

The Effect of Socialization through the Lens of Malay Students on Ethnic Relations

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Abstract

This study explores the role of key socialization agents—family, friends, and media—in shaping Malay students' attitudes and behaviors toward interethnic engagement within Malaysia's multicultural society. By focusing on these critical domains of socialization, the research aims to uncover the extent to which each agent influences ethnic relations, either fostering social cohesion or perpetuating division. Employing a quantitative methodology, data were gathered through an online survey involving Malay students from diverse demographic and educational backgrounds. The results indicate that family serves as a foundational socialization agent, significantly shaping initial attitudes and perceptions of other ethnic groups through parental teachings and cultural values. Peer interactions, on the other hand, emerge as dynamic spaces where existing perceptions may either be reinforced or challenged, depending on the quality of intergroup experiences. Media is identified as the most pervasive influence, functioning as both a bridge and a barrier to interethnic understanding. While positive portrayals in media foster intercultural acceptance and empathy, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes risks entrenching biases and social divisions. This study provides valuable insights into the complex interplay of socialization agents in shaping interethnic dynamics. It highlights the critical need for balanced and inclusive approaches across family, peers, and media domains to nurture harmonious ethnic relations. The findings have practical implications for policymakers, educators, and media practitioners, emphasizing the importance of promoting inclusive educational practices, facilitating positive interethnic interactions, and ensuring balanced media representations of ethnic diversity. By addressing these aspects, this study contributes to advancing Malaysia's aspirations for a more integrated and cohesive multicultural society.

Keywords: Socialisation, Malay, Students, Ethnic, Ethnic Relation

Introduction

Malay students in Malaysia's diverse education system face distinct challenges in navigating interethnic relationships while fostering a strong sense of identity. The legacy of over 150 years of British colonial rule reshaped Malaysia from a predominantly Malay society into a multicultural nation with three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Sani, 2009; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). This cultural diversity significantly influences the education system, which serves as a critical platform for shaping the attitudes and values of younger generations. A key feature of Malaysia's primary education system is its dual structure, offering national schools, where Malay serves as the medium of instruction, alongside vernacular schools that use Mandarin or Tamil (Sani, 2009; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). While this framework preserves the linguistic and cultural heritage of various communities, it also inadvertently perpetuates ethnic segregation. The lack of frequent and meaningful interethnic interactions within these separate educational streams may deepen social divides, limiting opportunities for mutual understanding among students of different backgrounds. This dual-system structure raises important questions about the role of education in fostering national unity within a multicultural society. To navigate these challenges, it is crucial to explore how educational policies and practices can be reimagined to encourage greater interethnic engagement and understanding, ultimately positioning education as a unifying force in Malaysia's diverse sociocultural landscape.

Promoting unity among students from diverse ethnic backgrounds remains a significant challenge. Despite efforts to cultivate tolerance and harmony through the curriculum, issues such as ethnic prejudice and discriminatory behavior persist (Maaruf et al., 2013). These challenges underscore the urgent need for more deliberate and impactful strategies to encourage positive relationships among students of different communities. Many have urged the Ministry of Education to take bold actions to instill a deeper sense of national unity within schools (Azlan, 2018). Without such targeted measures, schools risk reflecting or even exacerbating the broader divisions that exist within society. One key initiative aimed at fostering integration has been the adoption of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language. This policy seeks to create a shared platform for communication across ethnic lines and to build a collective national identity. While the use of a common language has shown potential in bridging linguistic divides, it alone is insufficient to address the deeper social and cultural separations that persist. Bridging these gaps requires more than linguistic unity; it demands fostering meaningful interactions and collaboration among students. Such interactions, rooted in mutual understanding and empathy, are essential for breaking down stereotypes and building genuine connections. By creating opportunities for shared experiences and dialogue, schools can move beyond superficial measures, actively contributing to a more integrated and cohesive society.

