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ABSTRACT

For adolescents, developing a strong and positive ethnic identity is a crucial life task that significantly impacts their well-being. This task can be especially challenging for those from multiethnic families in areas with social divisions and political conflicts. This qualitative study applies the Identity Process Theory to better understand the social-psychological challenges and coping strategies employed by adolescents from multiethnic families (an Arab father and a Jewish mother) in Israel. Twenty adolescents aged 12–18 (60% boys; mean age = 15.2 years, SD = 1.9) residing in Arab localities in southern Israel participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences during the "Swords of Iron" war. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. The results revealed four main themes reflecting the challenges faced by these adolescents, as well as four main coping strategies. Collectively, the twenty multiethnic adolescents expressed difficulties navigating their conflicting identities, experiencing peer rejection, displaying negative emotions due to the political situation, and witnessing tension and conflicts between their parents. The coping strategies employed by these adolescents included flexing their ethnic identity, disengagement and avoidance, confronting the situation, and seeking family support. Although findings are based on a nonrepresentative sample, they offer valuable insights for developing interventions and culturally sensitive practices to promote effective coping strategies that may foster resilience in adolescents from multiethnic families living in conflict regions.

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Ethnic self-identity is a "definition of the situation of the self" (Rumbaut, 2005, p. 114). It is "a learned identity transmitted through one's family and social networks and is typically thought of as including cultural markers of language, food, values, religion, dress, and customs" (Samuels, 2014, p. 3). Ethnicity is a socially constructed term that refers to people who share similarities in culture, language, and country of origin (Hamer et al., 2020).

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Multiethnic refers to people identifying with more than one ethnic category (Samuels, 2014). Individuals are considered multiethnic if their biological parents belong to two or more ethnic groups (Gabriel et al., 2023). Drawing on the Identity Process Theory (IPT; Breakwell, 2015), this in-depth qualitative study aims to describe the experiences of Israeli youth from multiethnic families in Israel. Specifically, we conducted twenty in-depth interviews with adolescents ages 12–18 with a Jewish mother and an Arab-Muslim father who reside in Arab localities in southern Israel. Our goal is to explore the social and psychological challenges that adolescents from multiethnic families encounter in the context of "Swords of Iron" war. Additionally, the study examines the coping strategies these adolescents employ to manage identity-related conflicts amidst socio-political tensions.

Multiethnic families in Israel

Based on 2021 estimates from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2021), Israel's population consists mainly of Jews (73.9%), with a minority of native-born Arabs comprising 21.1% of the country's population. Arab citizens of Israel include several religions, primarily Muslims (82.9%), with a minority of Christians (7.9%) and Druze (9.2%). The Arab citizens of Israel are considerably different from the Jewish majority: they speak Arabic, have a distinct culture and norms, and mainly reside in Arab-only villages and towns, some of which are among the poorest in the country (Lewin et al., 2006). Additionally, they are a native minority subjected to political, social, and economic marginalization and discrimination due to their Palestinian origin (Shdema et al., 2021). In this study, we define multiethnic marriages as one spouse being Jewish and the other being Arab (i.e., Muslim, Christian, or Druze). This term encompasses the combination of ethnical, cultural, and religious differences between the couples in these multiethnic families. This definition aims to establish a clear understanding of what is meant by the terms "multiethnic marriage" and "multiethnic families" within the context of this study.

Research on marriage patterns has documented increases in interethnic and interracial marriage in developed societies. However, much of the research to this point has mainly been conducted in the United States (de Guzman & Nishina, 2017). Comparatively, there is a dearth of up-to-date and comprehensive data on the prevalence of multiethnic marriages in Israel, particularly regarding marriages between Jewish and Arab couples. At the end of 2008, the Israeli Interior Ministry reported that there were 92,612 mixed marriages in Israel. Of these, 55,463 involved a non-Jewish woman, and 37,148 involved a non-Jewish man. According to this report, in 2008, 118,511 children lived in multiethnic families; 49,009 children were raised by a Jewish mother, and 69,502 were raised by a Jewish father.

Religious and ethnic intermarriages, particularly between Muslim men and Jewish women, are considered to be uncommon in Israel and carry significant social and political implications (Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022). Israeli society is marked by ethnic discrimination and segregated communities, in which the strong social norm is not to cross ethnic and religious lines. According to Islamic Sharia law, a Muslim man is permitted to marry a Jewish or Christian woman, with the understanding that any children born to the couple will be recognized as Muslim (Islam, 2014). However, a Jewish woman's choice to marry a Muslim man brings with it unique complexities and challenges societal norms and boundaries (Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022). For Jewish women entering Muslim families, adapting to their husband's community often necessitates significant cultural and religious adjustments, which may include conversion to Islam. These couples may face negative responses from family members, as well as societal and political backlash, mirroring the broader tensions in Israeli society between minority and majority groups. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by multiethnic youth in the Israeli context.

Multiethnic youth in the context of political violence

This study is conducted in the context of the recent "Swords of Iron" war that commenced on October 7, 2023. On this day, approximately two thousand terrorists from the Gaza Strip infiltrated southern Israel by land, sea, and air. This attack was carried out alongside indiscriminate rocket attacks. Over 1,400 people (mainly civilians) were killed, thousands more were injured, and 241 were taken into Gaza and held as hostages. About 67 towns were evacuated, and 126,000 Israeli citizens were displaced (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The nature and timing of the attacks from Gaza and their lethality against Israeli citizens have no precedent in the 16 years that Hamas has controlled Gaza (Congressional Research Service, 2023). In addition, this attack was accompanied by extensive media coverage on social media, with videos of people being held hostage and acts of severe violence posted online. The attack by Hamas has sparked a war that is different than many previous rounds of violent confrontation in terms of scale and significance.

