



The moderated mediating effect of age on the relationship between perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, and depression in multicultural adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The problem and the aim of the study. As countries around the world increasingly become multicultural, adolescents from multicultural families in Korea continue to face discrimination, which negatively impacts their mental health by increasing depression. This study focuses on the positive role of bicultural acceptance in reducing the negative impact of perception of discrimination on depression. Specifically, it aims to explore whether the relationships between perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, and depression in adolescents vary according to age, in order to propose strategies to mitigate depression caused by discrimination in multicultural adolescents in Korea. *The aim of this study* is to examine the moderated mediating effect of age on the relationship between perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, and depression in multicultural adolescents. First, does bicultural acceptance mediate the impact of perception of discrimination on depression in multicultural adolescents? Second, does age moderate the mediating effect of bicultural acceptance in the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression? The results of this study are intended to help overcome depression in multicultural adolescents.

Research methods. This study utilized data from the 9th and 10th waves of the Korean Multicultural Youth Panel Study (MCYS), analyzing a final sample of 1,061 respondents. Reliability analysis, correlation analysis, mediation analysis, and moderated mediation analysis were conducted using SPSS Win 24.0 ver. and SPSS PROCESS MACRO 4.3 ver.

Results. The results of the study are as follows: First, bicultural acceptance mediated the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression in multicultural adolescents (Coeffect=.244, $p<.000$). Second, although higher perception of discrimination was associated with lower bicultural acceptance (Coeffect=-.059, $p<.01$), which in turn was associated with higher depression, this relationship was more pronounced in younger adolescents (Effect=-.109, $p<.01$) and those with average age (Effect=-.060, $p<.01$), where a strong perception of discrimination led to a sharp decrease in bicultural acceptance (Coeffect=.145, $p<.05$), ultimately increasing depression (Coeffect=-.216, $p<.000$).

Conclusion. The conclusions of this study are as follows. First, multicultural adolescents' perception of discrimination and depression were low, and their bicultural acceptance was medium. Second, there was a partial mediating effect of bicultural acceptance in the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression in multicultural adolescents. Third, the moderated mediating effect of age was significant in the relationship between perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, and depression among multicultural adolescents. However, this positive effect of age was significant only in groups where adolescent age was below or average.

KEYWORDS

multicultural adolescents, perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, depression, adolescent age, moderated mediation effect

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INTRODUCTION

1. Need for Research

The shift toward a multicultural society is a global trend. The concept of "multicultural" generally refers to the mere existence of cultural diversity. UNESCO established the Education 2030 education agenda to further develop Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Education 2030 is a powerful means to develop inclusive and equal quality education for all. Education is a basic human right that works to raise men and women out of poverty, level inequalities, and ensure sustainable development (www.unesco.org/en/right-education. 2025. 01.14). Therefore, discrimination in education can be interpreted as discrimination in human rights. Therefore, this study focused on discrimination experienced by multicultural youth in Korea [1]. In the United States, approximately 17% of marriages are between mixed-race couples [2]. In the United Kingdom, about 10% of the population has grown up in multicultural families [3] while in Canada, about 22% of the total population comes from multicultural families, with immigrants and their children increasingly integrating into mainstream society [4].

The situation is similar in Korea. As of 2023, international marriages account for approximately 10.2% of all marriages [5], and the number of multicultural adolescents is also on the rise. The number increased from 99,186 in 2016 to 168,645 in 2022. Specifically, the number of elementary school students rose from 73,972 in 2016 to 111,640 in 2022, middle school students from 15,080 in 2016 to 39,714 in 2022, and high school students from 9,816 in 2016 to 16,744 in 2022. The number of multicultural adolescents is expected to continue growing in the future [6].

