The Paradoxical Reality of Canadian Multiculturalism, as Narrated by 1.5-Generation Korean Immigrants

La réalité paradoxale du multiculturalisme canadien, racontée par des immigrants coréens de génération 1,5

Lindsey Paek
The Paradoxical Reality of Canadian Multiculturalism, as Narrated by 1.5-Generation Korean Immigrants

Lindsey PAEK, Université Bordeaux Montaigne / École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay

This paper investigates the current state of Canadian multiculturalism, both as an ideology and lived reality, as perceived among the sample of ten 1.5-generation Korean immigrants. The analysis of the findings from individual semi-structured interviews reveals multiple paradoxes. Across the narratives, the multiculturalist ideology is demonstrated as a unifying force promoting diversity and inclusiveness, yet often falling short in forging a strong Canadian identity. The lived experiences highlight coexistence within Canadian society and the resulting in-group pride in relation to national identity, while also illustrating social divisions shaped by racial discrimination and identity struggles. As a result, the multicultural identity imagined in the minds of the participants display both positive and negative effects on their national identification. Despite limitations, these insights emphasize the need to address these paradoxes, fostering dialogues for a more resilient multicultural and hybrid Canadian identity.

Multiculturalism, a pivotal aspect of Canadian identity, has been a subject of extensive discourse since the inception of the Multiculturalism Policy in the 1970s. It stands as a defining feature of contemporary Canadian identity, encompassing both political and sociocultural ideology and reality (DEWING and BROSSEAU 2009; PAEK 2023; STATISTICS CANADA 2017). However, the multifaceted nature of multiculturalism has sparked debates on its implications for Canada’s nationality, resulting in consensus among scholars that, while the nation has developed what can be described as a unique national identity based on multiculturalism, it has not been able to attain a strong national identity (HOWARD-HASSMANN 1999; TAYLOR 2007; WAYLAND 1998). Amidst discussions, the juxtaposition of embracing multiculturalism and pursuing the construction of a more unified national identity demonstrates the nuanced dynamics that continue to shape Canada’s societal fabric.
The term *multiculturalism* is subject to diverse interpretations, contingent upon the contextual lens and perspectives of those using the term. Previous studies stand as evidence: firstly, from a descriptive/demographic standpoint, multiculturalism signifies the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity within a given population (RATTANSI 2011); secondly, from a philosophical/psychological perspective, it denotes the appreciation of diversity and the moral imperative to recognize various cultures within the framework of social justice (BENHABIB 2002). Lastly, in its institutional/political sense, multiculturalism refers to the active role of the state in legally recognizing and positively accommodating various minority cultures, religions, and languages (KYMLICKA 1998). These diverse interpretations collectively encompass demographic realities, sociological ideals, and governmental policies associated with the term (ARASARATNAM, 2013; DEWING and BROSSEAU, 2009).

There are limited amounts of qualitative studies that focus on examining how multiculturalism is lived and perceived by Canadians. How do Canadians view multiculturalism, and why? How does it shape their imagination of national identity and affect their sense of national identification? To help filling this gap, this paper presents some of the findings from individual interviews conducted with 1.5-generation Korean immigrants in Toronto, which were aimed at exploring the participants’ identity journeys and outcomes. The interview questions (see below) inquired into diverse experiences and perceptions of the individuals, across different spheres of life, concerning ethnic and national identities as both cultural and social constructs. This paper will discuss how multiculturalism affects the conception of national identity and national identification among the sample. The results will shed light on the lived reality and resulting perceptions of the current state of multiculturalism, which can be best described as paradoxical.

**Literature Review**

In Canada, official multiculturalism originated as a pragmatic political initiative in 1971. Over time, it has transformed into a subject of contention and discussion in both academic and public discourse. In fact, the original Multiculturalism Policy has undergone significant shifts in focus, reflecting the state’s commitment to adapting to changing social dynamics. Simultaneously, it has generated a continuous array of public discourse (BERRY 2013). Initially, the emphasis was primarily placed on encouraging and supporting cultural diversity among the population to form a multicultural Canadian identity (LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES OF CANADA 1971, 8545). However, into the 1990s, there was a noticeable shift towards prioritizing equity and social inclusion, ultimately promoting shared citizenship (BERRY 2013; KUNZ and
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SYKES, 2007). Then, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the policy expanded to further promote equitable participation of citizens, offering equal opportunities for all, irrespective of their cultural background. By 2000s, civic integration became a central theme, encouraging newcomers to engage in Canadian civic life. Moreover, a broader emphasis on inclusiveness and integration was aimed at building a cohesive multicultural Canadian identity (BERRY 2013; FLERAS 2009). Following this period, the 2010s saw a recognition of the importance of positive intergroup relations. This recognition underscored the need to delicately balance cultural security among different groups, ensuring that each community feels safeguarded in preserving its unique identity, while mutual respect, understanding, and cooperative interactions among the diverse cultural entities are promoted. This perception appears to continuously shape the multiculturalist vision of Canada (BERRY 2013; BLOEMRAAD 2023; SAFDAR, CHAHAR MAHALI, and SCOTT 2023). Thus, the emphasis of the State in utilizing multiculturalism in nation-building appears to have evolved from promoting a shared multicultural identity to promoting integrated identity among its people, based on the principles of citizenship.

As mentioned earlier, alongside the shifts observed in the multiculturalism policies and demography of Canada, discussions and debates have been continuous. In fact, the overheated nature of the multiculturalism debate has been criticized, as it was identified as a factor that stands in the way of effective discussions on multiculturalism in Canada (RYAN 2010). On the one hand, the policy used to be met with skepticism, with claims that it was mere rhetoric and a tool for cultural appropriation and garnering ethnic votes (BISSOONDATH 1994; WAYLAND 1997, 48). The notion of multiculturalism was moreover linked to ethnic separatism and the necessity to embrace values that diverge from national values, potentially resulting in the fragmentation and ghettoization of both the society and nation. Simultaneously, minority groups perceived the ideals projected by the policy as neglectful of their immediate needs, including those faced by Aboriginals and French Canadians (WAYLAND 1997; BOUCHARD 2011; ABU-LABAN and NATH, 518). Lastly, faced with issues related to power dynamics of contexts based on settler-colonialism, heteropatriarchy, race/ethnicity, and sexualities, the distinction between inclusion and exclusion, as well as the effect of inclusion that are projected by multiculturalism policies, have been put into question (ABU-LABAN and NATH, 2020, 523).

