



Silver Bullet Versus Ecosystem: Unraveling the Impact of Jewish Educational Interventions on Jewish Identity

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Abstract

Evaluative research in Jewish education often adopts a “silver bullet” approach, attributing identity outcomes to single programs or interventions. This article advances an ecosystem framework that situates Jewish schooling, family upbringing, and peer networks within their wider communal and societal contexts. Drawing on hierarchical regression analyses of large-scale survey data ($n=21,260$) from four Jewish diaspora communities, we find that the impact of Jewish education depends on its interaction with family background, social capital, and national setting. Jewish identity thus emerges as a cumulative and relational process rather than the product of discrete experiences. These findings underscore the limitations of single-country studies, which often generalize about Jewish identity formation without considering the structural and contextual differences that shape communal life in different national settings. The findings also extend sociological theories of social capital, cultural capital, and the life course, offering new insight into how educational, familial, and communal forces together sustain Jewish identity in diaspora.

Keywords Jewish education · Jewish identity · Diaspora communities · Social capital · Ecosystem · Cultural capital

Jewish Identity in Diaspora Communities

Research on Jewish identity in diaspora communities has long emphasized the central role of socialization—especially Jewish education—in sustaining continuity and transmitting communal values across generations. In Jewish contexts,

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educational institutions serve not merely to convey knowledge but to reproduce the cultural capital that anchors communal belonging (Bourdieu 1986; Modood 2013). Jewish day schools, supplementary programs, and camps have been central to this effort, widely understood as vehicles for transmitting values and fostering enduring connection.

While the field's sociological literature has assumed the "ecology" of Jewish education for decades (Wertheimer 2007), programmatic evaluations have tended to examine these interventions through a "silver bullet" lens, attributing identity outcomes to single factors such as schooling, camping, or Israel travel. Such explanations yield tidy narratives but obscure the complex processes through which Jewish identity is both formed in youth and sustained across the life course.

This article advances an alternative ecosystem framework. Drawing on theories of social capital, cultural capital, and life course development, we situate Jewish education within a broader constellation of family, peer, and communal influences. This approach moves beyond the question of whether particular programs "work" to examine how multiple influences interact, reinforce, or attenuate one another in shaping identity.

Using large-scale survey data from four Jewish diaspora communities—Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the USA—this study applies an ecosystem framework to quantitatively test the field's long-standing ecological assumptions, which have been frequently conceptualized theoretically (Dorph and Schunn 2018; Kelman 2018; Kress 1998, 2011) but less often subjected to rigorous multidimensional analysis (cf. Bankier-Karp and Beider 2025; Graham 2014; Miller and Pomson 2024) within an integrated multinational model. Substantively, it illuminates how Jewish engagement reflects the interplay of education, upbringing, and social networks rather than the effects of discrete interventions. Conceptually, it integrates established sociological theories into a multidimensional account of Jewish identity formation, offering a framework attuned to the relational and contextual complexity of contemporary Jewish life.

Jewish Education and Identity Formation in the Diaspora

Jewish education represents one of the most extensive and well-resourced efforts at identity building in the diaspora. Day schools, supplemental programs (Aron and Schwartz 2024; Litman 2017), overnight summer camps (Reimer 2012; Sheskin 2009), and immersive programs such as Birthright Israel (Hecht et al. 2024) are designed to transmit Jewish values, foster communal belonging, and sustain identity across the life course. Together, they provide an unparalleled opportunity to examine how educational structures interact with family life and peer networks to shape Jewish identity outcomes.

At the same time, Jewish communities face the dual challenge of balancing continuity with integration into majority cultures, making Jewish education a particularly revealing arena for studying how identity is transmitted and sustained. Scholarship on Jewish education has long recognized its dual role of facilitating socialization and meaning-making (Fox et al. 2003; Levisohn and Fendrick 2013).

Classic studies by Himmelfarb (1974, 1977) and Bock (1976) established the dual importance of family upbringing and Jewish schooling in shaping adult Jewish connectedness, laying the groundwork for later research that examined how these influences intersect within broader communal ecologies (Graham 2014; Graham et al. 2025).

More recent scholarship has offered rich, empirically grounded accounts of how Jewish education contributes to identity formation, though most still examine its effects within discrete institutional or programmatic settings rather than as part of an integrated social ecosystem. Pomson and Wertheimer's (2022) ethnographic study of nine North American Jewish day schools explores how leadership, culture, and relationships shape the lived experience of students and families. They show that Jewish day schools function as hubs of communal life, linking home, classroom, and community in ways that foster Jewish engagement, though the study does not trace these effects over time. Drawing on more than a decade of longitudinal research with British Jewish families, Miller and Pomson (2024) likewise examine how schooling, home life, and peer networks interact over time to shape Jewish engagement. Their study highlights the cumulative and relational character of Jewish education's influence across the life course, even as it stops short of distinguishing the independent effects of schooling from family background.

A parallel body of work has examined informal and immersive educational programs that shape Jewish identity outside the classroom. Reimer's (2022) ethnography of Jewish residential camps shows that immersive Shabbat celebrations foster ritual literacy, communal competence, and affective attachment through participatory learning, yet the study treats camp as a standalone setting, leaving its relationship to prior schooling, family background, or longer-term identity formation unexamined. Kelner's (2010) ethnography of Birthright Israel portrays the trip as a powerful exercise in diasporic socialization, showing how shared emotion, travel, and peer bonding heighten Jewish attachment, but—similar to much of the Birthright research—offers little insight into how participants' preexisting home and peer environments shape their engagement before or after the trip.

