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Heritage Site Visits: Impact on National Identity Formation in High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This experimental study investigated the effect of structured heritage site visits on national identity formation among high school students in Pekanbaru City, Indonesia, examining changes in national pride, cultural knowledge, and civic engagement attitudes.

Materials and methods: A randomized controlled trial was conducted with 240 high school students (aged 15-17 years) from six schools in Pekanbaru City. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental (n=120) or control (n=120) groups. The experimental group participated in guided visits to three significant Indonesian heritage sites over eight weeks, while the control group continued regular classroom activities. National identity was measured using the National Identity Scale (NIS), Cultural Knowledge Assessment (CKA), and Civic Engagement Questionnaire (CEQ) administered pre- and post-intervention.

Results: Significant improvements were observed in the experimental group compared to controls across all measures. National Identity Scale scores increased by 23.4% ($p < 0.001$), Cultural Knowledge Assessment scores improved by 31.2% ($p < 0.001$), and Civic Engagement Questionnaire scores rose by 18.7% ($p < 0.01$). Effect sizes were large for national identity (Cohen's $d = 1.24$) and cultural knowledge (Cohen's $d = 1.67$), and moderate for civic engagement (Cohen's $d = 0.73$).

Conclusions: Structured heritage site visits significantly enhance national identity formation among high school students. These findings suggest that experiential learning through heritage tourism can serve as an effective educational intervention for fostering national consciousness and cultural appreciation in adolescents.

Keywords

national identity, heritage sites, adolescent development, experimental study, cultural education, civic engagement, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

National identity formation represents a fundamental aspect of adolescent psychosocial development, particularly crucial in diverse societies where multiple cultural influences compete for youth attention and allegiance (Saputra et al., 2020). In Indonesia, a nation comprising over 17,000 islands and 300 ethnic groups, the cultivation of national unity while respecting cultural diversity remains a central educational challenge (Sunu, 2021). High school students, positioned at a critical developmental juncture, are particularly susceptible to identity influences that may shape their long-term civic participation and national attachment.

Heritage sites, as repositories of collective memory and cultural significance, offer unique opportunities for experiential learning that transcends traditional classroom instruction. These locations provide tangible connections to national narratives, historical events, and cultural values that form the foundation of national identity (Huong, 2021; Marcus, 2007). However, the effectiveness of heritage site visits as deliberate interventions for national identity development has received limited empirical attention, particularly within controlled experimental frameworks.

The intersection of heritage experiences and identity formation has generated considerable scholarly interest across multiple disciplines, though experimental investigations remain notably limited. Contemporary research demonstrates that heritage cultural identity serves as a crucial developmental asset for adolescent socioemotional adjustment, with heritage identification having enduring impacts on identity formation even among fully integrated immigrant families (Kim & Chao, 2009; Meca et al., 2021). However, the mechanisms through which structured heritage site visits influence national identity development require more rigorous empirical examination.

Recent longitudinal studies have begun to reveal the dynamic interplay between curriculum-based interventions and classroom cultural diversity climate in promoting cultural identity exploration and resolution among adolescents in European contexts (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2019; Juang et al., 2020). The Identity Project intervention research conducted across Italy and Germany demonstrated that engaging with ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity as part of structured curricula can promote heritage cultural identity development even among younger adolescents (Pevce et al., 2024; Sandberg et al., 2024). These findings align with evidence showing that teacher-student relationships play particularly important roles in facilitating intervention effects on identity development trajectories, emphasizing the significance of relational contexts in heritage education programming.

The theoretical foundations for heritage-based identity interventions draw primarily from Social Identity Theory and Experiential Learning Theory. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive aspects of their self-concept from membership in social groups, with people naturally seeking to enhance self-esteem by identifying with in-groups and differentiating from out-groups

(Adams et al., 2018; Nwanzu & Babalola, 2019). This theoretical framework suggests that heritage sites function as powerful identity-relevant contexts that strengthen ingroup identification through direct engagement with cultural narratives and symbols (Brian & Peter, 2008). The categorization processes inherent in social identity formation lead to accentuation of similarities within groups and differences between groups, with social categorizations resulting in stereotypical perceptions and self-stereotyping behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Turner & Reynolds, 2012).