In Malaysia's vibrant and diverse cultural landscape, the education system serves as a critical platform for fostering a more inclusive and united society. For Malay students, growing up in this multicultural environment involves navigating the interplay between preserving their cultural heritage and embracing a shared national identity. This dynamic reflects broader concepts such as citizenship education and the "nation-of-intent" framework (Ahmad & Abdullah, 2022; Maaruf et al., 2013). While significant progress has been made in promoting interethnic understanding, persistent challenges highlight the need for thoughtful reforms. These reforms must focus on creating meaningful spaces where students from different

ethnic backgrounds can connect, collaborate, and learn from one another. Such efforts are vital to building a future that values unity while preserving the richness of Malaysia's cultural diversity. This study emphasizes the importance of understanding how socialization processes shape Malay students' attitudes toward ethnic diversity. By harnessing these processes, there is a unique opportunity to promote more inclusive and harmonious relationships across communities. The findings of this research aim to provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers, offering strategies to strengthen interethnic engagement. Ultimately, this research contributes to the vision of a society that not only celebrates its diversity but also finds strength and unity within it, paving the way for a more cohesive and resilient nation.

Socialization

Socialization is a fundamental process that shapes every aspect of our lives. It is through socialization that we learn the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors essential for participating in society. This lifelong process begins in childhood, influencing how we perceive ourselves, interact with others, and view people from different ethnic backgrounds. Central to this process are key socialization agents—family, friends, schools, and media—that transmit cultural norms and expectations (Baumrind, 1978; Pulerwitz et al., 2019). Among these agents, family plays the most pivotal role in shaping an individual's identity and worldview. From early childhood, families introduce children to cultural practices, social norms, and moral values that guide their future decisions and interactions (Elsayed, 2024). Parents, as primary role models, teach by example, demonstrating appropriate behavior and reinforcing it through discipline and encouragement (Elsayed, 2024; Hughes et al., 2006). Their actions significantly influence a child's understanding of societal expectations and acceptable conduct. Research underscores the importance of parental discipline styles in shaping children's social competence and empathy. Positive discipline practices, such as constructive feedback and consistent encouragement, are linked to fostering socially adept and compassionate individuals (Al-Hassan et al., 2021). These early lessons serve as the foundation upon which children build their ability to form relationships, navigate social complexities, and engage with the world around them.

During adolescence, schools and peer groups emerge as key influences in shaping social development, often complementing or challenging the foundational lessons taught at home (Bayram et al., 2021; Pulerwitz et al., 2019). These new influences often complement or even challenge the lessons learned at home. Peer groups, for instance, play a crucial role in shaping decisions related to identity, belonging, and behaviors, including risky activities such as smoking (Bayram et al., 2021). Schools, on the other hand, function as microcosms of society. Beyond imparting academic knowledge, they foster values, ethics, and a sense of civic responsibility. Through classroom lessons, group projects, and social interactions, schools help students navigate diverse social environments and collaborate with individuals from different backgrounds (Bayram et al., 2021). These experiences are instrumental in preparing young people to engage in the broader world. In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful socialization agent, especially for students. It provides opportunities for connection, learning, and self-expression. However, excessive use of social media can negatively affect academic performance and mental well-being (Boahene et al., 2019; Yessenbekova et al., 2020). Additionally, constant exposure to online communities shapes young people's beliefs, values, and expectations, often amplifying both positive and negative influences (Baria, 2021). While social media can foster connections and facilitate the exchange of ideas, it also has the

potential to spread stereotypes and misinformation. Thoughtful and responsible use of these platforms is crucial to ensuring they contribute positively to young people's development and socialization.