Despite the increasing proportion of multicultural adolescents in Korean society, these adolescents continue to face discrimination. According to the 2022 Multicultural Families Survey [7], 2.1% of children from multicultural families reported experiencing discrimination in the past year. Although this is lower than the 6.9% in 2015 and 9.2% in 2018, it still indicates that discrimination persists. Multicultural adolescents are often discriminated against due to differences in appearance [8] and experience challenges such as language barriers and value confusion while growing up in bicultural environments where the cultures of foreign-born parents and Korean culture coexist [9]. Discrimination experienced by adolescents acts as a stressor for children from multicultural families [10] and has a significant impact on depression [11]. Additionally, with findings showing that racial identity may represent a risk factor for this group through experiences of discrimination [12], discrimination experienced by adolescents can have a significant impact on levels of depression, potentially leading to broader social problems. In this study, we aimed to address the issue of discrimination experienced by multicultural adolescents and the resulting depression by exploring potential mitigating factors, with a particular focus on the role of bicultural acceptance. Bicultural acceptance refers to the positive capacity to embrace two different cultures. According to LaFromboise and Coleman [13], bicultural acceptance involves accepting two distinct cultures without prioritizing one over the other, while maintaining a positive attitude toward both. This concept reflects a high level of cultural competence [14; 15].

Bicultural acceptance is a protective factor that positively influences the mental health of multicultural adolescents. When multicultural adolescents accept both their foreign-born parent's culture and the mainstream culture, they are more likely to value their own identity and are less affected by the negative impact of discrimination [16]. Lopez and Contreras [17] in their study on 54 Puerto Rican teenage mothers under the age of 20, found that those with active biculturalism had fewer mental health issues, including lower levels of depression. David et al. [14] also examined the relationship between mental health and biculturalism in 164 college students, finding that those with high bicultural efficacy exhibited lower levels of depression. [18] demonstrated that higher levels of bicultural acceptance led to lower depression in the context of cultural value discrepancies between children and their parents. [19] argued that bicultural competence plays a moderating role in the relationship between depression and stress among ethnic minority college students. Moreover, bicultural competence was shown to reduce internalizing problems, including depression [20; 21], and to indirectly lower depression by reducing the perception of discrimination [21].

Similar findings have been observed in Korean studies. Bicultural acceptance negatively affects depression [22], and bicultural competence directly and positively influences the psychological adaptation of children from multicultural families, including reductions in depression and anxiety

[23]. For example, the bicultural acceptance attitudes of 5th-grade elementary school students were predictive of depression levels in 2nd-grade middle school students [24]. Collectively, these domestic and international studies suggest that higher levels of bicultural acceptance in multicultural adolescents are associated with lower levels of depression.

On the other hand, the effect of discrimination experienced by multicultural adolescents on depression, mediated by bicultural acceptance, is likely to vary depending on the age of the adolescents. Younger multicultural adolescents tend to experience higher levels of discrimination [25], and middle school students generally have higher levels of multicultural acceptance compared to high school students [7]. Additionally, 20.8% of children from multicultural families reported experiencing bullying, discrimination, or teasing at school, with 25.8% of elementary school students, 17% of middle school students, and 14.8% of high school students reporting such experiences. This shows that the rate of discrimination experienced by elementary school students is approximately twice as high as that of high school students [25]. Moreover, as adolescents' age, their levels of depression tend to increase. According to a longitudinal analysis by Yang et al. [26], as adolescents grow older, their levels of depression and social withdrawal also increase. Similarly, multicultural adolescents exhibit higher levels of depression during middle school compared to elementary school [7]. When examining the differences in bicultural acceptance by age, middle school students show higher levels of multicultural acceptance compared to high school students. Although the level of multicultural acceptance among middle school students has risen, it has decreased among high school students, leading to an increased gap between school levels from 2018 to 2021 (a 0.31-point difference in 2018 compared to a 3.5-point difference in 2021) [7]. While it is generally expected that as adolescents mature, they develop more sophisticated social values and attitudes, these results suggest that bicultural acceptance does not necessarily increase with cognitive maturity [7].