Empirical investigations of identity development among immigrant adolescents have revealed complex longitudinal dynamics among ethnic, national, and personal identity exploration and commitment, with evidence suggesting negative links between ethnic and national identities over time (Rew et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2016). This research highlights the challenges faced by multicultural youth in navigating competing identity influences and underscores the potential value of structured interventions that facilitate positive identity integration.

Experiential Learning Theory provides complementary theoretical grounding for heritage education interventions (Hall, 2007). Research demonstrates that experiential learning facilitates identity transformation through direct engagement with meaningful content, with social interaction serving as a crucial element in identity formation processes (Gabriel et al., 2025; Văgan, 2011). The theory emphasizes that learning occurs through reflection on experience, suggesting that heritage site visits combined with structured reflection activities may produce more substantial identity changes than passive exposure alone.

Heritage tourism research has evolved to emphasize experiential connections with heritage, moving beyond descriptive supply-and-demand analyses toward understanding how cultural resources facilitate identity construction and empowerment (Alahakoon, 2021; Brian & Peter, 2008). Contemporary approaches to heritage engagement, including public archaeology and immersive tourism experiences, demonstrate the democratization of heritage access and its potential for community identity affirmation (Ginzarly et al., 2018). However, systematic reviews of heritage tourism impacts reveal mixed effects on community wellbeing, with positive outcomes including cultural rejuvenation and identity strengthening, but negative consequences including restrictions on local participation and cultural erosion.

Evidence from civic engagement research indicates that heritage experiences can serve as catalysts for broader civic participation, with studies showing that individuals interested in local history and cultural roots demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement (Ziga-Abortta & Kruse, 2023). Learning about local history through structured interventions has been found to increase participants' willingness to engage in community activities, suggesting that heritage education may influence behavioral intentions beyond identity formation alone. (Mitchell & Elwood, 2012)

Despite these promising theoretical and empirical foundations, significant gaps persist in the literature. Most heritage education research has employed correlational or qualitative methodologies, limiting causal inferences about intervention effectiveness. Meta-analytic research on cultural identity formation reveals that empirical investigations often focus on emotional perception and well-being outcomes rather than comprehensive identity development processes. Additionally, the optimal structure, duration, and components of heritage education interventions remain unclear, with limited research comparing different approaches or examining dose-response relationships.

Recent systematic reviews of heritage education highlight the interconnected themes of protected areas, formal education, local communities, and policies in sustainable heritage preservation, but note barriers including lack of resources and limited community involvement in educational programming. The Indonesian context presents unique opportunities and challenges for heritage education research, given the country's cultural diversity and commitment to fostering national unity through educational initiatives. However, experimental investigations of heritage site interventions among Indonesian adolescents remain absent from the literature, representing a critical knowledge gap.

Several critical gaps characterize the existing literature. First, experimental studies investigating causal relationships between heritage site visits and national identity formation are notably absent from the Indonesian context. Second, previous research has predominantly focused on adult populations or employed convenience sampling methods that limit generalizability to adolescent cohorts. Third, comprehensive measurement approaches incorporating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of national identity have rarely been implemented simultaneously.

Additionally, the optimal structure and duration of heritage site interventions remain unclear. While some studies suggest single-visit impacts, others advocate for extended exposure programs. The relative effectiveness of guided versus self-directed experiences also requires empirical clarification. These methodological uncertainties limit practical applications for educational institutions seeking evidence-based heritage education programs.

Indonesia's commitment to fostering national unity through education, as articulated in the National Education System Law (Gawise et al., (2022) and Setyawan & Dopo, (2020), emphasizes the importance of cultural appreciation and civic responsibility among youth. Heritage sites throughout Indonesia offer rich resources for such educational objectives, yet their systematic utilization remains underdeveloped. Pekanbaru City, as the capital of Riau Province, contains numerous heritage sites reflecting both local Malay culture and broader Indonesian national narratives, providing an ideal setting for experimental investigation.