Compared to young children, adolescents are vulnerable because of their higher exposure to violence and their greater awareness of the negative consequences of armed conflict (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Such exposure to potentially traumatizing and ongoing events during periods of identity formation and life perspective development may carry adverse mental health implications for adolescents (Werner, 2012). This context is expected to present significant challenges for youth from multiethnic backgrounds

as they navigate their conflicting identities. As a result, adolescence is critical for investigating the unique challenges and coping strategies of youth living in multiethnic families (Gabriel et al., 2023).

Challenges faced by multiethnic youth

One of the challenges experienced by multiracial and multiethnic individuals is monoracism, which refers to the oppression directed at those who do not conform to monoracial categories or who hold multiple racial or ethnic identities (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). These individuals may encounter racist remarks and various forms of microaggressions from peers, family members, and others in their lives. Research examining the perspectives of youth and adolescents indicates that multiethnic youth often face rejection, persistent questioning regarding their racial background, and pressure to identify exclusively with a single race or ethnic group (Zamora & Padilla, 2024). For example, a study by Nadal et al. (2013) outlined four major domains of microaggressions that multiracial people may experience. These include family isolation, family favoritism, questioning authenticity, and denial of multiracial identity and experiences by monoracial family members.

Adolescents of multiethnic families may also experience complex feelings and thoughts stemming from their dual identities. Exploring one's identity begins during adolescence when one becomes more involved in social situations in different spaces, such as school and peer relationships (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). When faced with social situations involving racial comments and rejection, these children often feel the need to explore different aspects of their identity within their different communities (Salas Pujols, 2022). This process may shape one's identity development, feelings toward their ethnic–racial group, and overall well-being (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Multiethnic adolescents are particularly vulnerable to social situations involving ethnic discrimination because their existence blurs and threatens the assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories (Gabriel et al., 2023). Previous research on children of multiethnic families suggests that these children may be at increased risk for mental health problems and family instability compared to their monoracial minority and majority counterparts (Choi & Goldberg, 2021; Fisher et al., 2014). Social environments that idealize a single ethnic identity as normative and exhibit intensified discrimination and racism may exacerbate this risk (Samuels, 2014). Growing up in a multiethnic Arab-Jewish family in Israel brings an additional layer of complexity to a young person's sense of identity and belonging. While some studies have investigated multiethnic marriages between Jews and Arabs in Israel (Gaya, 2022; Karkabi-Sabbah, 2017; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022), to the authors' knowledge, there is currently no research

that specifically examines the challenges faced by adolescents in these families from their own perspectives.

Resilience and coping strategies among multiethnic youth

Young individuals of multiethnic backgrounds may encounter numerous challenges in navigating their racialized environments and multiethnic identities (Fisher et al., 2014; Snyder, 2016). However, they may employ various coping strategies to manage these challenges (Breakwell, 2015). Navigating life as a multiethnic adolescent in Israel presents various challenges that can impact their well-being. Moreover, continuous exposure to war-related traumatic events also has a profound impact on the mental health and resilience of young individuals (Haj-Yahia et al., 2021; Miller-Graff & Cummings, 2017; Slone & Shoshani, 2022). Given the consequences of these adverse experiences, this study sought to gain a deeper understanding of how adolescents adapt and cope with these challenges.

Coping is defined as the thoughts and behaviors mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Coping is generally categorized into four major categories: problem-focused, which addresses the problem causing the distress; emotion-focused, which aims to reduce the negative emotions associated with the problem; meaning-focused, in which an individual uses cognitive strategies to derive and manage the meaning of the situation; and social coping in which an individual reduces stress by seeking emotional or instrumental support (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Maladaptive coping refers to coping mechanisms that are associated with poor mental health outcomes and higher levels of psychopathology symptoms. These include disengagement, avoidance, and emotional suppression (Compas et al., 2017). On the other hand, effective coping strategies can bolster resilience among youth, enabling them to better manage difficult situations (Lee et al., 2017).

Research regarding coping strategies and their association with resilience among individuals of mixed ethnicities remains somewhat scarce (Ungar, 2011). One study focused on 24 multiethnic Mexican American adults underscored the importance of internal strengths, interpersonal relationships, and external support in managing stressors associated with racism and discrimination (Jackson et al., 2013). Moreover, the attitudes that children and youth hold toward their ethnicity and race can significantly influence their mental health and psychosocial well-being. For instance, positive feelings of attachment and connection to their ethnic groups are linked to enhanced psychosocial functioning and overall well-being (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Interventions designed to promote the consolidation of ethnic identity have been found to increase psychological resilience among minority youth (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019).

Predicting the identity development of a child from a multiethnic family, particularly within the context of a conflictual and divided society like Israel, presents significant challenges. Research on multiethnic families in Israel, where one spouse is Jewish and the other is Muslim, remains limited (Gaya, 2022; Karkabi-Sabbah, 2017; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022). A recent study by Gaya (2022) reveals that such families typically adopt one of three identities: exclusively Jewish, exclusively Arab, or a hybrid identity that blends elements of both cultures. As a result, a critical aspect of the experience for multiethnic youth in conflictual societies is the complex and ongoing process of identity formation (Gaya, 2022).