Collectively, these studies have deepened understanding of how Jewish education and upbringing shape identity within distinct domains. This recognition of the interactivity of influencing factors—encompassing families, social networks, and communal structures—has been assumed in the sociological literature since the 1980s (e.g., Goldscheider 1986; Schoem 1989), even as programmatic research has frequently continued to search for a silver bullet intervention. Subsequent scholarship solidified this ecological paradigm by emphasizing intergenerational factors (Cohen 1995) and the bidirectional relational influences between families and educational institutions (Fishman 2007; Pomson and Schnoor 2018; Wertheimer 2007). While contemporary research continues to validate the critical salience of these social connections (Fishman and Hartman 2023), these contributions have often remained site specific or theoretically fragmented (cf. Graham 2014; Kelman 2018), while underscoring the need for frameworks—such as the ecosystem approach developed here—that can integrate these domains into a single, dynamic model of Jewish identity formation and maintenance.

To conceptualize this complexity, the following sections draw on three sociological perspectives—social capital, cultural capital, and the life course—that collectively underpin the ecosystem framework advanced in this study.

Social Capital and Group Identity Formation

Social capital theory explains how networks of trust and reciprocity sustain identity and communal participation (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000). In Jewish contexts, educational institutions serve not only as sites of learning, but also as mechanisms for generating and reinforcing social capital, creating durable ties between individuals, families, and communities (Wuthnow 2002). Schools, synagogues, and youth movements function as key nodes within these networks. Even in settings of partial assimilation, dense Jewish social ties operate as stabilizing forces that strengthen identity through ongoing interpersonal engagement.

Jewish education therefore works not only by transmitting knowledge, but also by embedding learners within relational environments that make long-term engagement more likely (Kadushin 2012; Reinhart 2021). Studies consistently show that Jewish identity outcomes are closely linked to the strength of one's Jewish friendship and institutional networks, with the effects of schooling, camps, or Israel programs often mediated by the density of those ties (Kadushin 2012). In this sense, Jewish education is best understood as a mechanism for embedding individuals within social-capital-rich environments rather than as a standalone driver of identity (Bankier-Karp 2022).

Cultural Capital and the Transmission of Identity

Cultural capital theory highlights how education transmits the symbolic knowledge and competencies that sustain collective identity (Bourdieu 1986; Smith 2003). Access to these resources facilitates continuity within minority groups, and research has shown that graduates of culturally specific educational systems are more likely to participate in communal life and retain key elements of their heritage (Modood 2013).

In Jewish life, cultural capital is transmitted through both formal institutions and informal cultural practices. As Gans (1979, 1994) observed, modern ethnic identities often persist through “symbolic ethnicity,” where attachment is expressed through voluntary and affective forms of participation rather than institutional obligation. This pattern is evident in Jewish communities, where individuals may sustain Jewish identity through ritual competence, holiday observance, or social networks even in the absence of formal religious involvement.

Jewish education cannot therefore be understood in isolation from these wider cultural expressions. Formal schooling and programs interact with family life and cultural practice to produce cumulative effects on identity retention. Approaches that treat education as a single causal factor—the silver bullet model—miss this interdependence between institutional, familial, and cultural transmission.

A Life Course View of Jewish Identity Formation

Life course theory emphasizes how identity formation unfolds through the interplay of developmental timing, historical context, and cumulative socialization (Elder 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007). Early educational experiences intersect with family and peer influences to establish trajectories of ethnic and religious belonging (Fuligni and Pederson 2002). While childhood and adolescence are formative, identity continues to evolve across adulthood as individuals negotiate new social contexts and life transitions.

Applied to Jewish life, a life course perspective highlights education as part of an ongoing process rather than a discrete intervention. Jewish identity is shaped through layered influences—parental socialization, formal schooling, peer networks, and adult communal engagement—rather than through any single experience. Yet much existing research captures identity at a single point in time, overlooking what Miller and Pomson (2024: 10) term “the view along the way” of development (see also Horowitz 2003; Keysar and Kress 2021; Kress and Zakai 2021). A life course lens, even when applied cross-sectionally, helps situate such findings within the broader temporal and social processes that sustain Jewish identity over time.

Methodological Critique: The Limits of the Silver Bullet Approach

A persistent limitation in studies of individual programs is what may be termed the silver bullet approach—the tendency to isolate one explanatory factor and credit it with decisive influence. Whether the variable is Jewish schooling, camping, or Israel travel, studies have often conceptualized identity as the outcome of a single intervention. The appeal of such work is clear: it yields clean findings, aligns with communal hopes for straightforward solutions, and produces programmatically useful narratives. Yet its elegance is misleading, obscuring the conditional and interactive processes through which Jewish identity is shaped and sustained.

Research on Jewish schooling has often exemplified this orientation. Keysar and Kosmin (2004) found that day school graduates display consistently higher levels of Jewish engagement than peers, presenting schooling as the decisive factor. Hartman and Sheskin (2011) likewise linked childhood education and ritual practice to adult connectedness but treated these influences independently rather than as interacting with later experiences. Youth movements and camps have been similarly framed: Cohen and Ganapol (1998) showed that participation correlated strongly with adult engagement, yet conceptualized camps as standalone engines of identity rather than elements within a broader ecology of family and peer relations.

Parallel patterns appear in studies of Israel programs. Jacobson (2004) reported lasting increases in religious commitment among year-long Israel program participants without accounting for the selectivity of already engaged families. Even the most sophisticated evaluations—such as those of Taglit-Birthright Israel (Hecht et al. 2024)—rely on quasi-experimental designs that demonstrate participation effects but treat the 10-day trip as a self-contained catalyst, underplaying how preexisting networks and post-trip environments condition those outcomes.

Other single-factor studies focus on friendship networks, upbringing, or philanthropy. Kadushin and Tighe (2008) showed that Jewish friendship predicts engagement but analyzed it in isolation from family religiosity or institutional involvement. The Pew Research Center's (2021) *Jewish Americans* report identified intermarriage, upbringing, and schooling as key correlates of adult identity but modeled them in parallel rather than conditionally.