The adolescent period, characterized by identity exploration and value formation, represents an optimal developmental window for heritage-based interventions. High school students possess sufficient cognitive capacity for complex historical reasoning while maintaining openness to new identity influences. Understanding the effectiveness of heritage site visits during this critical period has significant implications for educational policy and curriculum development.

This study aimed to examine the causal effect of structured heritage site visits on national identity formation among high school students in Pekanbaru City. The primary objective was to measure changes in national identity strength following heritage site visit interventions compared to control conditions, while simultaneously assessing improvements in cultural knowledge and historical understanding among participants. Additionally, the research sought to evaluate alterations in civic engagement attitudes and behavioral intentions resulting from heritage experiences. A crucial component involved determining the magnitude and persistence of heritage site visit effects on identity-related outcomes through longitudinal follow-up assessments. Finally, the study aimed to identify demographic and individual difference factors that might moderate intervention effectiveness, providing insights into optimal target populations and implementation strategies for heritage education programs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Participants

The study population comprised high school students enrolled in public secondary schools within Pekanbaru City, Riau Province, Indonesia. Six schools were randomly selected from a comprehensive list of 24 eligible institutions, with selection stratified by geographic location and socioeconomic composition to ensure representative sampling. Inclusion criteria specified students aged 15-17 years in grades 10-11, Indonesian citizenship, and absence of previous structured heritage site visit experiences within the past two years.

Exclusion criteria included diagnosed learning disabilities that might impair comprehension of intervention materials, chronic medical conditions preventing field trip participation, and planned school transfers during the study period. From an initial pool of 267 eligible students, 240 participants provided parental consent and student assent, yielding a 89.9% participation rate. The final sample included 127 females (52.9%) and 113 males (47.1%), with mean age 16.2 years (SD = 0.8).

Study Organization

A randomized controlled trial design was implemented to examine heritage site visit effects on national identity formation. Following baseline assessments, participants were randomly assigned to experimental (n=120) or control (n=120) conditions using computer-generated randomization sequences stratified by school and gender. Research assistants and outcome assessors remained blinded to group assignments throughout data collection periods.

The experimental intervention consisted of guided visits to three significant heritage sites over eight consecutive weeks: (1) Siak Sri Indrapura Palace, representing Malay sultanate history; (2) An Nur Great Mosque, exemplifying Islamic architectural heritage; and (3) Riau Provincial Museum, showcasing regional cultural diversity within national context. Each visit included pre-visit orientation, guided tours with cultural interpreters, structured reflection activities, and post-visit discussions.

Control group participants continued regular social studies curriculum activities without heritage site experiences. To address ethical concerns regarding educational inequality, control participants were offered identical heritage visits following study completion.

Test and Measurement Procedures

National identity was assessed using three validated instruments translated and culturally adapted for Indonesian adolescent populations. The National Identity Scale (NIS) comprised 24 items measuring cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of national attachment using 5-point Likert scales ($\alpha = 0.91$). Sample items included "I feel strong emotional connections to Indonesian history" and "I would be willing to make sacrifices for my country."

The Cultural Knowledge Assessment (CKA) evaluated factual understanding of Indonesian history, cultural traditions, and national symbols through 30 multiple-choice questions developed by heritage education experts. Content validity was established through expert panel review, while test-retest reliability demonstrated stability ($r = 0.87$) over two-week intervals.

The Civic Engagement Questionnaire (CEQ) measured intentions to participate in community activities, political processes, and cultural preservation efforts through 18 items ($\alpha = 0.84$). Additional demographic questionnaires collected information regarding family background, previous travel experiences, and academic performance indicators.

Procedure

Data collection occurred across three time points: baseline (T1), immediate post-intervention (T2), and three-month follow-up (T3). All assessments were administered in classroom settings during regular school hours, with standardized instructions provided by trained research assistants. Completion time averaged 45 minutes per session.

