

Between Na Young and Nora: Self-Concept, Diasporic Identity, and Psychological Congruence in *Past Lives* (2023)



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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Nora Moon's self-concept and diasporic identity are cinematically constructed in *Past Lives* (2023) through Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology. Although previous studies have discussed identity and diaspora in film, limited attention has been given to how cinematic language represents psychological incongruence, self-reflection, and movement toward congruence. Using a qualitative textual and visual analysis, this study analyzes selected dialogues, character interactions, *mise en scène*, framing, silence, facial expressions, and spatial composition in key scenes involving Nora, Hae Sung, and Arthur. The findings show that Nora's self-concept develops through the tension between her real self, represented by her Korean childhood identity as Na Young, and her ideal self, shaped by her adult life in the United States. Her relationships with Hae Sung and Arthur function as reflective mirrors that help her recognize unresolved memories, emotional attachments, and cultural belonging. The film's use of silence, close-ups, spatial distance, and contrasting visual tones externalizes Nora's psychological conflict and gradual movement toward self-acceptance. This study concludes that *Past Lives* presents diasporic identity not merely as cultural displacement but as a humanistic process of negotiating memory, emotion, and psychological congruence.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, individuals frequently encounter psychological challenges related to identity crises and the pursuit of authenticity. The pressure to adapt to new cultural environments, coupled with social expectations and personal ambitions, often generates internal conflict between past and present identities. This condition is especially pronounced among those undergoing cross-cultural transitions, who commonly experience alienation, uncertainty, and emotional instability. These create incongruence between the real and ideal self that undermines well-being, as contemporary readings of Rogers' humanistic theory emphasise (Yao & Kabir, 2023). Consequently, understanding how individuals construct and reconcile their identities has become a crucial concern in both psychology and cultural studies.

Humanistic psychology is important for understanding characters like Nora because it emphasizes the human potential to grow and become their true selves (Krikorian, 2023). This approach rejects a deterministic view of human behavior and instead focuses on subjective experience, freedom of choice, and the capacity for positive development. Specifically, Rogers' theory offers a robust lens through which to understand the process of developing the self-concept through reflection and experience, with contemporary research highlighting congruence between the real and ideal self as a

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central aspect of psychological well-being and authentic living (Stephen, 2023; Yao & Kabir, 2023). It highlights the dynamic relationship between the real self and the ideal self, as well as the process of achieving congruence as a form of psychological well-being. Therefore, this perspective is relevant for analyzing how individuals navigate identity conflicts and strive for authenticity in their lives.

In this context, Celine Song's 2023 film *Past Lives* presents a compelling narrative that reflects these humanistic concerns. The film tells the story of Nora Moon, a woman who migrates from South Korea to the United States and grows up between two cultural identities. Scholars have noted that the film serves as a significant cultural moment for East Asian diasporic cinema, offering a rare and authentic portrayal of how Korean identity is negotiated across transnational spaces (Yang, 2023; Lee, 2023). Nora is portrayed as living between two versions of herself: Na Young, her past identity rooted in Korean culture and childhood memories, and Nora, her present identity shaped by her life in a Western environment. This duality creates an internal conflict that becomes more visible when she reunites with her childhood friend, Hae Sung, after many years apart. This reunion triggers a process of emotional reflection, as Nora begins to question her past choices and the identity she has formed over time. Through subtle dialogue and visual storytelling, the film illustrates how past experiences, cultural transitions, and interpersonal relationships influence her self-concept. Nora is not only a fictional character but also a representation of modern individuals who struggle to maintain authenticity while adapting to changing social and cultural contexts. Therefore, analyzing *Past Lives* through a humanistic perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how emotional experiences and relationships contribute to the development of self-concept and the pursuit of inner harmony.

From a contextual standpoint, *Past Lives* offers a unique narrative complexity by skillfully blending two cultural perspectives, Korean and American, into a gentle yet emotionally rich storyline. The film portrays cross-cultural experiences not just as background, but as a thematic force that shapes the psychological journey of its characters. Through calm dialogue and visual symbolism, Celine Song highlights the tension between nostalgia for the past and the need to live in the present. This representation differs from typical diaspora films that focus on social conflicts, *Past Lives* instead explores subtle, existential inner conflicts. Therefore, studying this film can deepen our understanding of how multicultural identity influences psychological growth and self-perception, especially for modern Asian women navigating the balance between memories, life choices, and personal authenticity in a globalized world. This psychological process is also informed by gender and postcolonial factors as Asian women in diaspora communities often negotiate identity based on the intersection of patriarchal and colonial legacies of their home and host countries (Strazzeri, 2024; Wilson et al., 2024).