From Silver Bullets to Ecosystems

Taken together, these studies illustrate how the evaluative focus on single interventions can overstate causal reality. While scholars (Bankier-Karp and Beider 2025; Cohen and Veinstein 2011; Fishman 2007, 2000; Fishman and Hartman 2023) have long explored the interwoven impact of family and social connections, the silver bullet orientation persists in models that treat educational programs as independent phenomena, divorced from the social world in which they are embedded. The problem is not that any one factor is unimportant—they clearly matter—but that such analyses treat them as acting independently. This leads to conclusions that overstate causal clarity while obscuring the relational mechanisms through which Jewish identity develops. As argued elsewhere (Bankier-Karp 2022; Graham et al. 2025), more useful models must account for the mediating and moderating processes that link these influences—for example, how parental involvement amplifies educational effects, or how peer networks translate experiences into sustained engagement.

What is needed, then, is a shift from silver bullets to ecosystems: a framework that situates schooling, upbringing, peer relations, and communal structures as interdependent forces. Rather than seeking singular levers of influence, this approach emphasizes how educational and social environments interact across the life course to sustain Jewish identity. The present study advances such an ecosystem model, positioning Jewish identity not as the product of any single intervention but as the outcome of a dynamic, relational system.

Toward an Ecosystem Approach: Addressing the Gaps

Building on these critiques, this study advances an ecosystem approach to understanding Jewish identity formation—one that situates education, family, and community within a single interactive system rather than as discrete variables. This perspective aligns with recent developments in network analysis, structural equation modeling, and comparative sociology, which conceptualize identity as emerging from the interdependence of institutional, social, and individual influences.

Applied to Jewish diaspora communities, this framework enables a more nuanced assessment of how Jewish schooling, family upbringing, peer relations, and communal engagement jointly shape patterns of belonging and continuity. In the present study, hierarchical regression models are used to test these relationships across multiple national contexts, revealing that Jewish identity reflects the cumulative interaction of these influences rather than the impact of any single intervention.

Beyond its substantive contribution, this approach extends the application of social capital, cultural capital, and life course theories to new empirical terrain, demonstrating their value for explaining identity maintenance in minority and diasporic settings. By embedding these theoretical perspectives within a cross-national and methodologically rigorous design, the study offers a framework for evaluating educational interventions that captures the complexity of contemporary Jewish life while contributing to broader sociological debates on education, religion, and ethnicity.

Research Framework and Hypotheses

The formation of ethnic and religious identity is a dynamic process shaped by multiple interwoven influences, including education, family background, peer networks, and broader societal structures (Fuligni and Pederson 2002; Modood 2013; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). While educational interventions play a key role in reinforcing communal engagement, prior research suggests that their effects cannot be isolated from the broader social ecosystem in which they operate. This study contrasts two methodological approaches: the silver bullet approach, which is premised on linear or direct causal relationships between individual interventions and identity outcomes, and the ecosystem approach, which accounts for the interaction of multiple social, educational, and demographic factors in shaping Jewish identity.

Drawing on theories of social capital (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), and life course development (Elder 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007), we propose the following hypotheses:

1. Sociodemographic factors:

H1: *Jewish identity outcomes are shaped by sociodemographic factors, including national context, age, and sex, reflecting broader societal conditions that influence religious and ethnic identity retention.*

Research on identity formation has demonstrated that macro-level structural factors, such as country of residence, shape how religious and ethnic identities are expressed (Alba and Nee 2003). Additionally, life course research suggests that age-related variations exist in identity expression, while sex differences have been observed in religious and communal engagement (Di 2020; Hartman 2024; Schnabel et al. 2018).

2. Socialization in upbringing:

H2: *Upbringing influences—specifically childhood denominational affiliation and Jewish education—play a critical role in shaping Jewish identity in adulthood, but their effects interact with broader communal and social structures.*

The role of childhood religious education and denominational upbringing is well established in the sociology of religion (Lazar et al. 2002; Sherkat 2010) more broadly and studies of Jewish education more specifically (Bankier-Karp 2022; Graham 2014). Prior research has shown that early life exposure to Jewish educational settings reinforces Jewish communal engagement later in life, but the strength of this effect is contingent on broader socialization environments (Schoenfeld 2010).

3. Socialization in adulthood:

H3: *Adult Jewish identity outcomes are strongly influenced by current social networks, including marital patterns, presence of children, and the proportion of Jewish friends, reinforcing the role of peer and familial environments in identity persistence.*

Social capital literature emphasizes the reinforcing effect of homophilous networks on identity maintenance (Kadushin 2012; Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 2002), and conversely, the assimilatory effects of social integration (Rebhun 2014). Research on intermarriage has also indicated that Jewish endogamy—compared with exogamy and singlehood (Engelberg 2016)—is associated with higher levels of communal engagement, while the presence of children often reactivates Jewish identity as parents seek to transmit cultural and religious values.

These hypotheses will be tested using hierarchical regression models, allowing for an assessment of how each factor—sociodemographic background, upbringing, and adult social networks—contributes to Jewish identity persistence across multiple national contexts.

Methodology

Data and Sample

This study draws on large-scale survey data from four major Jewish diaspora communities: Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the USA (Table 1). Each dataset was collected through online surveys administered by research institutions in the respective countries. While these surveys vary in scope and emphasis, they share a common focus on Jewish identity, educational experiences, and social engagement, allowing for meaningful cross-national comparisons.