On the other hand, several studies have demonstrated that the critics’ arguments against multiculturalism tend to lack empirical evidence, and that, in contrary, the Multiculturalism Policy helps facilitating integration of immigrants
As well, despite its flaws, multiculturalism has increasingly been perceived as a key component of Canada’s nation-building process and identity, shaping national culture and pride (M. Adams 2021; Bloemraad 2023; The Environics Institute 2015, 2; Kymlicka 2010, 38). In public discourse, Canadian multiculturalism generally garners favourable views, linked to its perceived role in fostering an improved cultural understanding within society (M. Adams 2021; May 2021). In fact, there has been a growing level of support of the public for Canadian multiculturalism over the years. For instance, the results from the 2015 Focus Canada survey indicated that, in contrast to 1997, a higher percentage of the public considered multiculturalism as one of the most important national symbols of Canada (Environics Institute 2015).

Moreover, utilizing discourse analysis of popular books, media coverage, and parliamentary debates, Phil Ryan (2010) contended that Canadian multiculturalism is more reasonable and has more support than the rhetoric created by the media and parliamentarians. While acknowledging ambiguity as an inherent flaw of the notion of multiculturalism, he emphasized the importance of clarifying what multiculturalism means and can achieve in the future. Likewise, Paul May’s (2021) analysis of the Canadian public debate on multiculturalism, based on how the topic was portrayed in nine Canadian daily newspapers between 2010 and 2020, reflected Canadians’ support of multiculturalism. Despite a distinct ideological divide which his study uncovered, there did not seem to be a substantial rejection of multiculturalism in Canada, with a considerable portion of the press supporting it.

Furthermore, Will Kymlicka (1998) explored the inherent complexities of ethnocultural relationships that fabricated multicultural Canadian society, differentiating between the experiences of ethnic groups and national minorities. He commended Canada’s efforts to integrate minority groups, particularly through the Multiculturalism Policy, and pointed out a persistent reluctance of Canadians to learn from their own successes (i.e. multiculturalism) and failures (i.e. minority nationalism) – which he attributed to individuals’ perception of ethnocultural politics as irrational and unpredictable. In addition, Kymlicka (1998) outlined clear and predictable limits on the types of demands made by both immigrant ethnic groups and national minorities; in turn, he advocated for a pragmatic and flexible approach to conflict resolution within these constraints. The need to understand stable cores of the demands and adopt a nuanced perspective to be able to effectively address conflicts was highlighted.

At the level of individuals, studies that have examined personal narratives regarding perceptions of self and others within multicultural contexts
have often employed approaches rooted in theories related to acculturation, social identity and categorization, as well as ethnic and national identities (CEBOTARI 2009; OAKES et al. 1991; PHINNEY et al. 2002; TAJFEL and TURNER 2004). Moreover, empirical studies that have inquired into lived experiences of Canadian multiculturalism tend to consider a diverse range of factors, such as family and communities, media exposure, and perceived notions of race and religion (CUI 2011; JAMAL et al. 2023; TASTSOGLOU and PETRINIOI 2011). However, studies aiming to explore individuals’ experiences and perceptions of Canadian multiculturalism in a comprehensive manner appear limited.

To further contextualize the sample of the study, the findings of previous Korean immigrant literature can be taken into account. Predominantly voluntary migrants seeking improved opportunities in various domains, including employment, politics, or religious practices (OGBU and SIMONS 1998), Furthermore, it has been reported characterized as education migrants, driven by the desire for better educational prospects for their children (LEE and JOHNSTONE 2014; PAEK, 2023). This emphasis on children’s English education has been highlighted in numerous studies (CHO 2017; PAEK 2023; I.-J. YOON 2012). Similar to other immigrant groups, Korean immigrants and their children exhibit varying degrees of attachment to their heritage culture and integration into the host society (WU et al. 2012). This holds true for both 1.5 and second generations, whose levels of bilingualism, biculturalism, and social integration are shaped in patterns correlated with generations (DANICO 2004; JEON 2012; YOO and KIM 2014). In particular, the identity journeys and outcomes of 1.5-generation immigrants have been described as inherently heterogeneous, largely shaped by their arrival age in the host country and peer networks (DANICO 2004). Across generations, Korean immigrants tend to maintain a robust ethnic identity while adapting to mainstream culture and opportunity structures (I.-J. YOON 2012, 47).

Concerning the general profile of Korean immigrants in Canada, some of the main traits include the community being the seventh-largest non-European ethnic group in the country, experiencing rapid growth compared to the overall Canadian population (STATISTICS CANADA 2016). According to 2021 census data (STATISTICS CANADA 2021), there are 202,555 Canadians of Korean origin, representing roughly 5% of the total Canadian population. Approximately

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1 Although defining the age criteria of the 1.5 generation is subject to varied opinions among scholars, consensus holds that the 1.5-generation individuals are those who arrive in the host country during formative years with lived memories of their homeland (DANICO, 2004; HURH, 1990; RUMBAUT, 2004).
93% are of single Korean origin, over 66% citizens (21.8% by birth; 44.3% by naturalization), predominantly settled in urban centres, especially Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary. Linguistically, around 90% of all Canadians of Korean origin whose mother tongue is Korean speak at least one official language—mostly English—and almost 62% speak Korean at home. Religiously, over 80% are Christian, particularly Protestant/non-Catholic. Furthermore, Korean Canadians exhibit higher educational attainment than the national average (70.2% vs. 57.2% with a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree), although their unemployment rate tends to be higher than that of the total visible minority groups (10.7% vs. 6.6%), as well as of the rest of the population (10.7% vs. 5.9%). Faced with challenges and discrimination, Korean immigrants seek upward mobility in the host country by pursuing independent work to navigate acculturation challenges and settling in areas with good schools for their children (I.-J. YOON 2012, 46-47). Recent census data suggest improving socio-economic conditions for the Korean Canadian population over time (STATISTICS CANADA 2011; STATISTICS CANADA 2021).