Theoretical framework

This study utilizes the theoretical framework of the Identity Process Theory (IPT; Breakwell, 2015) to investigate the dynamic between ethnic identity, coping strategies, and resilience among youth from multiethnic families in Israel. The IPT posits that ethnic identity formation occurs through the processes of assimilation, accommodation, and evaluation. Assimilation entails the reception and absorption of information from our social environments. This newly acquired information is subsequently adjusted or accommodated within our existing identity framework. Evaluation encompasses the process of attributing meaning and value to our individual social experiences. These processes are also guided by four identity principles, namely continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Continuity refers to one's sense of self-definition across time and situations. Distinctiveness pertains to one's uniqueness and differentiation from others. Self-efficacy reflects one's feeling of competence and sense of control over one's life. Lastly, self-esteem relates to an individual's perceptions of their worth and social value (Breakwell, 2015). The theory also suggests that when identity is threatened, the individual employs coping strategies to manage these challenges. The capacity to effectively navigate challenges without causing permanent negative impacts on identity is referred to as "identity resilience." Each of the four identity principles is regarded as a potential source of identity resilience and is related to the use of adaptive coping strategies when a person faces adversities or threats (Breakwell, 2021).

The conceptual model in Figure 1 presents the potential relationships between exposure to risks and adversities, identity formation (i.e., assimilation, accommodation, and evaluation), identity principles (i.e., continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem), coping strategies, and identity resilience. The following research questions were explored in the current study:

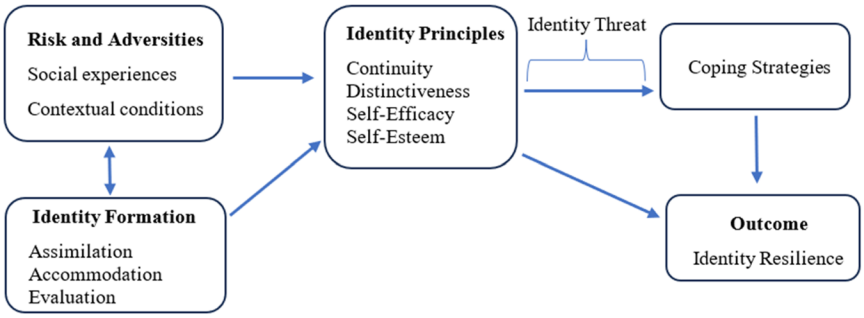


Figure 1. Conceptual model based on the identity process theory.

1. What challenges do adolescents from multiethnic families face in navigating their ethnic identity within a socio-political context marked by conflict?
2. How do adolescents from multiethnic families navigate identity conflicts and threats amid political violence?
3. What coping strategies are utilized by adolescents that may foster their psychological resilience?

Methodology

The study is based on the phenomenological paradigm, which emphasizes that reality is shaped by the perspectives of those who experience it (Qutoshi, 2018). We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with 20 multiethnic adolescents who shared their experiences, feelings, and thoughts as multiethnic during the "Swords of Iron" war in Israel. In this study, we focus on the age stage of adolescence since this developmental stage is marked by significant identity exploration and formation (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The criteria for selecting interviewees consisted of individuals aged 12 and older who were raised in multiethnic families in Israel, where the mother is Jewish and the father is Arab. Additionally, the parents are married and living together. For this study, we focused on multiethnic families living in Arab localities in southern Israel. There are two main reasons for this focus. First, these Arab localities are situated near the areas that were targeted in the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. As a result, the adolescents in these families experienced the attack and its aftermath firsthand. Second, growing up in an Arab village meant that these adolescents were expected to adhere to the social-political norms and traditional values of Arab society, which could lead to various social and familial challenges for them. The participants were located through mutual acquaintances, as well as by snowball sampling. This approach is used to reach individuals within

conservative populations that are often difficult to access (Duan et al., 2015).

Data collection and procedures

The data collection period spanned from January to April 2024, approximately three months after the outbreak of the war, during a period of heightened tension. Since the participants were minors, their mothers were provided with information about the study's objectives and signed an informed consent form before the interviews were scheduled. Subsequently, the adolescents also signed an informed consent form prior to the interview. All interviews were conducted via telephone in Hebrew by the first author. The initial call was made to the mother, who handed the phone to her child. The interview was conducted with the adolescent while the mother remained present at home and consented to the continuation of the conversation. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was recorded by the first author, and transcribed verbatim.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the authors of this study. The first section of the semi-structured interview included general and demographic questions about the participants, such as age, number of siblings, and their familial connections to their father's (Arab) and mother's (Jewish) families. This section also explored how the participant self-identified their ethnic identity by asking, "How do you define your ethnic identity?" The second section examined participants' challenges during the "Swords of Iron" war. An example of a question posed to participants was: "What challenges did you encounter during the war?" The third section of the interview delved into the coping mechanisms utilized by the participants to navigate the challenges they encountered. This part examined the different strategies they employed and how these approaches fostered their well-being. Example questions included, "What helped you overcome these challenges?"

The study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the first author's academic institution. The collected data is securely stored on the first author's computer, and the transcripts of the participants are anonymized using pseudonyms.