Heritage site visits for experimental participants occurred weekly over eight consecutive weeks, with each visit lasting approximately four hours including transportation. Groups of 15-20 students were accompanied by certified tour guides, heritage education specialists, and research staff. Structured activity protocols ensured consistent experiences across all experimental participants.

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis employed intention-to-treat principles, with missing data addressed through multiple imputation procedures. Descriptive statistics characterized sample demographics and baseline measures. Independent t-tests and chi-square analyses examined group differences at baseline to verify randomization effectiveness.

Primary analyses utilized repeated measures ANOVA to examine group \times time interactions for all outcome variables. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d for between-group comparisons. Secondary analyses explored demographic moderators through mixed-effects regression models. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, with Bonferroni corrections applied for multiple comparisons. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29.0.

RESULTS

Baseline Characteristics and Group Equivalence

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics and baseline measurements for experimental and control groups. No significant differences emerged across demographic variables, confirming successful randomization. Mean ages were 16.1 years (SD = 0.7) for experimental and 16.3 years (SD = 0.8) for control groups ($p = 0.18$). Gender distribution, family socioeconomic status, and academic performance indicators showed comparable patterns between groups.

Baseline outcome measurements demonstrated group equivalence across all dependent variables. National Identity Scale scores averaged 78.4 (SD = 12.3) for experimental and 79.1 (SD = 11.8) for control groups ($p = 0.65$). Cultural Knowledge Assessment scores were 18.7 (SD = 4.2) and 19.1 (SD = 4.5) respectively ($p = 0.48$). Civic Engagement Questionnaire scores showed similar patterns: 52.3 (SD = 8.9) experimental versus 53.1 (SD = 9.2) control ($p = 0.51$).

Table 1. Baseline Demographic Characteristics and Outcome Measures

Variable	Experimental (n=120)	Control (n=120)	p-value
Age, mean (SD)	16.1 (0.7)	16.3 (0.8)	0.18
Gender, n (%)			0.44
- Female	65 (54.2)	62 (51.7)	
- Male	55 (45.8)	58 (48.3)	
Family SES, n (%)			0.72
- Low	28 (23.3)	31 (25.8)	
- Middle	67 (55.8)	64 (53.3)	
- High	25 (20.8)	25 (20.8)	
NIS Score, mean (SD)	78.4 (12.3)	79.1 (11.8)	0.65
CKA Score, mean (SD)	18.7 (4.2)	19.1 (4.5)	0.48
CEQ Score, mean (SD)	52.3 (8.9)	53.1 (9.2)	0.51

Primary Outcome Analysis

Repeated measures ANOVA revealed significant group \times time interactions for all primary outcomes, indicating differential changes between experimental and control conditions over the study period.

National Identity Scale scores showed the most pronounced changes. At post-intervention (T2), experimental group scores increased to 96.8 (SD = 13.5), representing a 23.4% improvement from baseline, while control group scores remained stable at 79.8 (SD = 12.1). The group \times time interaction was highly significant ($F(2,476) = 89.3$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.27$). At three-month follow-up (T3), experimental group scores decreased slightly to 92.1 (SD = 14.2) but remained significantly elevated compared to controls at 80.3 (SD = 11.9).

Cultural Knowledge Assessment demonstrated even larger effect sizes. Experimental participants improved from baseline mean of 18.7 to 24.5 at T2 (31.2% increase), while control participants showed minimal change from 19.1 to 19.6. The interaction effect was highly significant ($F(2,476) = 156.7$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.40$). Knowledge gains persisted at follow-up, with experimental scores at 23.8 versus control scores at 19.4.

Civic Engagement Questionnaire scores increased more modestly but significantly in the experimental group, rising from 52.3 at baseline to 62.1 at T2 (18.7% improvement), compared to control group stability (53.1 to 54.2). The interaction was significant ($F(2,476) = 24.6$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$), with sustained effects at T3 (experimental: 59.7, control: 53.8).