Methodology and Sample

The data presented in this paper are drawn from ten one-on-one interviews conducted between October 2021 and January 2022 as part of Lindsey Paek’s doctoral dissertation (2023). The research had a twofold objective: first, to explore various ties and the resulting in- and out-group perceptions that 1.5-generation Korean immigrants form in relation to ethnic/national, cultural/social, and individual/group identities; and second, to examine how these factors influence their self-identification (i.e. Korean, Canadian, and Korean Canadian). The interview questions focus on the life histories and personal narratives of the individuals.

The qualitative method used to gather data was individual semi-structured life history interviews, an approach that enables researchers to explore each participant’s life in depth (W. C. ADAMS 2015; ATKINSON 1998). Although it could be argued that life histories should not be regarded as objective realities, many scholars assert that their subjective representation of reality remains valuable for better understanding and representing societies (BERTAUX and KOHLI 1984; COLE and KNOWLES 2001; GOODSON and SIKES 2001). Within this framework, an individual participant is considered as a lens that illuminates broader social and societal contexts (COLE and KNOWLES 2001, 12). In addition, narratives were integrated into the interview content, not only to avoid limiting the data to past events, but also to encompass the individuals’ perceptions of diverse aspects of their lives (LABOV 1981, as cited in DE FINA and TSENG 2007, 381).
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To participate in the interview, all of the following criteria had to apply
to an individual: (a) s/he was born in Korea; (b) his/her parents are both of Korean
origin; (c) s/he immigrated to Canada during childhood, before age 13; (d) s/he
was residing in Toronto at the time of the interviews; (e) s/he had to be at least 18
years of age; and (f) s/he identifies him/herself as a 1.5-generation immigrant. In
the information notice of the questionnaire survey, which had previously been
conducted as part of the dissertation, the researcher indicated the recruitment of
1.5-generation immigrants to participate in one-one-one interviews. Four of the
researcher’s personal contacts agreed to participate, and two individuals contacted
the researcher voluntarily. The remaining participants were recruited through
snowball sampling, with a confirmed participant directing the researcher to others
interested in taking part in the interview. Due to the ongoing pandemic at the time
and the distance between the researcher in France and the informants in Canada,
the interviews took place online on Zoom.

In average, each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, with follow-
up interviews, which, if necessary, lasted typically between 10 and 20 minutes.
Some of the questions on which this paper is based include:

● Have you experienced any racism/discrimination in Canada? How do you
  think they have affected you?

● What does multiculturalism mean for you? Do you think multiculturalism is
  working in Canada?

● In your opinion, what does it mean to be Canadian?

● Do you consider yourself integrated into the Canadian society?

● Are you happy with your life in Canada?

● How would you identify yourself? Korean, Canadian, or Korean Canadian?
  Why?

● How confident do you feel in your identity?

● How would you say your sense of identity has evolved throughout your life?

Ten 1.5-generation Korean immigrants residing in Toronto comprised
the sample of this study, consisting of six female and four male participants. All
participants were Canadian citizens in later adulthood, with an average age of
29.7 (ranging from 28 to 38 years). They had been long-term residents in Canada
for an average of 20.8 years. As well, they had completed post-secondary education and were employed full-time. Table 1 presents their profile traits.

Table 1 – Participants’ profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Citizenship status</th>
<th>Age at the time of immigration</th>
<th>Length of residence in Toronto</th>
<th>Highest level of education attained</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor of Medical Science</td>
<td>Software developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor of Fine Arts, Bachelor of Education</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts (Honours)</td>
<td>SEO account supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>College, Fashion Techniques and Design</td>
<td>Admin assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jisoo</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts</td>
<td>Flight attendant/Groomer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Bachelor of Art and Design</td>
<td>Customer service agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bachelor of Commerce</td>
<td>Real estate agent/part-time English tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Master of Architecture</td>
<td>Architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts</td>
<td>SEO associate account manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All interviews were transcribed semi-verbatim, and filler words and grammatical errors were left unedited. Any information that could be used to identify participants was removed, including their names, which were replaced.
with pseudonyms. In the case of interviews conducted in English, the audio transcription function for cloud recordings on Zoom facilitated the transcription process. For those conducted in Korean, transcriptions were done from scratch, and responses that were selected for quoting were translated into English.

The transcribed data were coded and grouped together into themes. The themes were numerous: (1) schooling experiences; (2) family; (3) ethnic community; (4) friend groups; (5) dating/marriage; (6) the Internet; (7) interest in current affairs and voting; (8) the media and pop culture; (9) first-hand experiences of the homeland; (10) ethnic and mainstream language; (11) perceived discrimination and racism; (12) multiculturalism; (13) defining Canadianness; (14) connection with peers within Canadian society; (15) integration within Canadian society; (16) feeling at home; (17) ethnic and national pride; (18) and self-identification. For each theme, categories – and sometimes sub-categories – added to provide further exemplary descriptors of each pattern (e.g., theme: learning English in school categories: positive experiences; negative experiences; vague memories etc.). The parts of transcribed data were carefully selected and reviewed for citation, with the aim of providing segments of the raw data. The findings discussed in this article are associated with themes 11-18.

Findings and Discussion

The overall findings showed that the participants understood multiculturalism as both a cultural and political ideology, as well as a socio-demographic reality. Moreover, their perception of the state of Canadian multiculturalism appeared varied and mixed. It is evident that the individuals’ imagination of Canadianness is significantly influenced by how they view multiculturalism.