Participants

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participating adolescents, including gender, their age, their mother's age, the number of siblings, their self-identified ethnic identity, and their subjective assessment of their closeness to both their father's and mother's families. The study involved 20 adolescents ranging from 12 to 18 years old, with a mean age

Table 1. Participants' background information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age[a]	Self-ascribed ethnic identification	Number of siblings (including the participant)	Mother's age[a]	Mother's family relationship[b]	Father's family relationship[b]
Ahmed	Male	16	Muslim-Jewish	8	42	Strong	Strong
Ibrahim	Male	14	Muslim-Jewish	5	37	Strong	Strong
Nur	Female	17	Muslim	7	40	Weak	Strong
Layla	Female	15	Muslim-Jewish	7	35	Moderate	Strong
Omar	Male	16	Muslim	9	36	No Contact	Strong
Fatima	Female	14	Muslim-Jewish	6	32	Strong	Strong
Yusra	Female	13	Muslim	9	40	Weak	Strong
Ziad	Male	16	Muslim	11	45	No Contact	Strong
Asma	Female	17	Jewish-Muslim	9	52	Strong	Moderate
Rima	Female	16	Muslim	8	38	Weak	Strong
Mariam	Female	15	Muslim-Jewish	7	35	Strong	Strong
Osman	Male	14	Jewish-Muslim	9	41	Strong	Moderate
Ali	Male	17	Muslim	8	39	No Contact	Strong
Hassan	Male	15	Jewish-Muslim	8	36	Strong	Moderate
Yusuf	Male	17	Muslim-Jewish	10	41	Moderate	Strong
Salim	Male	13	Jewish-Muslim	5	35	Strong	Moderate
Kamal	Male	15	Jewish-Muslim	8	37	Strong	Moderate
Abdullah	Male	16	Muslim-Jewish	10	43	Moderate	Strong
Omer	Male	13	Jewish-Muslim	8	35	Strong	Moderate
Samar	Female	14	Muslim-Jewish	9	39	Moderate	Strong

Note: $N = 20$. The mothers are of Jewish descent, while the fathers are of Arab-Muslim descent. All parents have indicated that they are married.

[a]At the time of the interview.

[b]Subjective assessment of the participant's closeness to their father's and mother's families.

of 15.20 years ($SD = 1.9$). Of the participants, 60% ($n = 12$) are boys, and 40% ($n = 8$) are girls. All participants have an Arab-Muslim father and a Jewish mother, reside in rural localities in southern Israel, and attend an Arab school. Table 1 reveals that all adolescents identified as Arab-Muslim, with 70% also recognizing themselves as having a Jewish ethnic identity. Notably, three of the 20 participants indicated no connection to their mother's side of the family, whereas the remaining participants reported connections ranging from weak to strong. Regarding their closeness to their father's family, all participants indicated a moderate to strong bond.

Data analysis

We adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) for data analysis. IPA allows for a nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences by focusing on how they interpret and assign meaning to significant events, such as living through a conflict. The recorded data were preceded by a coding process that integrated inductive and deductive reasoning. This approach combined existing theoretical knowledge presented in Figure 1 (deductive) with new insights

gleaned from the data (inductive), allowing us to iteratively develop and refine interpretations of the experiences presented by participants.

Transcripts underwent a qualitative thematic analysis as described by Giorgi and Duquesne University Press (1975). The analysis included four stages: The first involved a holistic reading of the text; the second stage included identifying and categorizing data into meaningful units guided by the research questions. The third stage consisted of a broad reading of all interviews by category, aiming to integrate closely related categories and construct sub-categories. The fourth stage involved comparisons across interviews to identify similarities and differences. This approach allowed us to identify central themes related to the adolescents' experiences. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Several steps were taken to ensure data quality, including detailed process documentation, precise error removal, and transcription verification. One researcher conducted interviews, and the same researcher transcribed recordings to ensure the results were authentic.

Reflexivity

The study was conducted by two female researchers. The first author is Jewish, from the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. The second author is Arab and possesses a dual religious identity, having been raised in an Arab family with a Muslim father and a Christian mother. The interviews were conducted by the first author, who has a personal connection with a Jewish woman married to a Muslim man. This connection, coupled with her deep awareness of the social and religious implications of such unions, informed her sensitivity during the research process. She remained mindful of how her views and assumptions might influence the study. To ensure the participants' voices were central, several strategies were employed to reduce bias. The semi-structured interview guide was initially developed by the second author and subsequently refined by the first author, ensuring consistency throughout the data collection process. During the analysis phase, both authors engaged in an iterative process of coding and theme identification, cross-checking interpretations to acknowledge and address potential biases stemming from their positionalities. These practices helped ensure that the findings authentically represent the participants' experiences. Furthermore, the authors' diverse identities and experiences enabled a collaborative approach that enriched the depth and cultural sensitivity of the study.

Findings

This study identified several challenges faced by adolescents from multi-ethnic families, highlighting four main themes: (a) navigating conflicting

identities, (b) peer social rejection, (c) negative feelings, and (d) conflicts and tensions between parents. Additionally, four coping strategies emerged: (a) flexing ethnicity, (b) disengagement and avoidance, (c) confrontation, and (d) seeking family support.

Challenges

Theme 1: "Navigating conflicting identities"

During the "Swords of Iron" war, adolescents encountered a significant challenge in navigating their conflicting identities. Amidst this conflictual situation, they grappled with questions of belonging—whether they identified with their Arab identity on their father's side or their Jewish identity on their mother's side. This struggle seemingly did not arise prior to the "Swords of Iron" war in Israel. Of the 20 adolescents participating in the study, 17 experienced this challenge. The following quote from Ibrahim illustrates this clearly:

> I never really thought about who I am. I am very close to my father and his friends, and I am with him a lot and with the Arabs, so I feel I belong there, but I know I have another part of it that I sometimes meet with my Jewish family, and I really like my Jewish family, and I feel part of the Jewish people.

Some participants found themselves in social situations where they were asked about their identity or pressured to take sides. This challenge extends beyond individual reflection on one's identity; it involves social pressure to declare and act in accordance with a particular perspective. Nur illustrated the difficulties she faced during the war due to her conflicting identities. She described how her peers and extended family posed inquiries about her identity, explicitly asking which side she supported.