2. Purpose of the Study

Although the research shows varying results regarding the changes in discrimination, depression, and multicultural acceptance based on age, these factors fluctuate depending on age. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the mediating effect of bicultural acceptance and the moderated mediating effect of age on the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression among multicultural adolescents. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions: First, does bicultural acceptance mediate the impact of perception of discrimination on depression in multicultural adolescents? Second, does age moderate the mediating effect of bicultural acceptance on the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Study subjects and analysis data

This study utilized data from the 9th and 10th waves of the Multicultural Adolescents Panel Study [27]. The MAPS targets multicultural adolescents in Korea, specifically those who were in the 4th grade of elementary school as of 2011. For this study, data from the 9th and 10th waves (2020) were combined and analyzed. The population consisted of 4,452 multicultural students enrolled in the 4th grade across 2,537 elementary schools nationwide.

Among the total 1,061 participants, 51.6% were female, and 48.4% were male, showing a nearly equal gender distribution. Of the participants, 67.0% had enrolled in college, while 33.0% had not. Thus, the number of adolescents attending college was approximately twice that of those who did not. Regarding subjective health perception, 61.1% considered themselves "healthy," the most common response. For subjective economic status, "average" was reported by 55.3%, representing more than half of the participants. Additionally, 45.1% lived in "small to medium-sized cities," 30.4% in "rural areas," and 24.5% in "large cities."

The adolescents from the 9th and 10th waves who were analyzed in this study had graduated from high school by the 10th wave. A total of 1,061 participants' data were used in the final analysis. The

data were collected using a stratified random sampling method and a probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling method, with a sampling rate of 35.9% and a sampling error of $\pm 2.5\%$ at a 95% confidence level. Proportional allocation was applied based on the distribution of schools across 16 cities and provinces, with some adjustments made.

2. Instruments

The independent variable, perception of discrimination, was measured using a modified version of [28] scale. It consists of a single item: "How likely do you think it is that you will experience discrimination or disadvantages in the process of entering society (e.g., employment) because you are a child from a multicultural family?" This item was measured on a 4-point Likert scale. As it is a single-item measure, reliability was not calculated.

The dependent variable, depression, was assessed using a modified and supplemented version of the scale originally developed by [29], and further refined by [30]. This scale consists of 10 items, measured on a 4-point Likert scale, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .910. The analysis utilized the mean score of the 10 items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of depression.

The mediating variable, bicultural acceptance, was measured using a modified version of the scale developed by [31], which evaluates attitudes towards both Korean and Mongolian cultures. This scale examines the degree of adaptation to the cultures of Korea and the foreign-born parent's country through items related to music, movies, clothing, cultural activities, preferred future residence, and desired country of school enrollment. It consists of 10 items on a 4-point Likert scale, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .795. The analysis used the mean score of the 10 items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of bicultural acceptance.

3. Statistical Methods

The analysis was conducted using SPSS Win version 24.0, which included reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, mean difference analysis, and correlation analysis. Additionally, the mediation and moderated mediation effects were analyzed using SPSS PROCESS MACRO version 4.0 (model 4 and model 7). To verify the mediation and moderation effects, bootstrapping was performed 5,000 times at a 95% confidence level. The independent and dependent variables were mean-centered to minimize multicollinearity.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1. Correlation between Major Variables

The perception of discrimination among multicultural adolescents scored 1.47 out of 5, and their depression level was also low, with a score of 1.81 out of 5. Bicultural acceptance scored 2.96 out of 5, which is around the median level. The average age of the adolescents was 18.96 years (no table). The skewness and kurtosis were checked to confirm the normal distribution of the variables, and the perception of discrimination, depression, and bicultural acceptance were found to be normally distributed with skewness ranging from .134 to .948 and kurtosis ranging from -.297 to .925 (no table).

Moreover, the correlation analysis between the key variables showed that a higher perception of discrimination was associated with higher levels of depression ($r=.253$, $p<.001$), while higher bicultural acceptance was associated with lower levels of depression ($r=-.181$, $p<.001$). However, the correlation between age and depression was not significant. Additionally, the correlation coefficients r ranged from .010 to .253, indicating no risk of multicollinearity among the variables (no table).