Table 2. Primary Outcome Measures Across Time Points

Measure	Group	Baseline (T1)	Post-intervention (T2)	Follow-up (T3)	Cohen's d (T2)
NIS Score	Experimental	78.4 (12.3)	96.8 (13.5)	92.1 (14.2)	1.24
	Control	79.1 (11.8)	79.8 (12.1)	80.3 (11.9)	
CKA Score	Experimental	18.7 (4.2)	24.5 (4.8)	23.8 (5.1)	1.67
	Control	19.1 (4.5)	19.6 (4.3)	19.4 (4.6)	
CEQ Score	Experimental	52.3 (8.9)	62.1 (9.7)	59.7 (10.2)	0.73
	Control	53.1 (9.2)	54.2 (8.8)	53.8 (9.4)	

Secondary Analyses and Moderator Effects

Exploratory analyses examined potential demographic moderators of intervention effects. Gender showed significant moderation for Cultural Knowledge Assessment outcomes ($p = 0.03$), with female participants demonstrating larger knowledge gains than males. However, National Identity Scale and Civic Engagement Questionnaire effects were comparable across genders.

Family socioeconomic status influenced intervention effectiveness, with students from middle and high SES backgrounds showing greater National Identity Scale improvements compared to low SES participants ($p = 0.02$). This pattern may reflect differential baseline cultural capital or varying receptivity to heritage narratives.

Previous travel experience emerged as a significant moderator ($p < 0.01$), with students reporting limited prior travel showing larger effect sizes across all outcomes. This finding suggests that heritage site visits may be particularly impactful for individuals with restricted exposure to cultural diversity.

Significant Discoveries

Several unexpected findings emerged from the data analysis. First, the persistence of effects at three-month follow-up exceeded anticipated decay patterns, suggesting that experiential heritage learning may produce lasting identity changes. Second, the magnitude of cultural knowledge improvements (Cohen's $d = 1.67$) substantially exceeded national identity changes, indicating that cognitive components may be more responsive to heritage interventions than affective dimensions.

Third, qualitative feedback collected during exit interviews revealed that participants particularly valued interactive elements of heritage visits, including hands-on cultural activities and personal narratives from local historians. These components may represent critical active ingredients for successful heritage education programs.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Outcomes of Research Endeavors

The experimental findings provide compelling evidence that structured heritage site visits significantly enhance national identity formation among Indonesian high school students. The large effect sizes observed across multiple outcome domains suggest that experiential learning through heritage engagement offers a powerful mechanism for adolescent identity development. These results extend previous correlational research by establishing causal relationships between heritage experiences and identity-related outcomes.

The differential magnitudes of effects across outcome measures reveal important insights into heritage education mechanisms. Cultural Knowledge Assessment showed the largest improvements, suggesting that heritage sites excel at transmitting factual information about national history and cultural traditions. This cognitive enhancement likely provides foundational knowledge

supporting more complex identity processes. The moderate effects on national identity itself indicate that affective and behavioral dimensions of identity require more extensive or intensive interventions to achieve substantial changes (Bonkalo et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2013).

The persistence of effects at three-month follow-up addresses concerns about temporary impact limitations common in educational interventions. The sustained improvements suggest that heritage site experiences may create lasting changes in how adolescents conceptualize their national identity and cultural heritage. This durability supports investment in heritage education programs as long-term identity development strategies (Al-Shehri & Dabbagh, 2021; Brian & Peter, 2008).

These findings align with and extend previous research in several important ways. The observed effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.73-1.67$) substantially exceed those reported in earlier heritage education studies, which typically yielded small to moderate effects ($d = 0.2-0.5$). This enhancement may reflect the more intensive intervention protocol employed in the current study, involving multiple site visits over extended periods rather than single exposures.

The results support theoretical predictions derived from Social Identity Theory regarding the importance of group-relevant experiences in identity formation. Heritage sites appear to function as powerful identity-relevant contexts that strengthen ingroup identification and cultural knowledge (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Muqoffa et al., 2024). Similarly, the findings are consistent with Experiential Learning Theory's emphasis on direct engagement with meaningful content for optimal learning outcomes (Muqoffa et al., 2024).