Previous studies have explored identity formation and self-concept from various psychological and literary perspectives. For instance, Stephen (2023) explores identity conflict from a humanistic psychology perspective, highlighting the interaction between real and ideal self as a complex and dynamic process of psychological negotiation in Rogers' person-centered approach. Similarly, Maulidiyah & Yurisah (2025) highlight the role of personal experience and reflection in shaping self-concept, while studies of films such as *Freedom Writers* demonstrate how humanistic theory can be applied to analyze character development and emotional growth. Furthermore, psychological research by Coutts et al. (2023) suggests that self-concept is closely related to emotional stability and well-being. However, despite these contributions, most studies focus on a single cultural context or general psychological development, with limited attention to cross-cultural identity and the internal reconstruction of self-concept within cinematic narratives. Furthermore, there is a lack of research examining how interpersonal relationships function as a reflective mechanism in identity formation from a humanistic perspective. This indicates a significant gap in understanding the psychological depth of identity formation in cross-cultural film contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the development of Nora Moon's self-concept in *Past Lives* (2023) using Carl Rogers' humanistic theory. It is hypothesized that Nora's identity is not fixed but continuously reconstructed through interpersonal relationships and reflective experiences, leading

toward greater self-acceptance and psychological congruence. To bridge the gap, this study uses textual and visual analysis of dialogues and filmic representations in the film, while also being mindful of how gender and postcolonial factors shape Nora's psychological journey as a Korean woman dealing with identity issues in the Western diaspora (Strazzeri, 2024). Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how internal psychological processes shape identity in a cross-cultural context, while contributing to interdisciplinary discussions on film, psychology, and identity formation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Concept in Humanistic Psychology

Self-concept is a key construct in humanistic psychology, proposed by Carl Rogers, to describe a relatively stable yet dynamic set of perceptions about the self that emerge from experience and social interactions (Yao & Kabir, 2023) and is divided into the real self (present qualities) and the ideal self (desired qualities). Congruence between these two aspects leads to psychological well-being, a process that is not only internal but also shaped by social, cultural, and power structures (Stephen, 2023; Xiang et al., 2023), while incongruence, typically caused by external pressures and/or refusal to acknowledge true feelings, results in anxiety, tension, and self-conflict. Beyond understanding oneself, the self-concept represents how an individual interprets their experiences in particular social, cultural, and ideological contexts (Mukherjee, 2025), and for post-colonial and diasporic women in particular, this process is mediated by intersections of patriarchal values, colonialism, and cultural dislocation which define the acceptable versions of self (Strazzeri, 2024; Park & Angelica, 2025). Rogers also stresses humans' inherent tendency toward self-actualisation and growth; reflecting on and interacting with others to develop a more unified and authentic sense of self, a perspective corroborated by research showing that self-concept clarity is associated with reduced anxiety, increased emotional stability, and increased subjective well-being (Xiang et al., 2023), as well as better mental health and life satisfaction (Coutts et al., 2023).

Interpersonal Relationships and Self-Development

The development of a self-concept is significantly influenced by interpersonal relationships. This is due to the fact that individuals gain an understanding of themselves through their interactions with other people. Personality and self are shaped by interactions with significant others as relationships are the main source of self-understanding (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Xiang et al., 2025). These relationships serve as reflective mirrors that assist individuals in recognizing their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Healthy relationships that are built on empathy, acceptance, and unconditional positive regard create a safe space for people to explore and fully embrace their actual selves - a Rogerian perspective that resonates with modern humanistic research (Stephen, 2023; Yao & Kabir, 2023).

When it comes to cinema and narrative studies, this idea is especially helpful for gaining an understanding of how characters' experience development as a result of their interactions with one another. Emotional interactions between characters not only play a role in their psychological development, but also contribute to how viewers internalise psychological experiences by identifying with characters' emotional experiences in the film narrative (Jaén Portillo, 2024). As a result, interpersonal relationships are not only forms of social interaction; rather, they also serve as significant mechanisms via which individuals reflect on, analyze, and continually modify their perspective of themselves.