2. Mediating Effect of Bicultural Acceptance

The mediation effect of bicultural acceptance was examined, and it was found that the impact of the perception of discrimination on depression among multicultural adolescents in Korea was mediated by bicultural acceptance (Table 1). Specifically, the higher the perception of discrimination among multicultural adolescents, the higher their level of depression (Coefficient=.244, $p<.000$). When including the mediator, the perception of discrimination negatively affected bicultural acceptance (Coefficient=-.059, $p<.01$), and bicultural acceptance negatively affected depression (Coefficient=-.216, $p<.001$). In other words, as multicultural adolescents perceived higher levels of discrimination, their bicultural acceptance decreased, but higher bicultural acceptance was associated with lower levels of depression. Furthermore, the effect of perception of discrimination on depression decreased from Coefficient=.244 to Coefficient=.231 when bicultural acceptance was included. Additionally, in the path from perception of discrimination → bicultural acceptance → depression, the mediation effect of bicultural acceptance, with a value of .013, was significant as the bootstrap lower limit of .003 and upper limit of .025 did not contain 0. This confirms that bicultural acceptance mediates the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression.

Table 1

Mediating Effect of Bicultural Acceptance

Variable	Coeffect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Dependent variable: Depression						
Constant	1.455	.045	32.075	.000	1.366	1.544
Perception of Discrimination	.244	.029	8.515	.000	.188	.301
$R^2 = .064$, $F=72.505$, $p=.000$						
Parameter: Bicultural acceptance						
Constant	3.054	.035	87.871	.000	2.986	3.123
Perception of Discrimination	-.059	.022	-2.705	.007	-.103	-.016
$R^2 = .007$, $F=7.317$, $p=.007$						
Dependent variable: Depression						
Constant	2.115	.129	16.409	.000	1.862	2.368
Perception of Discrimination	.231	.028	8.148	.000	.176	.287
Bicultural acceptance	-.216	.040	-5.459	.000	-.294	-.138
$R^2 = .090$ $F=52.138$, $p=.000$						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
Perception of Discrimination → Bicultural acceptance → Depression	.013	.006	.003	.025		