The combined dataset comprises $n=21,260$ respondents, making this one of the most extensive comparative studies of Jewish identity formation to date. Although online surveys have limitations—particularly in the potential for selection bias—each dataset was designed to approximate a representative sample of its national Jewish population through post-stratification weighting and recruitment strategies reflective of each community's demographics. By leveraging multiple national datasets, this study mitigates the common limitation of single-case studies that fail to account for cross-contextual variation in identity formation. This analytic strategy

Table 1 Datasets used in the analysis

Country	Dataset	Research institution
Australia	Gen17 Australian Jewish community survey (2018) ($n = 8615$)	Australian Center for Jewish Civilisation, Monash University, and JCA Sydney
South Africa	The Jews of South Africa in 2019 (2020) ($n = 4191$)	Institute for Jewish Policy Research, London and Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, Cape Town
United Kingdom	National Jewish Community Survey (2013) ($n = 3736$)	Institute for Jewish Policy Research, London
USA	Jewish Americans in 2020 (2021) ($n = 4718$)	Pew Research Center

Table 2 Independent variables across sampled countries

	Australia		South Africa		United Kingdom		USA	
	Mean	SE/N	Mean	SE/N	Mean	SE/N	Mean	SE/N
Age	52.11	0.25	54.09	0.29	49.73	0.52	50.41	0.67
Sex								
Male	47%	(3809)	47%	(2169)	48%	(1728)	49%	(2406)
Female	53%	(4790)	53%	(2010)	52%	(2008)	51%	(2283)
<i>Jewish education</i>								
Day school+ ^a	47%	(4193)	61%	(2543)	27%	(789)	21%	(1016)
Informal only ^b	38%	(3259)	17%	(739)	56%	(2297)	48%	(2635)
None	14%	(1163)	23%	(909)	17%	(650)	31%	(1046)
<i>Religious denominational affiliation during upbringing</i>								
Orthodox	28%	(2263)	33%	(1365)	15%	(418)	13%	(557)
Traditional ^c	39%	(3229)	48%	(1954)	43%	(1609)	0%	(13)
Conservative	3%	(234)	0%	(–)	0%	(–)	31%	(1509)
Reform	12%	(960)	10%	(362)	16%	(615)	35%	(1360)
No denomination	19%	(1491)	8%	(268)	26%	(813)	21%	(718)
<i>Respondent relationship type</i>								
Endogamous marriage	74%	(6308)	72%	(3170)	55%	(2292)	42%	(2065)
Single	17%	(1332)	18%	(601)	29%	(650)	23%	(729)
Exogamous marriage	9%	(679)	10%	(339)	16%	(611)	35%	(1022)
<i>Respondent's children living with them in their household</i>								
Yes	38%	(1114)	39%	(483)	29%	(939)	29%	(966)
No	62%	(1763)	61%	(875)	71%	(2797)	71%	(3752)
<i>Proportion of close friends who are Jewish</i>								
Most/all	84%	(7312)	85%	(3670)	70%	(2756)	29%	(1932)
Some	13%	(1044)	13%	(420)	18%	(615)	45%	(2110)
None/hardly any	3%	(183)	2%	(75)	12%	(355)	25%	(589)

^aDay school+ includes those who, at a minimum, received a day school education but may have also received informal Jewish education

^bInformal Jewish education includes supplemental programs offered by local providers including after-school, Sunday school, synagogue/Cheder (supplementary education program), or bar/bat-mitzvah programs

^cTraditional is a Jewish denomination in Australia, South Africa and the UK. It is similar to the nominal Orthodoxy common in the USA during the 1960s. Traditional Jews are aligned with Orthodox Jews with respect to festival ritual but similar to Secular Jews with respect to theological belief (Graham 2014)

enables clearer assessment of how educational exposures—day schools, camps, and trips—interact with broader social contexts to shape identity outcomes.

Measures

The analysis includes both independent variables, representing key demographic and socialization factors, and dependent variables, capturing Jewish identity outcomes (Table 2).

Independent Variables

- Jewish education: participation in formal (Jewish day schools) and informal (supplementary schools, Jewish overnight camps, Israel programs) educational settings.
- Religious upbringing: denominational affiliation during childhood (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Traditional, or no denomination).
- Social networks: the proportion of close friends who are Jewish, reflecting the role of peer socialization.
- Household composition: whether respondents are married endogamously or exogamously, and whether they have children in their household.

Table 3 Dependent variables

Jewish engagement scales	Mean	SE	Range	Cronbach's alpha
Ritual engagement ^a	12.96	0.10	0–20	0.84
Cultural engagement ^b	18.59	0.11	0–24	0.72

^a*Ritual engagement scale*: How important is each of the following to what being Jewish means to you? Observing Jewish law (*halakha*); continuing family traditions (not important = 1, important but not essential = 2, essential = 3). Are you currently a member of a Jewish congregation such as a synagogue? (no = 1, yes = 2). How often do you attend Jewish religious services at a synagogue, temple, or *minyan*? (never = 1, a few times a year/seldom = 2; monthly = 3; weekly or more = 4). Do you mark shabbat in a way that makes it meaningful to you? (no, never = 1, yes = 2). Do you keep kosher in your home? (no = 1, yes = 2). Last Passover, did you hold or attend a Seder? (no = 1, yes = 2). During last Yom Kippur, did you fast? (no = 1, yes all/part of the day = 2)

^b*Cultural engagement scale*: How important is each of the following to what being Jewish means to you? Leading an ethical and moral life; working for justice and equality in society; remembering the Holocaust; being part of a Jewish community (not important = 1, important but not essential = 2, essential = 3). How much, if at all, do you feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish people? (none at all = 1, not much = 2, some = 3, a great deal = 4). In the past 12 months, did you make a financial donation to any Jewish charity? (no = 1, yes = 2). Do you read a Jewish newspaper or seek out Jewish news online? (no, never = 1, yes = 2). Do you go to Jewish film festivals or seek out Jewish films (no, never = 1, yes = 2). Do you read Jewish literature, biographies or books on Jewish history (no, never = 1, yes = 2)

Dependent Variables

- Jewish ritual engagement: a composite scale measuring participation in religious practices (e.g., synagogue attendance, holiday observance).
- Jewish cultural engagement: a composite scale capturing engagement with Jewish cultural activities and communal life. Culture comprises the beliefs, values, traditions, and social practices that characterize Jewish identity and way of life (Bankier-Karp 2023; Dengah 2017; Schweid 2008).

These measures operationalize dimensions of Jewish identity maintenance in adulthood, capturing both ritual and cultural expressions of connectedness. Both engagement measures were developed on the basis of prior literature and factor analysis of existing survey items to ensure construct validity (Bankier-Karp 2021; Limonic 2020).