> I didn't think about it in the past. In the village, I was an Arab; when I came to the city, I was Jewish. Following the war, both Jews and Arabs asked me many questions. Friends from the neighborhood asked me many questions about the Jewish and Arab people and my place. Asked me if I consider myself an Arab and if I'm on their side.

Layla expressed her challenges with her dual identities, underscoring the difficulty of finding belonging in either one. She articulates that, despite successfully navigating both identities, she often feels unanchored in both, saying:

> At school, I am often asked if I am more Arab or Jewish. It's hard to explain that I feel like both. I participate in both Arab traditions with my family and Jewish customs with my friends, but sometimes I feel like I don't fully fit in anywhere.

Similar to Layla, Omer also expressed the feeling of trying to navigate between his conflicting identities yet not feeling like he belongs to either one:

> When I am with my Arab friends, I feel like I need to hide my Jewish side, and when I am with my Jewish relatives, I try not to reveal too much about my Arab background. It feels like I constantly switching between two worlds and never truly belong to either.

The participants' statements reveal that the war prompted them to reflect on their identities and the challenges of reconciling their conflicting identities. They experience social pressure from peers and family to choose a side and show loyalty to one of the ethnic groups. This pressure has laid bare the fractures in the continuity and distinctiveness of their identities.

Theme 2: Peer social rejection

Another common challenge found in the study noted that adolescents experienced discrimination and social rejection from their peers due to their ethnic identities. Specifically, boys with Jewish mothers were more likely to face rejection from their Arab peers compared to girls. Moreover, these boys experienced social rejection from both the Arab and Jewish communities, who tended to categorize them based on a single ethnic identity, disregarding their mixed heritage. As a result, their dual identity was often not recognized, leading to social rejection and conflicts with their peers. Of the 20 adolescents participating in the study, 11 experienced this challenge. Ziad described his experience with rejection by Arab peers in school and argued:

> My friends at school looked at me differently. Once, I had an argument with a friend during a soccer game, and he chose to call me a "filthy Jew" and started insulting me, saying that I want to take everything that doesn't belong to me.

Omar reinforced the stance on rejection following the war. He described how others ignored his dual identity and categorized him as having one identity, in this case, a Jewish identity.

> At school during recess, one of the kids shouted at me to stay away from here, that we don't mix with Jews. I saw from a distance that some friends were angry at him for speaking like that, but some also agreed with him that I'm Jewish and not exactly like them.

Some of the girls in the study echoed the boys' accounts of experiencing peer social rejection. For instance, Samar provided her perspective on this experience:

> The classmates talked about the war and blamed the Jews for hurting Arabs, and since I belong to the Jewish people, I'm not allowed to talk to them. This sparked a heated argument in class. Even after school, when I went out, kids in the neighborhood tried to talk to me about the war and blamed me because I belonged to the Jewish people. They told me to see what the Jews are doing to us.

Participants shared their experiences of social rejection within the Arab community. This rejection highlights deep-seated anger and resentment directed toward Jews, who are frequently viewed as symbols of the occupation and the Israeli military presence. These emotions are closely linked to the strong connections Arab individuals feel with Palestinians in Gaza. However, feelings of rejection were also articulated by the participants from the Jewish community, as Ali described his own experiences in this regard.

> I work afternoons as a stock clerk at one of the stores in the city. About a week after the war started, I came to work as usual. Suddenly, a group of Jewish teenagers who saw me there started shouting at me: "Get out of here, Arab!" I was shocked by their attitude just because they thought I was Arab. They didn't know I am Jewish.

These adolescents have faced social rejection due to their dual identities. The war in Israel has heightened tension and stress between the two ethnic identities, which has affected the adolescents' social interactions.

Theme 3: Negative feelings

The adolescents struggled with negative feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, and more due to the direct effects of mutual harm between Palestinians and Israelis. When attacks or injuries were committed by Palestinians toward Jews, or when such experiences affected their close relatives and friends, some of the teenagers felt guilt and shame for having a partial identity from the offending side. Of the 20 adolescents participating in the study, 9 expressed negative feelings due to war-related experiences. Hassan expressed his negative feelings, including confusion, guilt, and worry, in the following way:

> Classmates sing songs supporting Palestine, and I don't know what to do. If I don't sing along, they'll see me as a Jew and not one of them, but if I do sing, I'm worried that by singing those songs, I might hurt my Jewish mother's family, whom I really love, and it feels like betraying them.

Some participants felt conflicted about their dual heritage, torn between their Jewish and Arab family backgrounds. They were concerned that participating in protests against the Israeli war on Gaza might be seen as a betrayal by their Jewish relatives, as Mariam described:

> I feel guilty when I participate in activities that are against Israelis because I know that this hurts some of my family on the Jewish side. It feels like a betrayal, even though I don't support what is happening.

What amplified the negative feelings was the participants' identification with both sides of the conflict, as Osman described:

> I feel guilty about everything happening in this conflict because I can't find the right way to support either side. Every time I see pictures of victims, I feel like it's somehow related to me.

Layla describes feelings of sadness amid the war, providing insight into the internal struggle between her conflicting identities:

> I was very sad during the war, not just because of the sirens and missiles, but because it was a war between Jews and Arabs. I felt that during the war, part of me was fighting against the other part.

Rima described feelings of anger and a lack of acceptance regarding the attacks executed by Palestinians on Jews in the following manner:

> It was very hard for me to hear that on October 7th, Arab terrorists entered and harmed Jews with the intention to kill. It is forbidden. Even according to the Quran, it's forbidden, and I am very religious and also Arab.