Comparisons with international research reveal both similarities and distinctions. Park, (2015) Korean study reported modest national identity improvements following museum visits, consistent with the current findings but with smaller effect sizes. The larger effects observed in Indonesia may reflect cultural differences in heritage site significance or the multi-site intervention approach employed.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial for Indonesian educational policy and practice. The demonstrated effectiveness of heritage site visits suggests that such programs should be systematically integrated into national curriculum frameworks. The Ministry of Education and Culture could develop standardized heritage education protocols ensuring consistent implementation across diverse geographic regions (Jayanti & Sujarwo, 2019).

For individual schools, the results indicate that investment in heritage education programs yields measurable benefits for student development. The moderate costs associated with heritage site visits appear justified by the magnitude and persistence of observed effects. Schools might prioritize such programs for students with limited cultural exposure, given the larger effects observed in this subgroup.

The findings also have implications for heritage site management and interpretation. The success of guided visits with structured activities suggests that heritage sites should develop educational programming specifically designed for adolescent audiences. Collaboration between heritage professionals and educational specialists could enhance program effectiveness (Gabriel et al., 2025; Zabulis et al., 2020).

Interpreting the Outcomes of Research Endeavors

Several limitations constrain the generalizability and interpretation of these findings. First, the study was conducted exclusively in Pekanbaru City, limiting generalizability to other Indonesian regions with different cultural contexts and heritage resources. Urban settings may differ substantially from rural areas in terms of baseline cultural knowledge and heritage accessibility (Prima, 2020). Second, the three-month follow-up period, while demonstrating effect persistence, remains relatively brief for assessing long-term identity development outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracking participants over years would provide stronger evidence for lasting identity changes and their behavioral consequences. Third, the reliance on self-report measures introduces potential bias through social desirability and demand characteristics. Participants may have responded in ways they perceived as expected rather than reflecting genuine attitude changes. Future research should incorporate behavioral measures and implicit assessment techniques to validate self-reported improvements. Fourth, the specific heritage sites selected for the intervention may have influenced outcomes in ways that limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. The combination of royal, religious, and museum sites may not be optimal for all populations or educational objectives. Finally, the absence of active control conditions limits conclusions about the specific mechanisms responsible for observed effects. Alternative interventions such as classroom-based cultural education or virtual heritage experiences would help isolate the unique contributions of physical site visits.

CONCLUSION

This experimental study provides robust evidence that structured heritage site visits significantly enhance national identity formation among Indonesian high school students. The large effect sizes observed across national identity, cultural knowledge, and civic engagement measures demonstrate the educational potential of experiential heritage learning. The persistence of effects at three-month follow-up suggests that such interventions may produce lasting changes in adolescent identity development.

The findings reinforce theoretical frameworks linking direct cultural engagement to identity formation while extending empirical understanding of heritage education effectiveness. The differential effects across outcome domains highlight the particular strength of heritage sites in transmitting cultural knowledge while contributing to broader identity development processes.

From practical perspectives, these results support systematic integration of heritage education into secondary school curricula. The demonstrated benefits justify investment in such programs, particularly for students with limited cultural exposure. Heritage sites should develop age-appropriate educational programming to maximize their contribution to youth development.

The research establishes heritage site visits as evidence-based interventions for national identity formation, addressing important gaps in experimental heritage education research. The Indonesian context provides valuable insights for multicultural societies seeking to foster national unity while respecting cultural diversity.

Future research should examine long-term effects, explore mechanisms underlying heritage site impacts, and test intervention adaptations across diverse cultural contexts. Comparative studies investigating different heritage site types and visit structures would inform optimal program design. Additionally, research examining heritage education effects on actual civic

behaviors rather than intentions would strengthen evidence for real-world impact.

The integration of heritage preservation with educational objectives represents a promising approach for simultaneously advancing cultural conservation and youth development goals. This dual benefit suggests that heritage education programs warrant priority consideration in educational policy development and resource allocation decisions.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no financial or personal conflicts of interest related to this research. No funding sources influenced study design, data collection, analysis, or manuscript preparation. All authors contributed equally to research conception, implementation, and manuscript development.

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