The dependent variables included in each scale are detailed in the footnotes of Table 3.

Analytic Strategy

To assess the impact of Jewish education and socialization on identity outcomes, we employ a two-pronged analytic approach:

First, we replicate the silver bullet approach by estimating baseline regressions of Jewish identity outcomes on single educational exposures (Table 5). This mirrors the methods of much prior research, offering a useful point of comparison. Such models assess direct associations but do not account for broader conditioning influences.

Second, we estimate hierarchical regression models that progressively introduce demographic, upbringing, and adulthood socialization variables to predict Jewish engagement outcomes (Table 6). This approach enables us to examine whether the apparent effects of educational interventions persist once broader ecosystemic factors are taken into account. In this way, the hierarchical models reduce the common pitfall of attributing identity outcomes too strongly to single educational interventions, by showing how these effects may diminish, persist, or shift once family, peer, and household influences are considered. This methodological design strengthens inference by situating education within the wider constellation of factors shaping identity, distinguishing our approach from prior studies that rely on cross-sectional correlations alone.

By incorporating multi-country comparisons, this study also moves beyond the limitations of single-context research. The hierarchical modeling strategy enables us to test the ecosystem approach hypothesis, demonstrating how Jewish identity formation is shaped by the interplay of multiple influences rather than singular interventions.

Table 4 Analysis of Jewish engagement

Jewish engagement by country	Mean	Standard error	95% Confidence interval
<i>Ritual engagement*</i>			
Australia	15.25	0.03	15.19–15.32
South Africa	15.55	0.06	15.43–15.66
UK	15.54	0.07	15.40–15.59
USA	12.95	0.10	12.76–13.14
<i>Cultural engagement*</i>			
Australia	21.17	0.03	21.11–21.22
South Africa	19.04	0.05	18.93–19.14
UK	19.75	0.06	19.63–19.87
USA	18.58	0.11	18.36–18.80

* $p < .001$

Addressing Potential Biases

Given the reliance on cross-sectional survey data, this study does not directly establish causal relationships. However, the analytic strategy mitigates several common pitfalls. By comparing baseline models with hierarchical models that incorporate prior socialization factors, we reduce the risk of over-attributing identity outcomes to single educational interventions. In addition, the inclusion of multiple national contexts highlights how similar educational exposures produce different effects depending on the surrounding communal and cultural ecology.

While longitudinal data would provide a stronger test of identity trajectories over time, this study applies an ecosystem framework to provide extensive transnational, large-scale comparative assessment of Jewish educational impact using advanced regression techniques, enabling a more rigorous evaluation of educational influences within their broader social and communal contexts.

Results

This section presents findings from our comparative analysis of Jewish identity outcomes across four diaspora communities. We begin by examining cross-national variations in Jewish ritual and cultural engagement before evaluating the differential impact of educational programs through a conventional silver bullet approach. Finally, we introduce the ecosystem approach model, employing hierarchical regression to assess how Jewish education interacts with broader demographic and socialization factors in shaping Jewish identity.

Cross-National Differences in Jewish Engagement

Table 4 presents the mean values for ritual and cultural engagement across the four surveyed communities. South Africa and the UK report the highest levels of ritual engagement, followed closely by Australia, while the USA exhibits the lowest.¹ In contrast, cultural engagement is highest in Australia, followed by the UK and South Africa, with the USA again trailing.

These findings underscore the limitations of single-country studies, which often generalize about Jewish identity formation without considering the structural and contextual differences that shape communal life in different national settings. While previous research suggests that Jewish education is associated with higher levels of Jewish engagement (Pew Research Center 2021), our results highlight the influence of broader societal conditions in determining both the nature and intensity of Jewish identity expression.

- South Africa's strong ritual engagement may reflect its high levels of Jewish day school attendance and relatively cohesive communal structures, consistent with prior findings on the role of dense social capital in minority group identity retention (Putnam 2000).
- Australia's leadership in cultural engagement suggests the prominence of informal Jewish education, cultural institutions, and community engagement opportunities, reinforcing the idea that identity transmission occurs not only through religious instruction, but also through diverse forms of cultural participation (Modood 2013).
- The USA's lower scores in both dimensions align with broader trends of disengagement among US Jews (Pew Research Center 2021), suggesting that even when educational programs are available, their effects may be mitigated by the broader cultural and social landscape.

These variations reinforce the need for a comparative, ecosystem approach to studying Jewish identity, as opposed to assuming uniform programmatic effects across different national and communal environments.

A Silver Bullet Approach

Table 5 presents the findings from a conventional silver bullet approach, in which we assessed the relationship between six types of Jewish educational programs and the two dimensions of Jewish engagement. The results indicate that Jewish day schools, Jewish overnight camps, and bar/bat mitzvah programs show the strongest positive

¹ Wald tests were conducted to determine whether the between-country differences reported in Table 4 are significant. Results indicated significant differences in both ritual and cultural engagement among the four countries, except for ritual engagement between South Africa and the United Kingdom, where no significant difference was found. Data available on request.

Table 5 Jewish educational impact on ritual and cultural engagement by country, bivariate regression—A silver bullet approach