Understanding how socialization shapes ethnic relations requires examining key theoretical frameworks that provide valuable insights. Social learning theory, for instance, posits that individuals acquire behaviors and attitudes by observing and imitating influential figures, such as parents, teachers, and peers (McCullough, 2011). Through this process of observation, people internalize what is rewarded or discouraged, leaving a lasting imprint on their perspectives and actions (McCullough, 2011; Proctor et al., 2020). Another relevant framework is symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes the importance of communication and shared experiences in shaping social relationships. This theory explores how individuals use language, symbols, and shared meanings to interpret their interactions and understand the world. Its relevance is particularly evident in how individuals from different ethnic groups perceive and engage with one another. Socialization is a lifelong journey, continuously influencing how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. From the foundational lessons imparted by families to the broader impacts of schools, peer groups, and social media, every stage of socialization leaves an indelible mark. In an increasingly diverse world, the way we socialize plays a critical role in shaping our ability to understand and connect with people from different backgrounds. Adopting inclusive and intentional approaches to socialization can challenge stereotypes, promote mutual respect, and build stronger, more cohesive communities. By delving into the dynamics of socialization, we can take meaningful steps toward fostering a society where diversity is celebrated, and every individual feels valued and understood.

Socialization and Ethnic Relations among Malay Students

Malaysia's demographic landscape is a vibrant mosaic of ethnic diversity, encompassing Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various indigenous communities, each with its own distinctive cultural, linguistic, and religious identities. This rich diversity reflects the nation's complex historical journey, marked by periods of cooperation interspersed with episodes of tension and conflict. Ethnic relations in Malaysia have been profoundly shaped by historical, economic, and political factors, influencing the dynamics among its communities over time. To foster national harmony and unity, the Malaysian government has implemented various initiatives, including the *Rukunegara* and *Wawasan 2020*. These efforts aim to promote integration and mutual respect while building an inclusive national identity (Shamsul, 2011). In recent years, newer frameworks such as the *Wawasan Kemakmuran Bersama 2030* (WKB) and the *Dasar Perpaduan Negara* (DPN) have further emphasized unity in diversity, focusing on equitable economic growth and social cohesion as pathways to achieving national integration. Despite these proactive measures, significant challenges remain. Ethnic differences persist, often compounded by socioeconomic disparities and the politicization of ethnic identities (Brown et al., 2018). Unequal access to education, employment opportunities, and wealth distribution continues to fuel tensions, while divisive political rhetoric has occasionally amplified these divisions, undermining efforts to foster genuine unity. Overcoming these challenges requires a shift from symbolic interventions to meaningful, structural reforms that address the root causes of inequality and division. Genuine dialogue, inclusive governance, and policies promoting equity and justice are essential. By embracing these approaches, Malaysia can advance toward realizing its vision of

unity—a society that celebrates its vibrant diversity while fostering a shared sense of belonging and purpose.

Research explicitly focuses on the socialization of Malay students and its impact on ethnic relations remains limited. However, existing studies suggest that Malay students' attitudes toward their non-Malay peers are shaped by various factors, including family influences, educational environments, and broader societal narratives (Mansor, 2014). Inclusive educational practices and fostering positive interethnic relationships within schools have been shown to improve ethnic attitudes (Razli et al., 2013). Conversely, societal tensions and negative stereotypes perpetuated by media and peer groups can hinder efforts to establish harmonious relationships between different ethnic communities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for promoting social cohesion and fostering interethnic harmony in Malaysia. Family upbringing plays a foundational role in shaping initial perceptions, while schools serve as a critical space for cultivating interethnic understanding through collaborative activities and shared experiences. However, societal narratives, particularly those shaped by the media, often reinforce stereotypes that undermine these efforts. Peer group influences, especially during adolescence, can either bridge or deepen ethnic divides depending on the context. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the socialization processes among Malay students and their implications for ethnic relations. By examining the roles of family, education, peer groups, and societal narratives, it aims to provide nuanced insights into how these factors interact to shape attitudes toward ethnic diversity. The findings are expected to inform policies and practices in multicultural education and community development, offering actionable strategies to build stronger, more inclusive communities. Through this research, policymakers and educators can better understand the mechanisms underlying interethnic attitudes and work toward fostering a unified society that values and respects diversity.