Cross-Cultural Identity and Psychological Conflict

Globalization shape's identity by creating hybrid identities, where individuals blend elements from multiple cultures rather than replacing one with another (Kipng'etich, 2024). This process, known as cultural hybridity, often leads to internal struggles as people balance their original and new cultural

identities. Research in cross-cultural psychology shows that during acculturation, individuals may experience psychological stress from trying to adapt while maintaining their roots (Horne, 2024). First-generation immigrants, in particular, tend to strongly retain their original culture while navigating new societal demands, resulting in identity conflict and emotional strain (Maehler & Daikeler, 2024; Kotic, 2025). These dynamics are reflected in *Past Lives* (2023), which portrays identity as fluid and shaped by memory, cultural change, and emotional experience. From a humanistic perspective, this process represents an effort to achieve inner balance and a coherent sense of self.

Textual and Visual Analysis as Methodological Approach

The method used in this research is textual and visual analysis, in which textual analysis focuses on the systematic analysis of dialogue, narrative, and symbolism, while visual analysis explores the cinematic codes (shot scale, lighting, spatial positioning) that create psychological and emotional meanings (Trombeta & Cox, 2022; Jaén Portillo, 2024). Given that film meaning is constructed not only through narrative but also through body gestures, facial expressions, spatial arrangements, and symbolism, analysis needs to answer both “what” and “how” the film portrays something through cinematic codes that present psychological meanings (Jaén Portillo, 2024). In *Past Lives* (2023), the analysis occurs in three phases: (1) narrative analysis of dialogues portraying Nora’s struggle between real and ideal self; (2) analysis of interpersonal relations with Hae Sung and Arthur as a reflection of her self-concept; and (3) systematic analysis of cinematic elements such as shot scale, facial close-ups, body posture, spatial positioning, and scene transitions as moments of identity negotiation and congruence (Trombeta & Cox, 2022; Jaén Portillo, 2024), which collectively depict the development of self-concept in a cross-cultural setting.

METHODS

Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using textual and visual analysis to examine the development of self-concept in the character of Nora Moon in the film *Past Lives* (2023). This approach is considered appropriate as it allows an in-depth interpretation of how self-concept is constructed through both narrative and cinematic representations, particularly in relation to interpersonal relationships and emotional experiences.

Data Collection

The data collection process is conducted through several steps. First, the researcher watches the film multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline, characters, and themes. Second, relevant dialogues and scenes that reflect Nora’s self-concept, emotional conflict, and interpersonal relationships are identified and documented. Third, visual elements such as facial expressions and gestures are observed and categorized. Finally, all collected data are organized based on key themes related to self-concept, identity, and interpersonal relationships.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study consists of a documentation sheet designed to analyze the film *Past Lives* directed by Celine Song. It focuses on identifying and recording relevant data from the film, including dialogues, character interactions, and selected scenes that represent Nora’s psychological development and self-concept. Additionally, the instrument provides categories to examine visual elements like facial expressions, body language, and gestures, helping to better understand the character’s emotional and psychological state (Orsi et al, 2026). These elements are systematically organized into analytical indicators based on humanistic psychology, particularly Carl Rogers’ theory of self-concept, including aspects of the real self, ideal self, and self-congruence.