	Ritual	Cultural		Ritual	Cultural
<i>Jewish day school</i>	2.87*** (0.25)	1.10*** (0.27)	<i>Jewish supplemental school</i>	0.63** (0.21)	0.98*** (0.25)
<i>Country</i>			<i>Country</i>		
Australia	0.76*** (0.07)	-0.08 (0.06)	Australia	0.36*** (0.07)	0.39*** (0.06)
South Africa	0.03 (0.14)	-0.08 (0.13)	South Africa	-0.19 (0.12)	0.39*** (0.11)
UK	1.35*** (0.16)	0.47*** (0.11)	UK	1.49*** (0.17)	0.62*** (0.14)
USA	2.71*** (0.23)	1.22*** (0.26)	USA	0.58** (0.21)	0.74*** (0.24)
<i>Jewish overnight camp</i>	2.04*** (0.20)	1.25*** (0.23)	<i>Bar/bat-mitzvah</i>	1.85*** (0.20)	1.21*** (0.23)
<i>Country</i>			<i>Country</i>		
Australia	0.66*** (0.07)	0.42*** (0.06)	Australia	0.78*** (0.08)	-0.12 (0.07)
South Africa	0.20 (0.12)	0.19 (0.11)	South Africa	0.02 (0.12)	-0.04 (0.11)
UK	1.45*** (0.13)	0.61*** (0.12)	UK	1.45*** (0.15)	-0.01 (0.13)
USA	1.96*** (0.20)	1.15*** (0.22)	USA	1.80*** (0.19)	1.02*** (0.22)
<i>Birthright^a</i>	-2.23* (0.41)	-0.77 (0.49)	<i>Israel trips^b</i>	1.95*** (0.11)	1.39*** (0.12)
<i>Country</i>			<i>Country</i>		
Australia	-0.81*** (0.19)	-0.14 (0.17)	Australia	1.06*** (0.06)	0.75*** (0.06)
UK	0.48 (0.41)	0.05 (0.37)	South Africa	0.85*** (0.08)	0.80*** (0.09)
USA	-1.93*** (0.37)	-1.08* (0.35)	USA	1.71*** (0.10)	1.48*** (0.11)

^aThe South Africa dataset did not contain a Birthright question

^bThe United Kingdom dataset did not contain an Israel trip question

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

associations with both ritual and cultural engagement. However, the strength and direction of these associations vary significantly by country.

- Jewish day school attendance exhibits a strong and consistent positive association with ritual engagement across all countries, affirming previous research linking formal Jewish education to long-term religious commitment (Pomson and Schnoor 2018).

- Jewish supplemental school and informal programs (such as youth groups and Jewish overnight camps) demonstrate moderate positive associations with both identity dimensions but exhibit substantial cross-national variation in their impact.
- Israel trips, including Birthright Israel, produce mixed effects: while non-Birthright Israel experiences (e.g., long-term study programs) show consistently positive associations with both ritual and cultural engagement, Birthright participation is negatively associated with ritual engagement in the USA. This finding may reflect selection effects, whereby individuals less engaged in Jewish religious life are more likely to opt into the program. This is important for Jewish educators and evaluators to consider when interpreting outcome data from short-term programs. Alternatively, it may indicate that short-term interventions, in the absence of sustained reinforcement, do not independently foster long-term religious commitment. Without controls for prior socialization or adult social networks, however, the reasons for these observed associations remain speculative.

While the silver bullet approach yields useful associations, it remains methodologically limited, failing to account for selection effects, preexisting identity levels, and interdependent influences. Without a more holistic framework, these findings risk overstating the impact of individual programs while neglecting the broader social ecosystems in which identity is formed.

An Ecosystem Approach

To address these limitations, we introduce an ecosystem approach that incorporates multiple predictors of Jewish identity formation simultaneously. Table 6 presents the results of hierarchical regression models predicting both ritual engagement and cultural engagement on the basis of demographic background, measures of upbringing, and adult socialization.

Key Predictors of Jewish Engagement

1. Demographic factors

- Country of residence matters: while South Africa initially appears to have the highest levels of ritual engagement, once upbringing and social context are accounted for, both the UK and the USA surpass South Africa in ritual engagement. This shift underscores how contextual factors mediate identity expression, challenging assumptions that some communities are inherently more engaged than others. This finding also confirms H1, which posits that national context influences identity.
- Sex differences emerge: women exhibit higher levels of cultural engagement than men across all countries, a pattern consistent with broader sociological research on religious and ethnic identity transmission (Di 2020; Hartman

Table 6 Jewish educational impact on ritual and cultural engagement by country, hierarchical regression—An ecosystem approach

	Ritual engagement			Cultural engagement		
	Model 1r	Model 2r	Model 3r	Model 1c	Model 2c	Model 3c
<i>Country^a</i>						
Australia	-0.31*** (0.07)	0.56*** (0.12)	0.15 (0.13)	2.18*** (0.06)	2.52*** (0.12)	2.25*** (0.12)
United Kingdom	-0.05 (0.10)	1.49*** (0.14)	1.46*** (0.14)	0.83*** (0.09)	1.36*** (0.15)	1.41*** (0.16)
USA	-3.10*** (0.11)	0.94* (0.41)	0.81** (0.28)	-0.34** (0.12)	1.77*** (0.38)	1.69*** (0.27)
<i>Age (years)</i>						
	-0.01** (0.01)	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
<i>Sex^b</i>						
Female	0.17 (0.20)	0.44** (0.17)	0.51** (0.16)	0.75*** (0.22)	1.09*** (0.21)	1.10*** (0.20)
<i>Denomination in upbringing^c</i>						
Orthodox		4.52*** (0.34)	3.55*** (0.31)		1.15** (0.42)	0.26 (0.40)
Traditional		6.24*** (0.81)	3.95*** (0.56)		4.42*** (0.76)	1.03 (0.55)
Conservative		1.54*** (0.26)	1.22*** (0.24)		0.94** (0.32)	0.71* (0.32)
Reform		0.16 (0.25)	0.52* (0.24)		-0.27 (0.32)	0.06 (0.31)
<i>Jewish education scale^{d,1}</i>						
Day school education+		1.11*** (0.22)	0.70*** (0.22)		0.64* (0.30)	0.38 (0.30)
No Jewish education		-0.84*** (0.24)	-0.50* (0.25)		-0.92** (0.30)	-0.53 (0.30)
<i>Relationship type^e</i>						
In-married			1.39*** (0.25)			0.72* (0.33)
Intermarried			-0.47 (0.24)			-0.68* (0.33)
<i>Child/ren in household^f</i>						
Yes			0.51* (0.21)			0.16 (0.25)
<i>Jewish friends^g</i>						
All/most of them			1.45*** (0.24)			1.09*** (0.25)
Hardly any/none of them			-0.77*** (0.24)			-1.49*** (0.30)
_cons	16.03*** (0.28)	11.27*** (0.54)	11.06*** (0.47)	17.19*** (0.34)	15.53*** (0.62)	15.98*** (0.57)