A. Multiculturalism as a Cultural and Political Ideology

Most participants automatically acquired Canadian citizenship as dependents on their parents’ application. James, the only participant who recently became a naturalized citizen, recalled what he had studied for the citizenship test – which requires an understanding of multiculturalism as an important national value, promoted and upheld by the State. He expressed that “to be Canadian is [to] embrace multiculturalism, so respecting other cultures,” which he believes is “the core value of being Canadian.” Indeed, multiculturalism is cited as one of the fundamental freedoms and rights guaranteed in the Charter, listed in the study
guide for Canadian citizenship applicants. The following is the excerpt, pulled from the guide:

Multiculturalism—A fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity. Canadians celebrate the gift of one another’s presence and work hard to respect pluralism and live in harmony. (IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP CANADA 2021, 8)

The following narratives are aligned with James’ acknowledgement of multiculturalism as a crucial facet of Canada’s cultural and political identity, positively contributing to national pride:

Embracing diversity, like, yeah. And recognizing that people are different, cultures are different. (Ben)

[…] like the US is the melting pot and Canada is a mosaic. And the reason why it’s mosaic is because every ethnicity keeps intact their cultural interests and values and qualities. But then, they’re also part of the larger picture, right? So a mosaic culture. (William)

I think people, because of that, are a lot more open, a lot more accepting. […] And I personally feel like Canada is a pretty peaceful place to live in […] Canadians are more open or at least tolerant toward differences. (Jacob)

Canadian… Someone who is part of a very diverse population, diverse society, who understands different cultural differences, who knows how to get along with people from different backgrounds, […]. And just, in general, we are nice. (Nora)

We’ve already become more multicultural, compared to like 20 years ago, right? So I think that’s great, because more people become more open-minded, then. […] Ah, I think I really like that I’m Canadian, because I like Canada. (Victoria)

Embracing differences and accepting them, things like that, I think. Not alienating. […] I feel proud as a Canadian… (Jisoo)

[…] being very, very polite and kind to strangers, being respectful, being open-minded to different cultures… […] I’m proud that we are represented as multicultural and accepting, open-minded toward other races and religions. (Lucy)
As can be observed in the narratives above, the participants described multiculturalism as a set of ideals centred around embracing diversity—highlighting tolerance for differences, as well as inclusiveness. Furthermore, they perceived multiculturalism as both a cultural and political ideology, contributing to the cultivation of open-mindedness among individuals and society. This perception, in turn, facilitated a sense of appreciation of Canadian identity that they feel. Hence, consistent to previous literature, the individuals in this study appear to hold favourable perspectives on multiculturalism, overall. Essentially, as a cultural and political ideology, multiculturalism seems to effectively convey its values among the sample.

Nonetheless, embracing multiculturalist ideals did not seem sufficient for some participants to be able to describe a distinct cultural and political identity of Canada with confidence. Additionally, the dominant influence of American media and pop culture made it challenging for them to envision a distinct cultural identity of Canada based on its own media and pop culture products. In such cases, national pride was negatively affected.

About Canada, frankly, everything’s American. […] Even people like Justin Bieber, and, who is it, Avril Lavigne, people like that. But then, there’s like nothing about them that you look at and think, ‘Oh, they’re Canadians,’ no? (Harin)

[…] I think there have been like pop cultural phenomenon that have put Toronto, Canada, more on the map—like the Raptors or like Drake. Even then, I just don’t feel there’s any, anything special about Canada. […] And Canada doesn’t do anything as a country, I feel like, to develop the sense of nationality in its citizens the way America does. Like Canada doesn’t do anything to nurture that sense of national pride in anyone, because we so believe in this mosaic multiculturalism, not that melting pot model or whatever it’s called. (Kelly)

[…] Canada is, we’re a bit of everything, but not really. Even the food, we have every cuisine, […] but we don’t necessarily have our own food other than like poutine. […] But again, we just don’t have much food that we can actually say it’s Canadian. […] I mean, like Justin Bieber and Drake, I feel like people don’t even know that they’re Canadians—unless you’re Canadian and that’s how you know. […] In fact, I can’t even recall off the top of my head just one sort of Canadian media or entertainment that I can really say I was ever really into. (Jacob)
These reflections illustrate the difficulties associated with identity formation in the context of Canada’s multicultural ethos and the overshadowing influence of American culture. In line with the findings, previous literature has identified the cultural similarities between the US and Canada as one of the causes of the blurred distinction between Canadian, American, or North American identity – on cultural, economic, and political levels (GRANT 1997). Furthermore, it has been reported that the prevalence of American influence has cast a significant shadow over the Canadian media landscape (MEISEL 1986; K. YOON 2017). The narratives above affirm this perspective and suggest that multiculturalism remains one of the essential identifiers that individuals use when defining Canadian culture.

However, Canadian popular media may not be effectively utilizing multiculturalism as a means to promote Canadian identity. In fact, the weak Canadian media identity can largely be attributed to the noticeable lack of diversity in Canadian media content, resulting in an overlap between the identities of Canadian media and those of its American counterpart. Simultaneously, this lack of diversity may be contributing to the failure of public broadcast media to satisfy migrant populations in Canada (K. YOON 2017). The absence of diversity is evident in statistics: between 2014 and 2016, only 47 out of 3,206 television contracts were awarded to women of colour, with only 22 granted to Indigenous women (GOLICK and DANIELS 2019). The inherent cultural parallels that result between Canada and the United States inevitably lead to the overshadowing of American media, as well as a challenge in fostering a distinctive Canadian media identity that resonates with its diverse population.

The overall narratives of the participants provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of multiculturalism as a concurrent political and cultural ideology within the Canadian milieu. Although the notion of multiculturalism as a foundational tenet of nation-building of Canada appears to be firmly established, its ramifications on constructing a coherent national identity on both cultural and social fronts seem to be imbued with intricate complexities. Thus, the crucial role that multiculturalism plays in fostering inclusiveness and cultivating open-mindedness and tolerance cannot be overlooked, along with its constraints in harmonizing diverse cultural strands into a distinct singular identity fabric.