Data Analysis

This research uses an integrated film analysis approach to explore meaning-making in *Past Lives* (2023), where textual analysis engages Nora's intra-personal conflict (dialogue and narrative) and cinematic analysis explores *mise en scène*, shot scale, framing, camera angles, lighting and composition as representations externalizing characters' psychological processes (Jaén Portillo, 2024; Trombeta & Cox, 2022). The analysis explores how cinematic language externalizes emotional meaning, identity negotiation, congruence, and incongruence through the dialogue, silence, facial expressions, spatial positioning, and visual contrast (Ghosh, 2022). Scene selection followed four criteria: (1) dialogues related to identity and belonging, (2) interpersonal turning points with Hae Sung or Arthur, (3) visually significant non-verbal sequences, and (4) important narrative moments such as migration, reunion, and emotional resolution. Seven sequences were selected and coded based on Rogers' concept of real self, ideal self, congruence, incongruence, and interpersonal reflection. Data were recorded using a structured observation sheet containing timestamps, dialogues, visual descriptions, and interpretive notes. To maintain interpretive consistency, selected scenes were repeatedly reviewed and compared throughout the analysis process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings using the theory of self-concept and interpersonal relationships from Carl Rogers. In Rogers' humanistic theory, self-concept is the way an individual understands themselves, their thoughts, feelings, and experiences - and includes the interactions between the real self and the ideal self (Yao & Kabir, 2023). When there is a match between these, congruence is achieved; when there is a mismatch, incongruence results in internal conflict and tension (Stephen, 2023).

In *Past Lives*, these psychological states are not explicitly described, but cinematically portrayed through the *mise en scène*, framing, and spatial arrangements of characters - making film language the privileged medium for conveying Nora's self-concept (Jaén Portillo, 2024; Ghosh, 2022). Relationships, as discussed in recent humanistic literature, serve as mirrors that facilitate self-reflection and facilitate a greater understanding of oneself (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Xiang et al., 2025). In film, these relationships are visually depicted through close-up shots of micro-expressions, eye-level framing that can signal intimacy or emotional distance, and the composition of space that can convey the emotional significance of a relationship (Ghosh, 2022). Through interaction with others, people can reflect on their emotions and become more aware of their identity.

In this analysis, the depiction of self-concept is captured through four film sequences, and interpersonal relationships and emotions are captured through three sequences. These sequences are analysed as units of film language, with reference to shot scale, camera angle, *mise en scène* and dialogue, as interrelational systems of representation (Trombeta & Cox, 2022; Jaén Portillo, 2024).

Representation of Nora's Self-Concept

Self-concept is an important concept in humanistic psychology, especially in the theory proposed by Carl Rogers. Self-concept is defined in Rogers' humanistic theory as a structured and dynamic set of perceptions of the self, including thoughts, feelings and experiences (Yao & Kabir, 2023). It is made up of two elements: the real self and the ideal self. When these are aligned it is termed congruence, but when they are misaligned, it is termed incongruence and produces an internal conflict (Stephen, 2023; Yao & Kabir, 2023). In this study, Nora's character shows how self-concept can change and develop over time due to life experiences and cultural shifts that can be seen through the data below.

Data 1: “You Dream in a Language I Can’t Understand”

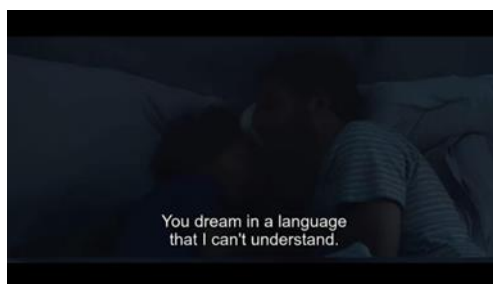


Figure 1. *Nora and Arthur’s First Emotional Encounter*

In this scene, Nora’s distance and incongruence are cinematically depicted, revealing an incongruence between her real self and her actual reality. In this scene (01:13:50-01:13:51) a medium close-up of Nora and Arthur in bed, bathed in low, soft light, communicates the couple’s sense of domesticity and warmth, which is offset by emotional distance. The framing at eye level renders the characters equal but the positioning, Arthur turned towards Nora and Nora looking elsewhere, visually represents their unequal relationship. Arthur says, “You dream in a language I can’t understand,” to which Nora responds with only a soft smile and silence. The setting enhances this dynamic: the bedroom, its low lighting and quiet, convey a subtle but obvious sense of enclosure, as if Nora’s soul cannot fit within the confines of her present life. Her silence, captured in a prolonged close-up on her face, cinematically depicts her persistence as Korean in an American moment. As Boora (2024) explains, filmic identity is not only spoken about but constructed cinematically, through framing, lighting, and composition.