Reference categories. ^aCountry: South Africa. ^bSex: male. ^cDenomination in upbringing: no denomination. ^dJewish education: supplemental Jewish education. ^eRelationship type: single-not married. ^fChildren in the household: no. ^gJewish friends: some of them

¹The Jewish education scale combines different education programs in a way that can be suitably

Table 6 (continued)

analyzed for additive effect. Due to a lack of common variables across the four datasets, we were only able to utilize a binary variable for day school education

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

2024; Schnabel et al. 2018). This finding further supports H1 by illustrating the impact of basic demographics—here, sex—on religious and communal participation.

2. Upbringing and education

- Denominational background has a lasting impact: Orthodox and Traditional Jewish upbringings strongly predict higher levels of ritual engagement, while those raised with no denominational affiliation exhibit significantly lower scores in both identity dimensions. This aligns with findings on religious socialization in other minority communities, where early life religious exposure fosters stronger identity retention (Lazar et al. 2002; Sherkat 2010), supporting H2's focus on childhood denominational affiliation.
- Jewish day school attendance predicts both ritual and cultural engagement, although the effects are strongest for ritual practices. Notably, its impact diminishes when controlling for social networks, indicating that peer environments appear to sustain engagement over time, further confirming H2 that education matters, but in interplay with other communal factors.

3. Social networks and current relationships

- Jewish social circles are among the strongest predictors of both ritual and cultural engagement. Respondents with mostly Jewish friends exhibit significantly higher identity scores, supporting the argument that Jewish identity is socially reinforced through peer and communal interactions (Kadushin 2012; Wuthnow 2002). This robust effect supports H3 on the importance of adult social networks.
- Marriage patterns matter, but in complex ways. Endogamous marriage is positively associated with both identity dimensions—compared with exogamous marriage and singlehood (Engelberg 2016)—although its impact is weaker than that of peer networks. This suggests that while family structures remain important, peer and communal influences may be more decisive in shaping long-term Jewish identity outcomes, again reinforcing H3's emphasis on marital and familial dynamics in adulthood.

Comparing the Silver Bullet and Ecosystem Approaches

The ecosystem approach challenges the deterministic claims often found in program evaluations that isolate the effects of educational interventions. While Jewish day schools, Jewish overnight camps, and Israel programs positively contribute to identity engagement, their impact is not independent but rather deeply intertwined with familial, social, and contextual factors.

A silver bullet approach might conclude that Jewish education directly causes increased Jewish engagement (Table 5). However, our hierarchical regression models demonstrate that these effects are moderated by upbringing, peer influence, and marital patterns (Table 6).

The strongest predictors of Jewish identity engagement are not individual educational experiences but rather the combination of Jewish education, peer networks, and family background (Lazar et al. 2002), a finding consistent with broader sociological research on identity formation in ethnic and religious communities (Fuligni and Pederson 2002; Modood 2013). Taken together, these results confirm that Jewish identity formation is best understood as an emergent property of interconnected educational, familial, and social processes, a finding that reframes how we evaluate the impact of Jewish education in comparative perspective.

Discussion

Key Findings and Theoretical Contributions

Numerous studies have examined how Jewish identification persists or wanes within diaspora contexts, highlighting the combined influence of educational experiences, institutional support, social networks, and personal conviction (Di 2020; Rebhun 2014). This study systematizes the field's long-standing ecological discourse by providing an empirical model that simultaneously tests the interaction among factors discussed since at least the 1980s. It moves beyond the program-specific focus of traditional evaluations to examine how educational, familial, and social forces jointly sustain communal continuity. Specifically, it advances that discourse by moving beyond silver bullet explanations that attribute Jewish identity outcomes to single formative interventions such as schooling, camps, or Israel programs. Instead, it emphasizes the ecosystem framework in which Jewish identity formation arises from the interdependence of educational, familial, and social forces operating across the life course. This perspective situates Jewish education within the wider ecology of Jewish social life, emphasizing how learning, upbringing, and networks collectively sustain communal continuity across generations and national settings.

Drawing on comparative data from four diaspora communities, our analysis demonstrates that Jewish educational participation—both formal and informal—exerts a measurable influence on ritual and cultural engagement, but that these effects depend on the surrounding social ecosystem. Denominational upbringing, peer networks, and family structures each amplify or attenuate educational impact, revealing that identity formation is a relational process rather than a linear outcome of isolated interventions. These findings reaffirm the explanatory power of social capital (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), and life course perspectives (Elder 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007) for understanding Jewish identity maintenance in contemporary diasporic settings.

Rethinking Program Impact: Beyond the Silver Bullet Approach

A central finding of this study is that the effects of Jewish education—whether formal or informal—cannot be understood apart from the wider demographic and social environments in which they occur. The ecosystem approach shows that the strongest predictors of Jewish identity engagement are cumulative rather than singular: educational participation interacts with the density of Jewish peer networks, family religiosity, and communal cohesion. Peer influences, long recognized as crucial to ethnic and religious identity formation (Kadushin 2012; Reinhart 2021; Rebhun 2014), emerge here as one of the most powerful mediating mechanisms through which education sustains engagement.

While Jewish schooling and informal programs clearly contribute to identity development, their impact is amplified when reinforced by highly engaged familial and social settings. This pattern mirrors findings in other minority and religious communities, where educational effects are strongest when embedded within supportive social ecosystems (Modood 2013; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Rather than viewing Jewish education as a self-contained catalyst, these results highlight its function as one element in an interdependent system of relationships that collectively sustain Jewish belonging.