B. Multiculturalism as a Demographic and Social Reality

Furthermore, the findings highlight the salience of multiculturalism as both a demographic and social reality in the minds of the sample. Notably, Toronto emerged as a recurrent reference, exemplifying a Canadian society distinguished by the coexistence of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.
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Multiculturalism itself, [...] is just the state that we are living in. [...] And so I think we live in a multicultural society just as a technicality: we live with many people from many different countries, especially here in Toronto. (Kelly)

At least, in Toronto, you can get pretty good food now from any kind of cuisine. (Jacob)

Um, I’m sure not all of Canada is very multicultural. Toronto is like the biggest city, so obviously, it’s a little different. It’s a land of immigrants, basically: everyone comes from somewhere from another part of the world. Even if they’re, you know, Canadian, their ancestors like obviously are from somewhere else, right? (Nora)

In the grand scheme of things, I think there’s definitely ups and downs, and I think it varies a lot by region. Like I said, I think Toronto is, in essence, at the forefront of it. They’d get like top marks for kind of multiculturalism. Whereas like some small town in northern Ontario would just be full of like older, six-, seven-generation Canadians—very simple, like European descent, mostly. (Ben)

Despite the multicultural context of Canadian society, narratives of racial discrimination – whether perceived or personally experienced – were common, albeit often to limited extents. Many participants recalled incidents of discrimination from childhood, primarily in the form of micro-aggressions. For instance, non-Korean peers made remarks such as “you’re really pretty/good looking for an Asian,” imitated the way Asian languages sound, and disregarded their Korean identity by mislabelling them as Chinese and dismissing any corrections.

Additionally, some participants discussed their experiences, encompassing both everyday situations and professional contexts. Harin and Victoria detected subtle forms of discrimination which, despite their discreet nature, were evident in the differential treatment they receive compared to White individuals.

When they see that you’re Asian, and, immediately, they’re not nice, whereas, when it’s White people, they are much nicer, and they get chatty… things like that? The kinds of stuff that are just felt without anything being said, you know? [...] These days, they don’t outrightly discriminate because that’s taboo. (Harin)
I think this thought is rooted in my mind. Because I am Asian, Korean, and my English isn’t perfect, not like the White… So, rather than discriminating in an outright manner, they treat you in a different way. (Victoria)

The ensuing narratives shed light on how some participants perceive discrimination within the realm of work:

[…] we are faced with career barriers… Like even the type of industry we can work in? […] Because we don’t have roots here. Our parents and their friends, it’s limited, what they can do. And we grew up witnessing that, so you’re also kind of limited. So what you’ve experienced indirectly, as well as directly. (Victoria)

Although it wasn’t any intentional things that I was experiencing from people… […] it was very obvious how underprivileged I am as an Asian person in the creative industry. […] Every time I go on a business kind of a golf outing, of course, in golf, it’s like predominantly White, […]. (William)

Nora also shared the difficulties she experienced in receiving callbacks during a job search. Inspired by a study highlighting biases in hiring processes based on names of applicants, particularly favouring those with more Canadian-sounding names, she decided to adopt an English name and subsequently noticed an increase in callbacks.

Furthermore, perceived incidents of racial discrimination were emphasized in the narratives revolving around the pandemic. While travelling in Vancouver, Lucy and her boyfriend were yelled at by a homeless person on the street, and, in downtown Toronto, Kelly and her husband were verbally abused by a White man. As for Victoria, she felt significantly concerned about Asian hate crimes reported in the media during the pandemic. As a precaution, she refrained from walking outside alone and opted to travel by car “door-to-door” for several months.

The White Canadian stereotype seemed to influence the participants’ perception of Canadians and/or the mainstream social group within Canadian society to varying degrees. In fact, seven out of ten participants felt that the White race is closely associated with the Canadian identity. Some drew links between White Canadians and mainstream cultural interests that dictate group membership.
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[...] they [White Canadians] all grew up with cottages or playing hockey, or, you know, following the Jays, Raptors, and blah blah blah… And all that stuff that I can’t connect with. They would always feel a little bit awkward about asking me about Asian type of questions. [...] The level of connectivity is not there, the depth of connectivity. So it’s not as easy to do business. (William)

[...] I feel like there are certain values, hobbies, interests that they commonly have that I don’t. But then, I have friends who are also non-Korean origin. So I guess here, I’m talking about, again, White Canadians who I consider like the mainstream, or Canadian Canadians. [...] like the Blue Jays and the Raptors, there are still a couple of things for sure that are rooted to Canada. (Jacob)

Like, I’ve never been to a cottage before, and none of my friends have a cottage, unfortunately. Like, obviously, I consider myself Canadian, but I don’t think I have the same like social tendencies. [...] when I think of like mainstream social circle, I can’t help but think of like actual White Canadians. (Nora)

William articulated the difficulty in connecting with White Canadians due to differences in upbringing and interests such as cottages, hockey, and sports affiliations. Jacob echoed this statement, pointing out distinctions in values and interests between himself and what he refers to as mainstream Canadian Canadians. Nora, similarly, expressed a sense of cultural disconnection, noting the absence of shared experiences like cottage visits in her social circle. Through these narratives, the participants expressed limited levels of connectivity they face with what they perceive as mainstream Canadian culture and social groups, revealing a gap in shared experiences within diverse Canadian contexts.