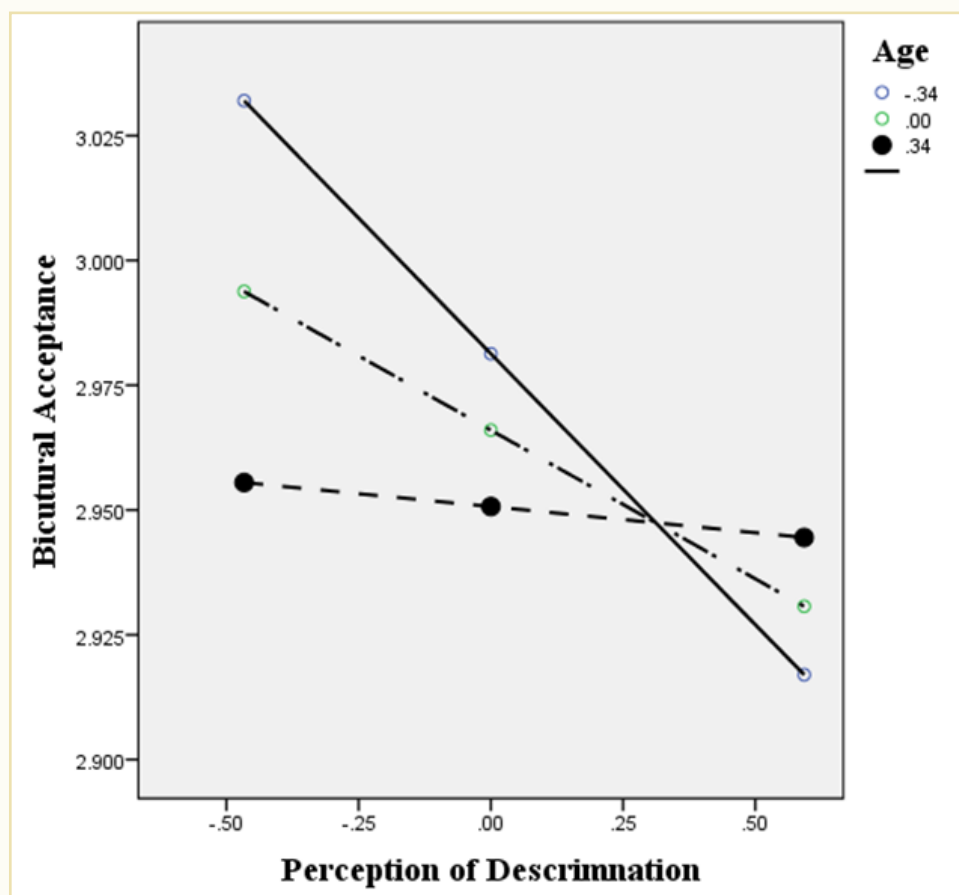
3. Moderated Mediation Effect of Age

The analysis of the moderated mediation effect of age on the path from perception of discrimination → bicultural acceptance → depression among multicultural adolescents is presented in <Table 2> and [Figure 1]. The results showed that the model was significant, with an F-value of 52.138 ($p<.001$), and the explanatory power was 0.9%. Examining the moderating effect of age, it was found that the interaction between perception of discrimination and age significantly influenced bicultural acceptance (Coefficient=.145, $p<.05$). Additionally, bicultural acceptance had a significantly negative effect on depression (Coefficient=-.216, $p=.000$). This indicates that the effect of perception of discrimination on depression among multicultural adolescents varies according to age.

Table 2

The mediating effect of bicultural acceptance and the moderating effect of age

Variable	Coeffect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Dependent variable: Bicultural acceptance						
Constant	2.966	.013	228.146	.000	2.941	2.992
Perception of Discrimination(A)	-.060	.022	-2.711	.007	-.103	-.016
Age(B)	-.045	.038	-1.177	.240	-.120	-.016
A × B	.144	.066	2.172	.030	.014	.274
R ² =.012, F=4.407, p=.004						
R ² increases with interaction						
Interaction term	R ²		F		p	
Discrimination awareness × Age	.004		4.715		.030	
Conditional effects of age in multicultural adolescents						
Age	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI*	ULCI**
-.341(M-1SD)	-.109	.032	-3.412	.001	-.171	-.046
.000(M)	-.060	.022	-2.711	.007	-.103	-.016
.341(M+1SD)	-.010	.031	-.334	.739	-.072	.058
Dependent variable: Depression						
Constant	2.454	.119	20.693	.000	2.221	2.689
Perception of Discrimination	.231	.028	8.148	.000	.176	.287
Bicultural acceptance	-.216	.040	-5.459	.000	-.294	-.138
R2 =.090, F=52.138, p=.000						

**Figure 1** Moderating effect of multicultural age

Additionally, the analysis of the conditional indirect effects of age (Table 3) revealed that the conditional indirect effects were significant under two conditions of adolescent age (M, M-SD). However, the conditional indirect effect was not significant under the M+SD condition of adolescent age. In other words, the moderated mediation effect of age was significant only in the group with below-average age and the average age group, while no moderation effect was found in the group with above-average age. Moreover, the index of moderated mediation for age was $-.031$ (95% CI: $-.066$ to $-.004$), indicating that the moderated mediation effect of age was significant in the path from perception of discrimination to depression via bicultural acceptance among multicultural adolescents (Table 3).

Table 3

Verification of significance of conditional indirect effect of age and adjusted mediation effect index

Conditional indirect effect of age				
Age	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
$-.341(M-1SD)$	.024	.008	.009	.041
.000(M)	.013	.005	.003	.024
.341(M+1SD)	.002	.007	-.011	.016
Verification of adjusted mediation effect index				
	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Age	$-.031$	.015	-.066	-.004

DISCUSSION

First, the study found that the perception of discrimination among multicultural adolescents negatively influenced bicultural acceptance, and bicultural acceptance negatively influenced depression. This indicates that bicultural acceptance mediated the relationship between multicultural adolescents' perception of discrimination and depression. In other words, the higher the perception of discrimination among multicultural adolescents, the lower their bicultural acceptance; however, higher bicultural acceptance was associated with lower levels of depression. Additionally, the effect of perception of discrimination on depression decreased when bicultural acceptance was added, indicating a partial mediation effect of bicultural acceptance in the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression among multicultural adolescents.