Material and Method

Materials

The instrument measuring the influence of socialization was adapted from Huang and colleagues (2019), who examined the impact of socialization through family, friends, community, and media on women's sports participation in Taiwan. This tool was modified to suit the context of this study. However, this research focuses specifically on three primary socialization agents: family, friends, and media. To construct the items, concepts of socialization influence on intergroup attitudes from previous studies were referenced. These studies include Cameron et al. (2011), McKeown and Taylor (2018), Odenweller and Harris (2018), Punyanunt-Carter (2008), Soliz and Rittenour (2012), and Zhang (2015), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Reference Sources for Socialization Influence Instruments

Reference Source	The Concept of Socialization Influence
Punyanunt-carter (2008); Zhang (2015)	The presentation of information about a race through the media contributes to the formation of views towards that race.
Cameron et al., (2011); Mckeown & Taylor (2018)	Peer culture is associated with increased intentions toward intergroup friendship.
Odenweller & Harris (2018); Soliz & Rittenour (2012)	Family communication patterns influence socialization attitudes between groups of children

Based on the references mentioned, a total of 15 items were developed to measure the influence of socialization, with 5 items allocated to each primary socialization agent. A 5-point Likert scale, like the format used in Huang and colleagues' (2019) instrument, was employed in this questionnaire. Below are examples of items included in the socialization influence construct:

1. **Family:** My family members often encourage me to help others, regardless of their religion or ethnicity.
2. **Friends:** My friends and I are interested in participating in activities that involve individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.
3. **Media:** Negative news about interethnic issues in the mass media reinforces my negative perceptions of other ethnic groups.

Method

This survey form was distributed to students at Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) using the convenience sampling method via online survey. The Google Form database is used by spreading and sharing links with friends, HEI students, and lecturers who aim to obtain information from the perspective of Malay HEI students, especially starting from the beginning of November 2020 until the end of December 2020, a total of 384 respondents were taken as suggested by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) based on the total student population obtained through Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) statistics. HEI students at the certificate to bachelor level in 2019 are over 1,000,000 people (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2019). Meanwhile, the total percentage of Malay students in HEIs included in Public and Private Higher Education Institutions is only 32% compared to 68% of non-Malay students (Nazri et al., 2013). So, of 32%, the total population of Malay students in HEIs is approximately 320,000.

Result and Discussion

The influence of socialization was assessed using a customized evaluation tool specifically designed for this study, adapted from the framework introduced by Huang et al. (2019). This adaptation ensured that the tool aligned with the unique cultural and contextual nuances of the research, enabling a more accurate measure of the socialization process. The scale focuses on three primary socialization agents—family, friends, and media—each of which plays a critical role in shaping attitudes toward different social groups. The items on the scale were carefully designed to capture the extent to which these agents influence participants' interethnic perceptions and engagement. For instance, family socialization reflects early and

foundational attitudes, while friends contribute through peer dynamics and shared experiences. Media influence encompasses exposure to narratives, images, and messaging that shape broader social perspectives. Table 2 provides a detailed overview of the findings, highlighting the varying degrees of influence these agents exert on Malay students attending Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. The results reveal the significant, yet varied, contributions of family, friends, and media to shaping attitudes and fostering interethnic engagement. By understanding these influences, the study offers valuable insights into the complex interplay of socialization agents in promoting harmonious ethnic relations within the Malaysian context.