Moreover, what stands out from the findings is that many participants seem to view race—closely associated with culture—as a significant factor contributing to social divisions, creating an us-versus-them dynamic. In other words, in spite of multiculturalist ideology, cultural barriers are likely to restrict the social integration of immigrants from visible minority backgrounds into mainstream society. It is also worth noting that, when faced with sociocultural barriers, the need for a sense of belonging often strengthens in-group identities based on ethnicity and race (TAJFEL and TURNER 2004). Hence, the intrinsic imperfections of the social reality of multiculturalism are highlighted.
Nevertheless, multiculturalism appears to have an overall positive impact on the psychological well-being of the participants, who navigate life as visible minorities within Canadian society. When discussing racism, it serves as a useful means for them to distinguish Canada positively from other places, such as the US and Europe (“You go to Europe, it’s bad in Europe”—Harin; “[...] in places other than Manhattan, a bit like in the countryside [...] I can feel the stares”—Jisoo). In particular, some participants emphasized that Toronto is exceptionally safe, “shielded” by multiculturalism (“Living in Toronto, I’ve never experienced any hate, especially in the last two years with covid. [...] I’ve seen lots of videos of like Asians talking about it [...]”—Nora; “It feels like I have been more shielded from experiencing any overt racism just from living here [...]”—Ben). The “It’s better here” narrative also stemmed from the participants’ perception of the sociodemographic reality of multiculturalism, shaped by their travel and/or work experiences, as well as media exposure. Therefore, multiculturalism seems to help them cope with perceived racial discrimination. The participants’ tendency of differentiating us (Asian Canadians) from them (e.g. Asian Americans) could be interpreted as a strategy to bolster self-esteem and reinforce the in-group identity—thus positively affecting one’s sense of national pride (DE HOOGE and VAN OSCH 2021).

As well, the narratives typically illustrate mixed sentiments and perspectives regarding the current state of multiculturalism as a social reality. On the one hand, many participants held a positive outlook on Canada’s progress as a multicultural society and its adeptness in championing multiculturalism as both a governmental policy and cultural identity. On the other hand, some voiced concerns about the rise of social divisions and the formation of insular, “cliquey” social groups that inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes.

And I think people cluster more and more between themselves... your ethnicity. [...] I think people might not see some groups positively, kind of, think they are too cliquey... Some bad perceptions, probably? (Victoria)

And if it’s [multiculturalism] working... I don’t know. Because, recently, I feel like there are times we have so much diversity and we kind of have to tolerate it. And there are some maybe negative sides to it. [...] sometimes, it’s not harmonious—like, there could be clashes, violence, fights... because, like, everybody is here. Like, I live downtown near Dundas Square, and when I go out, I see in one corner this guy who’s like, ‘Believe in Jesus Christ,’ and in this other corner, this guy handing out Quran... (Lucy)
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Victoria observed a trend of people clustering within their ethnic communities, raising concerns about potential negative perceptions associated with such groups. Meanwhile, Lucy expressed a nuanced view on the extent and effectiveness of multiculturalism, noting instances where the sheer diversity appeared to prevail in the form of disharmony rather than coexistence. These observations demonstrate the complexities involved in managing diversity and highlight the need for an honest evaluation of the impact of multiculturalism on societal harmony and cohesion.

The notions of ethnic separatism and cultural clash within multicultural Canadian society are not new subjects of discussion, as they frequently make up arguments put forth by critics of the Multiculturalism Policy. These critics contend that multiculturalism, as a national culture and value framework, can lead to division rather than unity among people, due to its fundamental rejection of universal values outside of multiculturalist ideals that promote cohesion. Furthermore, the unequal levels of progress of different cultures in advocating for human rights underscore the imperfections of multiculturalism as an ideology (KYMLICKA 2010, 7; KYMLICKA 1998; SCALCĂU 2020, 57). Therefore, according to the critics, realization of multiculturalism as a societal construct is implausible.

Moreover, some narratives addressed an aspect of Canadian society which seemed to be related to the way multiculturalism is approached and discussed within public discourse, alluding to the concept of political correctness culture (hereinafter PC culture). Ana Scalcău (2020) compared dictionary definitions of the term, PC culture, such as “the avoidance of terms and behaviour considered to be discriminatory or offensive to certain groups of people” (OXFORD DICTIONARY 2001, as cited in SCALCĂU, 2020, 53) and identified a flaw – the lack of clarity about “who decides what is offensive” (53-54). Based on this understanding, Scalcău (2020) pointed out an inherent paradox within PC culture, arguing that, rather than fostering societal progress, it can hinder necessary confrontations, conflicts, and debates, leading to a form of societal regression. She concluded:

The more PC tries to correct the social inequalities, the more inequalities it creates, the more it tries to put an end to conflicts, the more conflicts it generates, the more inclusive it claims to be, the more it excludes those who oppose it, the more progressive it wants to be, the less progress it brings about (58).
The narratives of Ben and William, in particular, mirror Scalcău’s (2020) depiction of the impact of PC culture.

[...] the whole push for multiculturalism also kind of makes me more aware – or hyper aware – of different cultures and ethnicities. [...] It is something that comes like front and centre in my mind when I meet someone [...]. [...] [Yet,] I guess, one thing that I don’t like about, sometimes, with multiculturalism is where a lot of them will deny that there’s any cons of different cultures. [...] I think there should be some space to allow for discussion and to be able to say, yeah, there are some negatives, and I think that’s fine. (Ben)

I think it’s just like stereotypes that exist with every race. As much as we don’t like to talk about it or say it out loud, [...] We all have this. Why are we in such denial of it, and what [why] are we trying to eliminate it? I think we should know how to walk around it, learn to use it to our advantage. We should learn to improve it, because it is a stereotype we have, or we should learn to laugh about it. Like it’s just part of life. Ignoring it or trying to eliminate it and pretending that doesn’t exist, it doesn’t do anything. It doesn’t work. [...] It’s just a question of how to make the best use of the voices. (William)

Ben’s perspective highlights the heightened awareness that comes with the push for multiculturalism, emphasizing the significance of acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of different cultures. Conversely, William delved into the discussion of stereotypes, urging for a more realistic and constructive approach. He suggested that, instead of denying existing stereotypes, efforts should be directed towards navigating and leveraging them for enhanced understanding and communication. Thus, the importance of embracing cultural nuances and making “the best use” of diverse voices appears to be accentuated in these narratives. The perception that the management of cultural diversity in Canada—fostered by the ideology of multiculturalism and substantiated through its demographic manifestation—might not be optimal for promoting social cohesion appears to be, at least partially, linked to the rise of PC culture.