In this theme, negative feelings of guilt, sadness, anger, and shame were major psychological challenges that undermined the well-being of these adolescents. In part, those feelings were exacerbated due to their connection to both sides involved in the conflict.

Theme 4: Conflicts and tensions between parents

In this study, we have identified a familial challenge relating to the relationship between the participants' parents. The political situation and the ongoing war events have increased tensions and divisions between the parents, who come from different sides of the conflict. The participants witnessed these conflicts and disputes and were aware of the tensions between their parents, resulting in increased psychological distress. Furthermore, exposure to both Arab and Jewish ethnic identities shaped the participants' dual identities. They peacefully integrated these identities because of what they saw at home: two parents from different backgrounds who successfully built a life together. However, when these two ethnic identities clashed, it increased parental conflict, making it harder for the child to reconcile his dual identity. Of the 20 adolescents participating in the study, 7 described such tension and conflict between their parents. Asma described the tensions between her parents at home:

> I was afraid of what would happen next with my family. I was scared that something might happen between my dad and mom. There were many fights at home because of the war, and I was constantly afraid that it would affect my parents.

The origins of the conflict between Arabs and Jews became increasingly evident during the war, significantly affecting the family dynamic of a household with an Arab father and a Jewish mother. Yusra articulated the relationship between her parents in the following manner:

I heard my dad and mom arguing a lot about the situation. My dad thinks all of the state of Israel belongs to the Arabs, while my mom thinks the opposite.

Kamal shared:

Every time there were sirens, my mom was very scared for us and blamed the Arabs for hurting everyone and not caring about our lives. My dad got angry about this, and they would start fighting again and again

Mariam shared:

I remember the arguments at home between my mom and dad about how to handle the situation. My mother always talked about the need to protect the Jewish people, while my father argued that Palestinians needed to fight for their rights. This caused me a deep sense of alienation and confusion.

The research findings underscore the conflicts that emerge between parents due to their differing perspectives and emotions regarding the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. Generally, the Jewish parent tends to align with the Jewish viewpoint, while the Arab parent supports the Palestinian stance. This divergence often leads to escalating tensions and discord within the family. Consequently, adolescents may experience feelings of confusion and alienation as they find themselves caught between familial and political conflicts. Such tensions can adversely affect their sense of security and their relationships with their parents, further complicating their emotional experiences related to their dual identities amid the conflict.

Coping strategies

As hypothesized by the IPT, the participants' experiences with identity threats may have triggered cognitive and behavioral responses to help them face the challenges they encountered during the "Swords of Iron" war in Israel. In response to the challenges outlined above, we have identified the following coping strategies.

Theme 1: Flexing ethnicity

Adolescents from multiethnic backgrounds possess diverse facets of identity, allowing them to identify in multiple ways within social contexts. Their ethnic identity was employed as a coping strategy to navigate potentially racially hostile environments. By "flexing" their ethnic identity, these adolescents demonstrate the changing nature of identity depending on the context. Of the 20 adolescents participating in the study, 12 employed the strategy of flexing their identity. The following quote from Nur illustrates this strategy:

> If Arabs ask me, I answer that I am an Arab, and if Jews ask me, I answer that I am Jewish. I feel safe to answer like this because I belong to both of them.

Ibrahim also illustrated the changing, contextual nature of identity depending on who was around him and adapting to the expectations of those in his presence:

> I stand up that I am very connected to everyone and try to combine worlds. When asked specifically what my identity is, I answer according to the side that asked me.

This sense of belonging to two ethnic groups allows Ibrahim to flex his identity, sometimes identifying as Jewish and other times as Arab.

This strategy was identified in previous research and was titled "Chameleon Identities," "Performing Race/Ethnicity," and "Identity Flexing" (Opara et al., 2023; Snyder, 2016). As shown by the findings of the present study, this strategy enables multiethnic individuals to explore different facets of their identity to cope with identity threats and facilitate positive interactions with people from other identity groups.

Theme 2: Disengagement and avoidance

Some participants adopted a strategy of disregarding derogatory behaviors and negative attitudes toward them. Meanwhile, others chose to avoid social situations that might escalate into political arguments related to the conflict between the Jewish people and the Palestinians. Of the 20 adolescents participating in the study, 6 employed the strategy of disengagement and avoidance. Ziad claimed that his coping strategy is to be silent and ignore others to avoid conflicts. I always kept silent and tried not to respond to anyone. I ignored them so they would leave me alone quietly.

Similarly, Omar said,

> I'm very quiet, try not to argue with friends, and stay calm. I try to remain as silent as possible and not respond to anyone. I try to ask friends not to talk to me about the situation.

By adopting this coping strategy, these young individuals tried to avoid exposure to stigma, racism, and negative attitudes that may target them in different social situations.

Theme 3: Confrontation

Adolescents from multiethnic families often employ active coping strategies, such as confrontation, to address their challenges. This approach differs significantly from the avoidance and ignorance strategies previously mentioned, highlighting the diverse ways these individuals navigate their experiences. Of the 20 adolescents participating in the study, 5 employed the strategy of confrontation.

Samar argued that her coping strategy is to respond, not be silent. It seems that Samar perceived the social rejection based on her ethnicity as unjust, which triggered feelings of anger. This led her to choose an active way to cope with the situation rather than remain silent:

> What helped me was my mouth. I never shut up. I responded to everyone who tried to talk to me, and I silenced them. I'm not related to the war. I belong to both nations, love them both, and don't want to be part of this discussion.