Comparative and Cross-National Insights: Identity Formation in Diaspora Contexts

The cross-national design of this study reveals how Jewish identity formation is shaped not only by individual or educational factors, but also by the broader communal and demographic environments in which Jewish life unfolds. While much research on Jewish education and identity has been confined to single-country contexts, our findings highlight the need to account for local variations in social structure, institutional density, and communal cohesion (cf. Sheskin and Hartman 2015). Jewish engagement levels in South Africa and the United Kingdom, for example, exceed those observed in the USA, despite comparable rates of educational participation. This pattern suggests that the strength of Jewish identity depends as much on the surrounding social ecology as on educational provision itself—a dynamic consistent with cross-national studies of assimilation and ethnic identity maintenance (Alba and Nee 2003; Gans 1994).

These contrasts also complicate assumptions about the uniform effectiveness of Jewish educational systems across diaspora settings. The USA, despite possessing the largest and most developed network of Jewish schools and programs, records the lowest mean engagement levels among the four communities examined. This divergence points to the influence of wider sociological conditions—such as intermarriage, singlehood (Engelberg 2016), denominational fluidity, and changing modes of communal affiliation—that shape how educational experiences translate into long-term identity. Similar patterns have been observed in other minority and religious communities, where institutional interventions interact with national and local contexts to produce distinct trajectories of belonging (Kalmijn et al. 2006).

Implications for Studies of Jewish Education, Identity, and Social Networks

This study contributes to scholarship on Jewish education by showing that educational settings operate not merely as sites of knowledge transmission, but also as integral components of wider Jewish identity ecosystems. Jewish schooling, camps, and informal programs shape identity most powerfully when situated within dense networks of family, peers, and communal institutions. These findings also speak more broadly to scholars of ethnicity and religion concerned with how minority communities sustain continuity amid shifting social environments. They affirm that education functions as a mechanism of cultural reproduction that links individual learning to collective belonging (Wuthnow 2002).

Methodologically, the analysis underscores the importance of approaches capable of capturing this complexity. Reliance on simple cross-tabulations or bivariate correlations cannot illuminate how education, socialization, and demography interact to shape identity. By employing hierarchical regression models, this study demonstrates the value of frameworks that incorporate multiple predictors and additive effects, offering a more nuanced account of identity development. Future research should build on this design, integrating longitudinal and mixed-method studies to trace how educational experiences intersect with family and peer networks over time.

Three implications follow. First, identity formation is context-dependent: cross-national comparisons reveal that educational experiences translate differently across communal environments, cautioning against generalizing from single-country studies. Second, peer and social network effects remain central. Jewish identity, similar to other ethnic and religious identities, is reinforced through thick and multidimensional social capital rather than through isolated institutional exposure. Third, short-term programs such as Birthright Israel may spark engagement but achieve enduring influence only when embedded within robust social and institutional frameworks. In cohesive communal settings, these experiences can integrate into lifelong patterns of participation; in more diffuse contexts, their impact often dissipates without sustained reinforcement.

Although this analysis focuses on Jewish diaspora communities, the ecosystem framework has broader relevance for comparative studies of religion and ethnicity. By recognizing the intertwined effects of education, social networks, and family life, researchers can apply this perspective to examine how diverse minority groups—Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, or otherwise—negotiate continuity and adaptation in diaspora settings.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers new insights into the interplay of education, family, and social networks in Jewish identity formation, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the analysis draws on data from four national Jewish community surveys, inconsistencies in variable definitions and question wording complicate direct cross-national comparison. In addition, the use of cross-sectional

data constrains our ability to trace the temporal sequencing of identity formation. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs to examine how educational experiences and socialization processes shape Jewish engagement over the life course.

Second, although our findings highlight the pivotal role of social networks, further work is needed to illuminate the mechanisms through which peer relationships foster or inhibit identity continuity. Social network analysis and qualitative inquiry could reveal how patterns of friendship, community involvement, and institutional participation sustain Jewish belonging in everyday life.

Finally, extending this ecosystem approach to other ethnic and religious groups would enhance its comparative value, clarifying how different diasporic communities negotiate continuity and adaptation within their specific social contexts. Such research would not only test the robustness of the framework proposed here, but also contribute to broader sociological understanding of how education, networks, and family life together sustain group identity in pluralist societies.

Conclusions

This study reconsiders how Jewish education contributes to the formation and persistence of Jewish identity in diaspora contexts. Moving beyond narrowly focused silver bullet explanations, it advances an ecosystem perspective in which Jewish schooling, informal education, family life, and peer networks operate interdependently within broader communal and societal settings. By demonstrating that educational influences are most effective when reinforced by social capital and familial continuity, this framework deepens sociological understanding of how minority groups sustain cultural and religious engagement over time.

Our comparative analysis across four diaspora communities shows that similar educational experiences yield different outcomes depending on the social and institutional ecology in which they occur. These findings affirm that Jewish identity is maintained not through singular interventions but through the cumulative layering of social relationships, cultural transmission, and communal participation. In doing so, the study synthesizes and extends earlier work on Jewish education and identity (Rebhun 2014; Engelberg 2016), demonstrating how overlapping familial, social, and institutional forces jointly shape religious belonging in contemporary diaspora life.

Methodologically, the research underscores the value of comparative and multivariate approaches that model the interaction of demographic, educational, and social factors. This design provides a template for future studies of ethnic and religious identity formation that seek to capture the complexity of real social environments. Although the present analysis focuses on Jewish communities, the ecosystem model developed here offers a transferable framework for understanding how education, networks, and family structures sustain collective identities across diverse cultural and national contexts.

Ultimately, the study calls for a conceptual shift—from viewing Jewish education as a discrete intervention to understanding it as a node within an interdependent

web of relationships that enable Jewish life to endure and evolve. Recognizing this relational foundation invites both scholars and practitioners to approach Jewish education not as the source of identity, but as one of the social contexts through which identity is continually made, renewed, and transmitted across generations.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests Adina Bankier-Karp is the associate editor at *Contemporary Jewry*.

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