In addition, Harin suggested that instilling practices of constructive dialogues about cultures throughout schooling could be instrumental in making progress as a multicultural society. Yet, evidently, contemplating the methods of initiating such conversations would require a re-evaluation of the language deemed suitable for public discourse. This circles back to the prevalence of PC culture, as well as the perception that it can impede progressive discussions about the diversity in Canadian society.
The findings indicate that the demographic reality of multiculturalism – characterized by the coexistence of diverse communities within Canadian society and nurtured by multiculturalist ideals of tolerance and inclusiveness – is often regarded as a favourable national characteristic embraced by individuals. However, assessing the social reality of multiculturalism does not seem straightforward: while Canadian multiculturalism can positively affect in-group identities (i.e. national, ethnic, and pan-Asian identities) and enhance one’s self-concept in coping with perceived racial discrimination, challenges arise when individuals are faced with issues related to social divisions. In fact, concerns about social cohesion seem persistent, linked with the perception that there is little room for meaningful discussions about the diversity present within the society.

C. Multiculturalism as a Building Block of Canadian Identity

The notion of identity is complex and intricate, marked by its multidimensional and multifaceted nature: it is affected by one’s evaluations of both in- and out-groups, spanning personal and collective identities; it can be ascribed or avowed; and it is often regarded as a product of social and cultural influences (MARTIN and NAKAYAMA 2010; SPRECKELS and KOTTHOFF 2007; TAJFEL and TURNER 2004; TATUM 2000). As the ideology of multiculturalism seeks to help constructing the identities of both the nation and citizens, examining its impact on shaping Canadian identity through individual and personal narratives seems adequate.

As discussed previously, most participants perceive Canadian multiculturalism positively in relation to Canadian identity. As well, the multicultural Canadian identity appears to have played a significant role in fostering a sense of national identification and pride for some, thus enhancing their self-concept. Simultaneously, it seems to help countering perceived barriers that negatively affect their national identification.

So someone who is accepted by this country, this culture. You can like blend in, but also, you’re able to keep like different aspects of Koreanness, I guess, and still cherish that in a way? […] Like, I have both sides of it. I tend to choose the sides that I like of the Korean culture and the sides that I like of the Canadian culture and mix it. So it’s like the best of both worlds. That’s what I think of when I say I’m Korean Canadian. (Lucy)

In Canada, we are definitely inclusive. When you hear other people speaking in a different language on the bus and stuff, no one cares – and me, neither. (Jisoo)
I identify myself as Korean Canadian. I feel very much attached to Korean culture because of my family, the way I interact and live every day – and there’s a lot of Koreanness to it. But I still feel accepted within the society and feel integrated. So yeah, I feel not just Canadian, but Korean Canadian. (Nora)

In the excerpts above, the participants expressed a nuanced and positive sense of identity as Korean Canadians, highlighting the ability to blend elements of both Korean and Canadian cultures. Lucy embraced the idea of being able to choose and integrate aspects of both cultures, creating a sense of the “best of both worlds,” Jisoo emphasized the inclusivity of Canadian society, and Nora, while deeply attached to her Korean heritage, also felt integrated and accepted within the society. Together, these perspectives illustrate the richness of hybrid identities, through which individuals find a harmonious balance between their ethnic roots and their Canadian experiences, celebrating the inclusive nature of their culture identity.

However, the notion of multicultural Canadian identity did not appear distinct nor firm enough in the minds of many participants for them to fully identify as Canadian. Firstly, for some, the impact of out-group perceptions and experiences of racism seem to have a more salient influence on their self-identification than that of multicultural Canadian identity.

So when people look at me and they’ll think I’m Korean, and because of that, I think that’s kind of embedded into my mindset, as well. (James)

[…] if someone did ask me, and I just told him that I’m Canadian, there will be a lot of questions that come up. […] And for me to just say I’m Canadian, they’re probably automatically going to assume, ‘Oh, you immigrated to Canada, and you might have the nationality or citizenship.’ (Jacob)

[…] I know that whoever’s asking the question isn’t really asking that question. And they’re gonna want to know where I’m really from. […] I think it’s [Canadian identity] when you are not so isolated in whatever background culture you’re from […] and you are willing and actually do embrace whatever the mainstream culture is here in Toronto or Canada. […] I would identify myself as Korean Canadian, because – this stems from the experience [of Asian hate] I had during Covid […]. Before, I always used to introduce myself as a Canadian […]. (Kelly)
As the narratives above indicate, out-group perceptions – often linking physical appearance to cultural/immigrant identity and, in some cases, leading to discrimination – can significantly affect self-perception and complicate the process of self-identification. Consequently, the findings demonstrate the perceived obstacles in grappling with self-identity, which arise from the challenge of being easily categorized based on appearance.

The findings also revealed that identifying with multiculturalism may not be sufficient for individuals to be able to effectively navigate the ambiguity inherent in the notion of Canadianness nor to overcome perceived sociocultural barriers. Consequently, in such cases, one’s national identification appeared to be limited.