Table 2
Level of Socialization Influence among Malay Students

	n	%	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
Socialization						
Family			20.7	3.6	7	25
Low	54	14.1				
Moderate	245	63.8				
High	85	22.1				
Friends			18.7	4.2	5	25
Low	50	13.0				
Moderate	245	63.8				
High	89	23.2				
Media			19.2	2.7	11	25
Low	28	7.3				
Moderate	263	68.5				
High	93	24.2				

**n: sampel size; Std: Standard deviation; Min: Minimum; Max: Maksimum*

According to the data presented in Table 2, the family serves as a significant socialization agent, with most participants (63.8%) reporting a moderate degree of influence. The average score for family influence is 20.7, with a standard deviation of 3.6, indicating some variation in how participants perceive this impact. Similarly, friends play a moderate role in shaping socialization, as 63.8% of participants also fall into the moderate category. The average score for socialization influence from friends is slightly lower at 18.7, with a standard deviation of 4.2, reflecting broader variability in peer influence. Media influence is similarly moderate but slightly more prevalent, with 68.5% of participants experiencing a moderate degree of influence. The average score for media's impact is 19.2, accompanied by a smaller standard deviation of 2.7, suggesting more consistency in how media shapes participants' attitudes. These findings highlight that socialization agents—family, friends, and media—moderately influence participants' perspectives and attitudes toward ethnic groups in Malaysia. A higher level of influence corresponds to a stronger impact of these agents on shaping interethnic engagement. Understanding the nuanced roles of these socialization agents is essential for developing targeted interventions that foster harmonious ethnic relations among Malaysian youth.

The findings on the levels of socialization impact from the three primary agents—family, friends, and media—indicate that most respondents experience a moderate level of

influence. This suggests that while socialization plays a role in shaping participants' lives, its overall impact may be limited in scope. Notably, among the three agents, media exerts the greatest influence on Malay students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), surpassing the influence of family and friends. In the era of globalization, the role of media, particularly social media, has become increasingly significant in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors. This study aligns with prior research by Akram and Kumar (2017), which highlights the transformative effect of social media on individuals' lifestyles. Social media's pervasive presence ensures consistent exposure to information, ideas, and perspectives, resulting in subtle yet profound shifts in users' worldviews. Recurrent media coverage further amplifies this influence, as noted by Akram and Kumar (2017), creating a ripple effect that shapes perceptions and interactions with social groups. Moreover, Marquart et al. (2018) emphasize that media's role as a socialization agent extends beyond mere information dissemination; it actively influences consumer behavior and attitudes. This underscores the need to critically evaluate the media's influence, particularly as it pertains to interethnic engagement among youths. Understanding media's significant role offers valuable insights for fostering positive socialization outcomes and promoting harmony within Malaysia's multicultural society.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significant role of socialization agents in influencing ethnic relations among Malay students in Malaysia. The findings reveal that family, peers, and media play crucial yet varied roles in shaping students' attitudes and perceptions toward ethnic diversity. Family influence remains foundational, as parental attitudes and teachings serve as a critical starting point for shaping students' perspectives on interethnic engagement. With 63.8% of participants reporting moderate levels of family influence, it is evident that familial interactions provide a significant platform for instilling values of acceptance and understanding. However, the variability in influence suggests that not all families equally emphasize ethnic inclusivity. Peer interactions, particularly within educational and social contexts, also emerge as a vital socialization agent. These interactions help foster mutual respect, shared experiences, and understanding across ethnic groups. However, the data also highlights the risk of reinforcing prejudiced beliefs when peer group dynamics are negative or exclusive. With 23.2% of participants experiencing high levels of peer influence, targeted interventions in educational settings can help shape positive peer interactions. Media, especially social media, was identified as the most impactful socialization agent, with 68.5% of participants experiencing moderate media influence. Positive representations of ethnic diversity in media promote understanding and acceptance, while negative stereotypes perpetuate biases. Given the pervasive nature of media in the digital age, its influence is both profound and far-reaching, emphasizing the need for critical media literacy among youths. This study recommends promoting inclusive curricula in educational institutions, encouraging media to portray positive and balanced ethnic representations, and involving families and communities in fostering inclusivity. Policymakers and educators must adopt a holistic approach, leveraging these insights to create interventions that promote interethnic harmony. By addressing these challenges and building on the strengths of socialization agents, Malaysia can progress toward a more cohesive and harmonious multicultural society.

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