Nora’s subtle micro-expression, a slight smile and subsequent silence, cinematically translates the emotional conflict she feels. The scene doesn’t cut away from her face, indicating that her inner world is the key focus of meaning. This lingering focus on her face, along with her spouse’s silence, implies that her Korean self, with all its linguistic, mnemonic and experiential associations, is an important but unspeakable component of her real self. Her present life with Arthur, in the cultural context of the US, is her ideal self, the life she has constructed. Yet, the framing and silence that reveal the lack of emotional understanding between them suggests that the two selves are yet to be integrated. Given that diasporic characters like Nora are often multi-dimensional, ambivalent selves rather than culturally-fixed identities, this condition is not unusual (Dhanalakshmi & Sobana, 2024; Strazzeri, 2024).

This state of being is understood through Rogers’ theory of self-concept, where incongruence occurs when there is a mismatch between someone’s real self and their experience (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Stephen, 2023). In film, this incongruence is not told, but depicted: the cinematic grammar of close-up framing, low-key performance, and the separation of characters within the same shot is used to encode Nora’s inner conflict (Jaén Portillo, 2024; Ghosh, 2022). Her real self, as defined by her Korean language and background, is not congruent with her current life, and this incongruence is shown through the silence, stillness and framing of the scene.

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Data 2: Childhood Separation (Na Young & Hae Sung)



Figure 2. *Childhood Separation*

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This scene cinematically signals the beginning of Nora's fragmented identity, where her real self is under threat of breakage from outside forces. In this scene (00:09:47-00:10:00) Na Young is presented as a figure in the middle of a wide scene, cinematically signaling her frailty and the weight of departure. The tones are muted and warm, yellows and browns, signaling the comfort and security of her Korean environment, the place she soon leaves. The naturalistic high-key lighting further evokes the purity and completeness of this moment, though the narrative is coming to a close. Of course, the composition of the space locates Na Young at the edges rather than in the centre of the frame, signaling cinematically her powerlessness in this situation. The *mise en scène*, the street, the proximity of Hae Sung, the ordinary domestic environment is a cinematic representation of everything that makes up her real self-prior to the moment of disruption. As Kashaka (2025) argues, cinematic elements like lighting, colour and composition are translated into a sensory experience in line with the film's psychological and narrative goals.

At this point, Nora's real self is still present, cinematically affirmed by the warm tone and a familiar *mise en scène* that envelops her Korean identity in a visual embrace. But the distance between Na Young and the camera in the wide shot visually marks the onset of an emotional distance as well as a geographical one. Once she is displaced and thrown into a new cultural context, a new set of rules

take shape in her developing identity. She begins to transform into Nora, a new identity that emerges in response to her American environment, while Na Young, her original identity, remains rooted in language, memory, and the warm-hued world of Korea that the film has created. The contrast in colour schemes between the Korean scenes of childhood and later scenes in New York in *Past Lives* also contributes to this duality: the film employs cooler colours in New York to represent cultural estrangement, in contrast to the warmer tones in Seoul. This cinematic temperature difference, between warm and cool, familiar and alien, opticalises this gap between her selves (Kashaka, 2025; Boora, 2024).

This state can be understood by Rogers' theory of self-concept, where incongruence occurs when the world starts to change an individual before they can accept or reject it (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Stephen, 2023). In *Past Lives*, this process is not spoken about, it is shot. The cinematography of the separation scene anticipates the onset of incongruence as a visual metaphor: the warm colour and comfortable composition of the *mise en scène* symbolise the real self, while the spatial alienation and the emotional distance of the wide shot anticipate the development of incongruence. This scene becomes the cinematic prologue of Nora's eventual identity crisis, as her real self (Na Young, in Korea) and her new self (Nora, in America) begin to diverge, a divergence that will be expressed primarily visually rather than verbally (Jaén Portillo, 2024; Ghosh, 2022).

This scene cinematically signals one of the first and crucial signs of Nora's identity transformation, where she herself proclaims a new identity. In this scene (00:09:47-00:10:00), Nora's delivery of the line "it's Nora now" is lacking in emotion, which is cinematically significant. She is presented in a medium shot, eye level to the camera, neither being haughty nor distressed, but being someone who is expressing a neutrality that they may only partially feel. The scene's *mise en scène* continues with its warm tones and Korean setting, with a camera angle that signals to the viewer that she is still Na Young, even as she says "it's Nora now". This disparity between her visual and verbal worlds is not coincidental, it is the film's cinematic encoding of the superficial nature of her name change - it is an adaptation, not a transformation.