Adolescents with high levels of self-esteem and a strong sense of distinctiveness choose to directly confront the person in front of them to deal with conflicts arising from the political situation. As Ali stated:

> My self-esteem helped me. I coped with responding as hard as I could. I replied that I am more Jewish than him and that it's a shame that he chooses to behave like that.

Theme 4: Seeking family support

The current study found that seeking family support is a significant strategy, enabling the participants to cope effectively with the challenges they encounter. Participants describe reaching out to their parents and extended family members as a means of support and protection when confronted with peer social rejection and discrimination. Notably, this strategy was the most frequently mentioned among all coping mechanisms, with 16 out of the 20 participants reporting its use.

Ziad, who adopted disengagement and avoidance as coping mechanisms, argued that open dialogue with his family and the support they provided were instrumental in helping him address the derogatory remarks from his peers:

> My family from my father's side, who I am in touch with every day, helped me a lot and gave me strength. My family heard that friends hurt me during the game because my mother is Jewish. They went out to defend me. They helped me [by asking those kids] not to treat me differently and talked to their families to stop.

Similarly, Samar, asserted that dialogue with her mother helped her realize that being different was positive. Samar seemed to rely on conversations with her mother to gain confidence that supported her well-being and resilience. Through this connection with her mother, she becomes more aware of her strengths and uniqueness:

> The support of my mother helped me a lot. I told my mother what happened in the classroom and what I replied to, and my mother was very supportive of me and told me that I was strong and had strong opinions, and I know how to influence everyone.

Discussion

The current study sheds light on the challenges and coping mechanisms utilized by multiethnic adolescents during the "Swords of Iron" war in Israel. Prior research has investigated the negative impact of exposure to the longstanding and ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the mental health of youth (Haj-Yahia et al., 2021; Miller-Graff & Cummings, 2017; Slone & Shoshani, 2022). However, these studies mainly focused on youth from one distinct ethnic group – Arabs or Jews. Drawing on the IPT, this study sought to explore the social-psychological challenges and coping strategies employed by youth of multiethnic families in the context of exposure to political violence. Specifically, we focused on adolescents with a Jewish mother and an Arab father residing in Arab localities in southern Israel.

Experiencing ethnic or political violence can affect an individual's perception of their ethnic identity (Jeong & Gentry, 2024), consequently affecting their mental health and psychosocial functioning (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). This is particularly challenging for adolescents actively exploring and developing their ethnic identities (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The ongoing political conflict in Israel, marked by deeply rooted divisions between Jews and Arabs, provides a unique context for exploring the challenges faced by multiethnic youth and the coping strategies they adopt to address the challenges posed by their conflicting identities.

Challenges faced by multiethnic youth

The current study identified four main challenges: difficulties navigating their conflicting identities, experiencing peer rejection, displaying negative emotions due to the political situation, and witnessing tension and conflicts between their parents. The political tensions during the "Swords of Iron" war in Israel exacerbate these feelings, with children displaying negative emotions such as confusion, guilt, regret, sadness, anger, and shame as they struggle with a sense of not fully belonging to either side. Additionally, witnessing ongoing tension and conflict within their families—particularly between their Jewish and Arab parents—forces them to reflect on different aspects of their ethnic identity within their different communities.

Amid the "Swords of Iron" war in Israel, these young individuals encountered social rejection from their peers, faced racial comments, and experienced pressure to express their allegiance in the conflict—whether to the Arab-Palestinian side or the Jewish side. Such experiences were absent from their social interactions prior to the outbreak of the war in Israel. Consequently, they grappled with questions of loyalty and belonging, which may have shaped the development of their ethnic identity (Zamora &

Padilla, 2024). These experiences highlight the critical role that ethnic identity plays in adolescent development, especially when political conflict forces young people to reconsider and reevaluate their understanding of who they are and where they belong. These challenges reflect the notion that identity is not a fixed or static construct but is constantly shaped and reshaped by external experiences and social interactions (Breakwell, 2015). The IPT supports this view, suggesting that identity formation is a dynamic process in which individuals continuously evaluate and integrate new information from their social environments to make sense of their experiences.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the aftermath of October 7th and the subsequent war created new social experiences and contextual conditions that may have challenged the process of identity formation among multiethnic adolescents. Specifically, these experiences challenged the notion of being able to hold two conflicting ethnic identities and forced them to confront an internal struggle regarding their ethnic identities. Navigating conflicting identities during times of political violence poses a significant challenge for adolescents who are still in the process of developing their ethnic identity.

According to the IPT, adverse experiences and changes in one's social-political environments can potentially induce what is known as an identity threat. Identity threat refers to a subjective experience that reflects an individual's feelings of threat to their self-esteem, sense of continuity, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness (Breakwell, 2021). The war has disrupted participants' sense of continuity within their established identity frameworks, leading to negative emotions and confusion regarding their identities. A key principle of the IPT is that individuals strive to cope in response to identity threats. For these adolescents, the experience of war and political violence has prompted a need to reconcile their conflicting identities by employing various coping strategies to preserve their well-being.

Identified coping strategies

The current study identified four main coping strategies employed by multiethnic adolescents: flexing ethnicity, disengagement and avoidance, confrontation, and seeking family support. While some of these strategies are effective and may enhance resilience among multiethnic youth, others, such as disengagement and avoidance, are regarded as less effective (Compas et al., 2017). Determining which coping strategies are inherently beneficial and contribute to strengthening resilience can be challenging. Therefore, it is advisable to consider individual experiences regarding how specific coping strategies have proven effective in managing stress or overcoming adversity (Grych et al., 2015).

