a cultural artifact into a shared language of affection.

There are also casual depictions of Korean skincare routines, such as wearing sheet masks, and family conversations about honoring the late mother's cultural background. The film avoids the stereotypical contrast between an "oppressive Asian household" and a "liberating American society." Korean traditions such as cooking bossam for family dinners coexist with typical American teenage activities such as watching classic American sitcoms, including *The Golden Girls*, and this coexistence illustrates how bicultural identity is actually lived. It is an experience in which Korean heritage and American upbringing are compatible and blend naturally into the daily life of the Covey family.

BICULTURAL IDENTITY AS A FLUID AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT PROCESS

Taken together, the six themes show that the Korean-American identity portrayed in the film is continuously produced through the interplay between family-based cultural values and school-based social expectations. The film presents biculturalism as a dynamic and performative process shaped by specific social contexts and does not treat identity as a fixed demographic attribute. Lara Jean's identity is situational. She embodies Korean collectivism and emotional restraint within the private sphere of the family, while she gradually adopts American ideals of outspokenness and individualism in the public sphere of the school. This pattern is consistent with evidence that identity development and acculturation unfold together in specific life domains such as education and friendship, with heritage culture maintenance and destination culture adoption operating side by side (Crocetti et al., 2024). It also corresponds with findings that biculturalism is the most common pattern of cultural identification among adolescents with an immigrant background and that the links between identification and adjustment differ across life domains (Baumert et al., 2024).

Lara Jean's approach can be described as integration, in the sense that she keeps her heritage orientation while adopting the norms of her environment. The film adds a further

nuance, because integration in adolescent spaces involves the strategic negotiation of emotional expression and does not simply mean preserving heritage. The movement from hidden love letters, which symbolize emotional privacy and restraint, to a public fake dating contract, which symbolizes American teenage performativity, shows how she balances the ingroup orientation of her heritage with the outgroup demands of her environment. Bicultural identity in this case is not a zero-sum matter that requires abandoning one culture for another, and it is better understood as a strategic harmonization of two frameworks. This reading agrees with evidence that national American identity contributes to the adjustment of minoritized and immigrant adolescents through its links with bicultural identity integration (Safa et al., 2024).

These findings are in line with research showing that the family is a primary setting for ethnic and cultural socialization among Korean youth. Shen et al. (2022) reported that parental cultural socialization was associated with lower depressive symptoms through ethnic-racial identity among Korean American adolescents, and Yang et al. (2025) described how Korean heritage speakers form their cultural identity through experiences with parents, peers, and society. Research with Asian American adolescents has also examined how parents' ethnic-racial socialization profiles relate to family cohesion (Atkin et al., 2023), which is consistent with the prominence of family solidarity in the film. The film illustrates this role by positioning the family home as the main sanctuary of Korean cultural preservation, as seen in shared meals, sibling solidarity, and parental guidance, while the school appears as the testing ground for American cultural norms. The findings also correspond with the conclusion of Crocetti et al. (2024) and Safa et al. (2024) that bicultural identity requires continual navigation. Lara Jean evolves under the dual pressures of maintaining her familial roots and gaining acceptance from her peers, which makes her identity fluid and context-dependent.

This study also offers a more fine-grained view than Nguyen (2025), who examined the macro-level representation of Asian American identity in documentary media. Nguyen highlights the wider political and ideological forces that surround identity essentialism and racial hierarchies, whereas the present study shows how bicultural identity is lived and negotiated within the micro-ecosystem of American high school culture. From a Cross-Cultural Understanding perspective, it is notable that the film largely avoids overt cultural clashes, racial marginalization, and stereotypical immigrant struggles. The cultural negotiation instead takes an internalized form that appears through emotional choices and not through external conflicts.

Overall, the film reframes the bicultural adolescent experience. It is portrayed as an adaptive movement through two parallel cultural systems and not as a tragic clash between East and West. By shifting between the expectations of her Korean heritage and the social currency of her American high school, Lara Jean exemplifies how bicultural identity can be reconciled into a coherent, harmonious, and empowered lived experience.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the representation of Korean-American identity in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) takes the form of a fluid and context-dependent process of bicultural negotiation, and the film does not present it as a static demographic trait. Through a Cross-Cultural Understanding perspective, the analysis showed that bicultural identity is continuously constructed at the intersection of two distinct environments. Within the private family sphere, the protagonist embodies Korean cultural values that emphasize collectivism, familial duty, and emotional privacy. In the public sphere of the American high school, she navigates values that call for independence, social performativity, and emotional candor.

The film does not depict a debilitating cultural clash and instead exemplifies a successful strategy of bicultural integration. The protagonist harmonizes her heritage with the dominant culture, keeps her core values, and expands her communicative repertoire, which is consistent with recent research on how adolescents navigate heritage and destination cultures in different life domains (Crocetti et al., 2024; Safa et al., 2024). The narrative therefore shifts the bicultural adolescent experience away from a site of inherent conflict and presents it as an empowering and continuous balancing of two cultural systems.

Beyond these theoretical contributions, the findings carry implications for multicultural education and media studies. Pedagogically, understanding how bicultural youth manage shifting cultural expectations can help educators and language teachers support the socio-psychological development of students in multicultural or transnational settings. Within literature and cultural studies, the findings point to the value of including contemporary popular culture texts in Cross-Cultural Understanding curricula, since such texts offer accessible and relatable frameworks for examining concepts such as ethnic socialization and identity integration, and they can foster a more inclusive and empathetic approach toward diverse learners. Because the analysis is limited to a single film, future research could extend this approach to other media texts or combine it with audience reception data.

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