Data 3: Self-Concept – Name Change (Na Young)



Figure 3. *Na Young's Name Change to Nora*

The changing of name from Na Young to Nora is not simply an individual act, it is a cinematic representation of the process of identity change that migrants undergo when adapting to a new culture. As Barua and Maheshwari (2025) discuss, migrants often reorganize their social identity and self-concept in response to language, social and cultural norms, which can create internal tension when the new identity does not fit the old identity. Nora's impassive, almost robotic delivery of "it's Nora now" cinematically translates as such: the name changes, but the warmth of the Korean *mise en scène* around her indicates that Na Young is still there. The film works against the audience's ability to accept the self as renamed; the codes tell us that it's not quite that simple. This is also emphasized by the spatial and tonal consistency between this scene and the previous separation scene, which is set in the same warm tones and location, visually tethering Nora's real self to her Korean world, even as she verbally distances herself from it.

This state can be explained by Rogers' theory of incongruence which occurs when a person's real self and ideal self are not congruent (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Stephen, 2023). Nora's given name is a means of creating an ideal self that fits her new living situation, but her real self, with its reliance on Korean language, memory and culture, remains. In terms of the film, *Past Lives* does not explain incongruence through dialogue but rather through the consistent visual representation of the Korean environment as safe, comfortable, and complete, even when Nora verbally distances herself from it. The film's language therefore serves as an important corrective to her words, to remind the audience, and Nora, that naming does not make one. According to Jaén Portillo (2024) and Ghosh (2022), cinematic language can convey psychological aspects that can be challenging to capture in dialogue, which makes this scene a notable illustration of that.

Data 4: Walking Alone Before Crying



Figure 4. *Walking Alone Before Crying*

This scene shows Nora's internal reflection, where she starts to accept her feelings and move toward a more balanced identity. In this scene (01:37:00–01:38:00), Nora is quiet and does not express her feelings through words. Instead, she reflects silently, and her facial expression shows that she is thinking deeply about her emotions. There is no dialogue, but the moment clearly focuses on her internal state. From a humanistic perspective, this indicates her movement toward a more integrated self, where her real self and present identity become more aligned, allowing her to achieve greater psychological balance.

This scene's cinematic representation of Nora's silence differs from her earlier ones. In earlier scenes, silence was figuratively represented through averted eyes, disciplined micro-facial gestures, and physical distance, cinematically signifying the emotional suppression and incongruence. In this scene, the film makes silence synonymous with resolution. In this sequence (01:37:00–01:38:00), Nora walks alone on a darkened, empty street at night with a medium long shot that leaves space around her body, allowing it to expand. The scene is backlit in cool and diffuse light, not the warm tones of her Korean home, or the stark extremes of emotional tension, a transitional mood that cinematically signposts the end of tension. She walks with her head high, in no rush, her face relaxed. The camera does not focus in for an intense close-up of an emotion, but observes from afar, as if to say that this process is Nora's alone. As López Gutiérrez and Arroyo Paniagua (2024) explain, silence in communication is not the same as absence; it can be a state of authenticity, completeness and depth, which language cannot fully express. It is a visual principle employed in the film: Nora's silence here is cinematic congruence.

This state is described by Rogers' concept of congruence, which refers to the psychological state where the real self and the experiences of the individual are in harmony, and which is associated with greater self-understanding, authenticity and well-being (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Xiang et al., 2023). In film, *Past Lives* depicts this shift towards congruence not verbally, but visually: Nora's unflinching pace, the blazing light, and the observational camera angles all communicate that she has stopped fighting with herself. While earlier scenes in the film used visual cues such as constrained facial expressions and close-ups to convey psychological conflict, this scene broadens the frame, suggesting

that the tension is subsiding. Nora's silence is not an expression of incongruence, but of congruence, as her past self (Na Young) and her present self (Nora) are no longer separated psychologically. As Kashaka (2025) explains, pacing, framing, and composition are all aspects of cinematic style that contribute to the emotional meaning of a film, in line with its narrative progress - here, a curve towards resolution.