The first coping strategy illustrates the fluid nature of identity; adolescents would choose to identify as Arab or Jewish, depending on the situation. Jaspal et al. (2020) have previously categorized this coping mechanism as "concealment/pretense," which involves concealing one's identity and inauthentic self-presentation. In this context, flexing identity may be regarded as an ineffective coping strategy as it entails masking one's true identity. Nevertheless, this coping strategy can effectively assist multiethnic youth in navigating the challenges they face in their social environments, ultimately reducing stress and conflict (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Flexing one's identity as a coping strategy entails interpreting new information and ascribing meaning to it. During this process, individuals employ cognitive strategies to comprehend and manage the meaning of the situation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

The second coping strategy involved disregarding derogatory behaviors and withdrawing from social situations that may trigger an identity threat. The participants in this study utilized this strategy to alleviate negative emotions associated with stress by distancing themselves from the stressor or the social environment that contributed to it. Although this approach may reduce immediate tension, it can also result in heightened psychological distress and social isolation (Richman & Leary, 2009). The third coping strategy stands in contrast with the second strategy and involves confrontation with the social situation. Research indicates that active coping strategies are associated with a stronger sense of control and, in turn, better psychological well-being compared to disengagement strategies (Dijkstra & Homan, 2016). The study found that adolescents with a strong sense of distinctiveness in their ethnic identity and strong self-esteem are more inclined to utilize active coping strategies. This finding underscores the significance of identity principles—such as continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem—in promoting effective coping mechanisms (Jaspal et al., 2020).

Seeking family support is another active coping strategy identified in the current study. These adolescents viewed their parents and extended family members as significant sources of support. This finding builds on Atkin and Jackson (2021) study, which emphasized the significance of parental support for children and youth from multiethnic families. By affirming their children's uniqueness and differentiation from others and engaging in conversations with them, the parents promoted their children's confidence in their identity. Such support may foster resilience and promote positive development for multiethnic children.

In conclusion, changes in the youth's emotional, social, and political environments appear to pose potential threats to their dual identity. This issue is particularly prominent during times of conflict and tension,

especially among multiethnic youth with conflicting identities. In response to perceived identity threats, multiethnic adolescents may employ various coping strategies to navigate these changing environments and the associated challenges. If one coping strategy proves ineffective in mitigating the threat, the individual may opt for an alternative approach. Thus, it is essential to recognize that coping strategies are not mutually exclusive; rather, they form essential components of an individual's self-protection arsenal that can be employed simultaneously.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study adds to the limited body of literature addressing the social and psychological functioning of adolescents from multiethnic families. By employing the IPT as a theoretical framework, this study enhanced our understanding of the link between ethnic identity and resilience strategies among adolescents from multiethnic families living in a deeply divided society and exposed to ongoing political violence. Furthermore, this study delves into the experiences of adolescents born to a Jewish mother and an Arab father. Such interethnic marriages are relatively uncommon; consequently, there is limited research investigating this phenomenon (Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022). By focusing on this understudied population, this study contributes to the existing multiethnic and multiracial literature, which predominantly centers on Black and White biracial youth in Western societies (Atkin & Yoo, 2019).

While this study has strong points, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, it specifically examines multiethnic marriages between Jewish women and Arab men in Israel. Mixed marriages between Jewish men and Arab women were not considered in the current study. Thus, the generalizability of this study may be limited, both within and outside of Israel. However, our findings can provide valuable insights into the experiences of other multiethnic adolescents from conflicting ethnicities. In addition, this study utilized qualitative research methods through twenty semi-structured interviews. While this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied, it is suggested that future research endeavors encompass a larger sample size and employ other research methods, such as a mixed-method design or longitudinal studies of identity change.

Additionally, the study employed the snowball method of recruitment. While this method is an appropriate one for difficult-to-reach populations, it can introduce bias, as participants are often connected socially or geographically. Thus, the diversity of perspectives may be limited, potentially reducing the generalizability of the results. Finally, this study primarily relied on interviews with the adolescents themselves. To validate and expand upon the current findings, future research should involve parents in the research and conduct dyad interviews.

Implications for practice

The data generated from this study may have important implications for interventions with multiethnic families. First, social workers, school counselors, and other professionals intervening with multiethnic families should acknowledge the dynamic between ethnic identity and its effect on the well-being of adolescents in these families. They should also be aware of the potential conflicts that may arise between the parents, as well as with peers. Such awareness of the complex intersection between ethnic identity and well-being can assist practitioners in developing interventions tailored to the needs of these adolescents.

The IPT theory underscores the significance of four factors in identity formation, namely continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. These factors play a pivotal role in enhancing resilience and guiding individuals toward effective coping strategies. Therefore, therapy or intervention programs should be aimed at enhancing personal psychological resources (such as self-efficacy and self-esteem) and promoting effective coping strategies, such as the active coping strategies identified in this study, which can enhance identity resilience. This can also serve to reduce the utilization of maladaptive coping strategies, which may be related to negative emotions and lower well-being. Furthermore, a child's sense of distinctiveness and continuity of their ethnic identity can be enhanced through the support they receive from their family. Therefore, it is essential to encourage parents to engage in open communication with their children regarding their ethnic heritage, to offer support during times of political conflict, and to help them manage experiences of discrimination and inquiries about their ethnic background.

Ethical approval

All participants in the research gave their written consent before participation.

Author contributions

The order of the names does not indicate seniority; both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, literature review, data analysis, and discussion sections of this article.

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Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available on request from the first author.

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