Second, the moderated mediation effect of age was significant in the relationship between perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, and depression among multicultural adolescents. Specifically, the higher the perception of discrimination, the lower the bicultural acceptance, which in turn increased depression, especially when the adolescent's age was at or below average. In contrast, in the group with above-average age, the difference in bicultural acceptance due to the perception of discrimination was not significant.

These findings suggest that to mitigate depression among multicultural adolescents, it is crucial to both reduce perceptions of discrimination and enhance bicultural acceptance, particularly for adolescents who are younger or of average age. Based on these research results, the following recommendations are made.

First, bicultural acceptance is strengthened when multicultural adolescents positively embrace both cultures. The findings suggest that adolescents with higher levels of bicultural acceptance are protected from the negative effects of discrimination on depression. To alleviate depression by enhancing bicultural acceptance among multicultural adolescents, it is necessary to help them embrace both their parents' culture and Korean culture. This can alleviate feelings of instability about themselves and difficulties in relationships with others. Therefore, it is important to support multicultural adolescents in positively accepting their identity and developing the ability to embrace

diverse cultures. This can be achieved by establishing social support networks, such as peer support activities among multicultural adolescents to share experiences and prevent feelings of isolation, matching them with adult mentors to help them find positive role models and overcome challenges in school and daily life, or providing professional counseling programs to educate them on stress management and coping strategies for depression.

Second, age plays a moderating role in the relationship between perception of discrimination and bicultural acceptance among multicultural adolescents. Therefore, tailored programs that cater to different age groups are necessary. Notably, younger multicultural adolescents were more strongly affected by perceptions of discrimination in forming bicultural acceptance. To maximize the educational impact of programs designed to enhance bicultural acceptance among multicultural adolescents, it is important to focus on younger adolescents. Since younger students are more influenced by their parents, activities that involve both parents and children from multicultural families, collaboration with various cultural organizations in the community, and engagement in sports, arts, and music can help reduce perceptions of discrimination and naturally enhance bicultural acceptance. Previous studies have shown that as adolescents age, they tend to experience higher levels of depression and social withdrawal [26], and high school students tend to have relatively lower levels of bicultural acceptance [7]. Therefore, it is necessary to provide tailored education that aligns with the developmental stages of multicultural adolescents, including career and vocational education.

This study is significant as it focused on the perception of discrimination among adolescents from multicultural backgrounds and examined bicultural acceptance as a variable that could mitigate the negative impact of discrimination on depression. It is also significant in suggesting that the relationships between these variables vary according to the adolescent's age. However, the study did not analyze various factors such as gender, economic background, regional characteristics, growth background, appearance, place of birth, and types of multicultural families (e.g., children of marriage immigrants, other naturalized citizens), as well as parental influences (e.g., the foreign parent's country of origin, educational level, economic background). Future research should analyze how these diverse factors among adolescents influence their perception of discrimination, depression, and bicultural acceptance. Additionally, since the concept of "multiculturalism" in Korea emerged in the 1990s and multicultural family cases have increased since the 2000s, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies with multicultural adolescents from other countries to identify the characteristics of Korean multicultural adolescents. This could help develop policies and educational programs to enhance multicultural sensitivity and bicultural acceptance from an international perspective.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the moderated mediation effect of adolescent age on the relationship between multicultural adolescents' perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, and depression. To achieve this goal, data from the 9th and 10th waves of the Korea Multicultural Youth Panel were combined and used. The adolescents analyzed in the 9th and 10th waves were high school graduates, with a final sample of 1,061 participants. The mediation and moderated mediation effects were analyzed using SPSS Win version 24.0 and SPSS PROCESS MACRO version 4.3.

The conclusions of this study are as follows. First, multicultural adolescent perception of discrimination and depression were low, and their bicultural acceptance was medium. Second, there was a partial mediating effect of bicultural acceptance in the relationship between perception of discrimination and depression in multicultural adolescents. Third, the moderated mediating effect of age was significant in the relationship between perception of discrimination, bicultural acceptance, and depression among multicultural adolescents. However, this positive effect of age was significant only in groups where adolescent age was below or average.

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