[...] Canada’s basically about multiculturalism, so accepting to be open toward other cultures. [...] I still think there are certain core elements as to what would really define a Canadian. For instance, [...] like the Blue Jays and the Raptors, [...]. And to be honest, me just not having any sort of knowledge nor interest in those fields, makes me feel like I’m not, you know, on that side of spectrum. [...] being open to other cultures, being accepting… like on that part, I can definitely identify with. I do feel like I’m integrated in that sense. But [...] like, what does it mean to be Canadian? I don’t think, you know, am I Canadian? I don’t know. (Jacob)

Like, someone who lived here for a long time, raised here and is familiar with the culture and the lifestyle. Um, but then... On the other hand, when you say Canadian, I also think of White people. Um, so... I guess that kind of overlaps. [...] Canadians are just Canadian. White. (Victoria)

As can be seen in the excerpts, Jacob and Victoria wrestled with the notion of Canadian identity. Jacob recognized the significance of multiculturalism in the context of national identity but felt disconnected from Canadian identity due to a lack of interest in cultural elements related to Canada. Meanwhile, Victoria mostly associated Canadian identity with White people, pointing to an inherent overlap that is perceived. As demonstrated in these cases, the lack of a clear and distinct Canadian identity was one of the most prominent reasons for which many participants did not feel fully Canadian. Additionally, mainstream interests linked to the Canadian landscape and climate, national sports and sports teams (with which some participants were unable to identify), as well as the prevalent White Canadian stereotype, seemed to negatively affect their national identification. The findings emphasize the intricate nature of defining Canadian identity, involving considerations of cultural familiarity,
lifestyle, and the challenge of reconciling multicultural ideals with prevailing perceptions.

In light of the findings, one noteworthy observation is the impact of time and life experiences – notably schooling experiences and economic integration in the multicultural backdrop – on the participants’ sense of integration and the resulting Canadianness. In fact, due to accumulated life experiences within the societal context, all participants felt increasingly integrated and Canadian as time passed. These findings suggest that, among the various facets of Canadian identity that the participants perceive, multiculturalism remains one of the elements with which they can progressively relate, which facilitates their integration within society—as a result, all participants except one self-identified as Korean Canadian. A majority associated this identity label with their mixed, hybrid identity, based on their identification with both ethnic and national identities, to varying degrees and in both symmetrical and asymmetrical manners. Some, on the other hand, mostly associated it with out-group perceptions. Overall, many participants gradually felt a stronger sense of attachment to their Canadian identity than Korean identity, as the latter acquired an increasingly symbolic significance.

Hence, while multiculturalism can positively contribute to the national identification of individuals, its inherent ambiguity remains a persistent challenge that can limit the prominence of multicultural Canadian identity in shaping one’s sense of national belonging. In addition, sociocultural barriers, such as out-group perceptions influenced by race, mainstream interests, and the White Canadian stereotype, can exert a strong influence on one’s national identification. Consequently, those with a weak sense of ethnic identification may experience identity struggles and crises throughout the process of identity development. Time, correlated with accumulated life experiences and integration, appears to be a soothing factor that can alleviate these complications.

Conclusion

This paper presents insights derived from individual semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of 1.5-generation Korean immigrants in Toronto. The findings shed light on the paradoxical nature of Canadian multiculturalism, accentuating its multifaceted character as a political and cultural ideology, as well as a demographic and social reality. In turn, they illustrate how multiculturalism helps shaping Canadian identity within a complex web of influences.
Embedded in the perceived notion of Canadian multiculturalism, paradoxes are inherent and numerous. Firstly, multiculturalist ideology has played a significant role in Canadian nation-building; yet, its impact is conflicting. On the one hand, it serves as a unifying force within the society, and, on the other hand, challenges remain in forging a distinct and firm Canadian identity based solely on multiculturalism. The lived reality of multiculturalism is equally complex: narratives of coexistence of diverse communities and the resulting in-group pride associated with multicultural Canadian identity counterbalance those related to racial discrimination and bias and identity struggles that one faces. The paradox also extends to the salience of multiculturalism in shaping Canadian identity, as its positive impact on one’s national identification is indeed evident, albeit often to limited extents, due to persisting sociocultural barriers. As a result of such paradoxes, patterns of national identification and pride in relation to multiculturalism appear varied among the sample, most of whom self-identify using the same Korean Canadian identity label.

Overall, these findings reflect the shift in emphasis of both the state and the literature in discussing the notion of multiculturalism as a nation-building tool – moving from focusing on the vibrant mosaic and the idea of a common multicultural Canadian identity to integrating multiculturalism into the broader framework of citizenship (BERRY 2013; NG and METZ 2015; BLOEMRAAD 2023). As a result, multiculturalism is now seen as interconnected with Canadian citizenship, as a means of facilitating integration of new citizens. Through the integration, the civic responsibilities of citizens are highlighted, along with the multicultural character, when discussing Canadian identity. In essence, both the findings of this study and literature converge on the versatile nature of Canadian multiculturalism, while offering nuanced perspectives on the challenges, paradoxes, and evolving trends shaping Canadian identity.

Some limitations of the study warrant acknowledgement. One pertains to the narrow sample composition, which limits generalizability. Perspectives and experiences of diverse groups and communities could provide additional dimensions to the complex discourse about Canadian multiculturalism. Despite these limitations, the study illuminates the dynamics surrounding multiculturalism and identity construction within the current societal context of Canada through narratives of individuals, by providing a case study based on a narrowly defined group belonging to a visible minority community.

Not only has multiculturalism become more prevalent than ever among the Canadian population, it permeates every aspect of Canadian society,
influencing policy-making and shaping the lives of individuals across all levels and spheres of life. Hence, in-depth discussions on the complexities of multiculturalism are essential – recognizing its potential to unite and divide, as well as analyzing the nuanced influencing factors associated with it, can foster a more profound and transparent synthesis of the current state of Canadian multiculturalism. Moreover, open dialogues addressing barriers and embracing evolving identities can lead to a resilient, inclusive, and unified multicultural Canada.

Paek (2023) concluded that dynamic processes of negotiating identities within the multicultural Canadian society, along with the resulting attention and sensitivity toward multiculturalism are the core elements that define the modern-day English-speaking Canadian identity (461). This paper furthermore delves into these processes, revealing multiple paradoxes associated with the notion of Canadian multiculturalism. By exploring the contradictions and tensions arising from the interplay between the ideals and realities related to multiculturalism, present challenges can be transformed into a catalyst for fostering dialogue, promoting growth, and strengthening the national identity of Canada.

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