Interpersonal Relationships and Emotional Reflection

Interpersonal relationships also play an important role in shaping self-understanding. In the humanistic psychology of Rogers, close relationships are the prime relational context in which people explore their own identity, process their feelings and gain a stronger sense of self (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Xiang et al., 2025). Modern research backs this up, Auger et al. (2024) show empirically that a person's felt understanding in their relationship results in a change to their self-concept, making the relationship more central to their identity. Through interaction with others, people can reflect on their emotions and become more aware of their identity. In this study, Nora's relationships with other characters, especially Hae Sung and Arthur, act as a mirror that helps her recognize her inner conflict, memories, and identity. Therefore, interpersonal relationships become an important factor in Nora's journey toward a more complete and balanced self-concept that can be seen through the data below.

This scene shows a deep emotional connection between Nora and Hae Sung, which helps Nora understand and accept her feelings more honestly. In this scene (01:32:46–01:33:35), Nora and Hae Sung walk together on a quiet street in New York after spending their last evening. When they arrive at the taxi stand, Hae Sung says, "In another life, maybe we would walk home side by side like every night." Nora smiles slightly while holding back tears and replies, "In this life too." After a long silence, Hae Sung leaves, and Nora stays still before finally crying. This was the moment when the strong bond between Nora and Hae Sung was not about romantic fulfillment, but rather understanding and acceptance of their history and different destinies.

Data 1: The Final Goodbye



Figure 5. *The Final Goodbye*

This moment shows that Nora and Hae Sung share a strong emotional bond that comes from their past, even if they are not together romantically. Their conversation and silence show that they understand each other deeply without needing many words. The silence itself is meaningful because it carries emotions that are hard to express. Nora's expression and her effort to hold back tears show that she is dealing with deep feelings inside. She is not only reacting to Hae Sung as a person, but also to what he represents about her past, her memories, and her old identity. This interaction illustrates how nostalgia, prompted by a person from the past, serves as a coping mechanism that reinforces people's reestablishment of their sense of self-continuity and identity when their sense of belonging has been threatened (Cao, 2024). When she finally cries, it shows that she has been holding these emotions for a long time. This moment becomes important for Nora because it helps her realize that her feelings are

not just about love, but also about identity, memory, and where she belongs. Through this interaction, she starts to understand herself better and accept the complexity of her emotions.

This state is understood according to Roger's person-centered theory, in which healthy relationships, marked by empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard, provide the context in which people can explore their sense of self (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Cavé et al., 2024). In this scene, Hae Sung acts like a mirror for Nora, helping her reflect on her true feelings. This process supports her movement toward congruence, where she begins to accept both her past and present identity. As a result, this moment contributes to Nora's personal growth and helps her develop a more complete and authentic self-concept.

Data 2: Video Call Scene (Nora & Hae Sung)

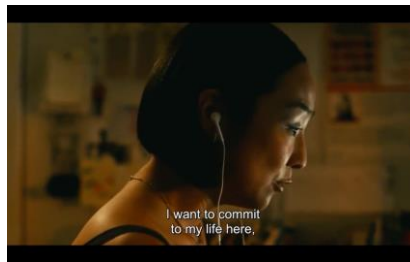


Figure 6. Video Call Scene (Nora & Hae Sung)

This dialogue shows Nora's emotional honesty and her inner conflict between her present life and her past identity. In this scene (00:32:47–00:33:00), Nora's words show that she is being honest about what she feels. Her interaction with Hae Sung brings out emotions that she may have hidden before. Through this conversation, it becomes clear that Nora is still emotionally connected to her past, even though she is already living a different life in the present. From a humanistic perspective, this illustrates the tension between her ideal self, represented by her intention to remain in her current life, and her real self, which is still connected to her past identity.

This moment shows that Nora is facing a conflict inside herself. On one side, she wants to stay committed to her current life and the choices she has made. On the other side, meeting Hae Sung brings back memories, feelings, and parts of her old identity that she cannot easily ignore. This means that her struggle is not only about another person, but also about herself. This mix of retaining an old identity and setting a new one for the present is a known characteristic of identity transitions, where the simultaneous presence of "old" and "new" selves leads to identity conflict, which is negotiated by the individual (Nielsen & Gish, 2023). Through Hae Sung, Nora is indirectly facing her past self again. Their interaction helps her realize that her feelings are still connected to her Korean identity, her memories, and her unfinished emotional experiences. This also shows that relationships can help a person understand themselves better. In Nora's case, Hae Sung becomes someone who reflects parts of herself that she may not fully see when she is alone. Because of this, Nora starts to reflect more deeply on what she truly feels and why those feelings are still important to her. Step by step, this process helps her understand herself in a more honest way.

This state is explained by Rogers' humanistic theory of self-concept, where the understanding of self is enhanced through significant relationships that provide reflection of our inner experiences and our sense of identity (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Cavé et al., 2024). In this scene, Hae Sung acts as a mirror for Nora, helping her recognize her true feelings, memories, and emotional connection to her past. This also demonstrates the tension between her ideal self, which wants to stay fully in the present, and her real self, which remains connected to her past identity. Therefore, this scene not only highlights Nora's emotional struggle but also illustrates how interpersonal relationships assist her in rebuilding and reshaping her self-concept, guiding her toward a more complete and balanced identity.

Data 3: Nora & Arthur – Emotional Conversation



Figure 7. *Nora & Arthur Emotional Conversation*

This scene shows a deeper emotional reflection, where Nora starts to understand her feelings more clearly with the help of her relationship with Arthur. In this scene (01:06:35–01:07:23), Arthur asks Nora, “Are you attracted to him?” Nora answers, “He was just a kid in my head for such a long time, and then he was just an image on my laptop, and now he is a physical person. It’s really intense, but I don’t think that’s an attraction. I just missed him a lot. I think I missed Seoul.” This conversation shows that Nora is trying to explain her feelings honestly.

Nora’s answer shows that her feelings are not simply about romantic attraction. Instead, they are connected to her memories, her past, and her identity. When she says she “missed Seoul,” it means that what she feels is not only about Hae Sung, but also about her past life, her culture, and her old self as Na Young. This longing for Seoul functions as a form of nostalgia that goes beyond sentimentality, it serves as a psychological mechanism through which Nora reconstructs her sense of self-continuity across time and cultural displacement (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023). In this case, Hae Sung becomes a symbol of her past identity. At the same time, the way Nora explains her feelings shows that she is trying to understand herself maturely and thoughtfully. She does not avoid her feelings, but she reflects on them carefully. This shows that she is becoming more aware of her emotions and learning how to accept them. Her calm tone also indicates that she is not confused anymore, but starting to gain clarity about what she really feels. This moment becomes important because it shows her growth, from emotional confusion to better self-understanding.

This state can be understood according to Rogers’ self-concept theory that suggests people come to know themselves better through their interactions with others (Yao & Kabir, 2023; Stephen, 2023). In this scene, Arthur acts as a supportive figure who gives Nora space to express and reflect on her feelings. His question helps Nora think more deeply about her emotions. This interaction shows that relationships can work like a mirror, helping someone see their true feelings more clearly. As a result, Nora begins to understand that her emotions are not only about love, but also about identity, memory, and belonging. This process helps her move toward a more complete and balanced self-concept. It shows how interpersonal relationships can support emotional reflection and help someone gain a deeper and more complete understanding of themselves.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the self-concept of Nora’s in *Past Lives* (2023) is shown to be a cinematically constructed product, the interaction between the narration and visual elements, such as *mise en scene*, framing, spatial composition, angles of the camera and silence. The results indicate that Nora’s identity is created in the conflict between her real self and her ideal self in terms of Carl Rogers’ humanistic theory, which she facilitated in her Korean childhood identity (Na Young), and her ideal self (American life). The film uses the cinematic language to depict Nora’s feelings of incongruence, self-reflection and eventual psychological congruence.

The results additionally indicate that, besides psychological factors, cultural aspects of migration, memory and diasporic identity have an impact on Nora's self-concept. Her relationships with Hae Sung and Arthur are reflective devices which allow her to see everything that is unresolved, everything that's foreign, and everything that's been fragmented about herself, resulting in her gaining a sense of self-understanding and self-acceptance. Overall, this study highlights the capacity of cinematic language to represent complex psychological processes and identity formation within a cross-cultural context. Future research may apply similar approaches to other diasporic films to further explore the relationship between self-concept, culture, and identity negotiation in transnational settings.

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