



## Cultural Identity Negotiation Among English-dominant Malaysian Chinese University Students

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### Abstract

This research explores the question: How do English-dominant Malaysian Chinese (EMC) university students in Malaysia negotiate their cultural identities within an English-dominated environment? Employing qualitative methods, data were collected from 30 participants through open-ended questionnaires, and 4 participants, selected from the initial questionnaire respondents, took part in a focus group discussion. The study reveals that societal factors, personal experiences, and traditional Chinese cultural upbringing significantly influence their cultural identity negotiation. Some of the major issues are government policy, Malaysia's multiculturalism, western influence and culture, and perception towards the use of English. Participants adopt strategies like embracing multiculturalism, blending languages, and selectively incorporating English elements to balance their Malaysian Chinese heritage with English influences. This study adds to the literature on multiculturalism and fluidity of identity, especially in the context of Malaysian Chinese and the need for constant cultural adaptation and learning.



### Article History

Received: 15 August 2024

Accepted: 24 October 2024

### Keywords

Cultural Identity;  
Identity Negotiation;  
Language Dominance;  
English-Dominant Malaysian Chinese;  
University Malaysian Chinese Students.

### Introduction

As the world becomes more globalized, cultures are open to a variety of ideas, practices, and technologies. This combination of tradition and the contemporary world leads to dilemmas on both the societal and personal level. On a macro level, it has resulted in the emergence of a new world order and "new universalism", a concept that suggests the integration of different cultural values, norms, and practices into a shared global culture.

This process often results in the standardization of certain aspects of life, such as language, fashion, and consumer habits, which can overshadow local traditions and identities (Zerilli, 1996). On a micro level, the diversity and the complexity can be confusing to individuals and they can be unable to envision themselves in certain groups. This raises questions of identity—questions of "who I am" and "who are we".

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Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CRJSSH.7.2.09>

The impact of this global shift is especially evident in multicultural societies, such as Malaysia, where various ethnic and linguistic communities navigate their identity negotiations. While previous research has extensively examined the cultural identity of Malaysian Chinese and the dominance of English in Malaysia, there is a lack of focus on EMC and a significant gap in understanding their identity dynamics. (Al-Saggaf & Su, 2024) has quantitatively explored the attachment of English-dominant Malaysian Chinese (EMC) students to their Malaysian Chinese culture, revealing that a significant percentage retain a positive connection. However, the study does not address the personal experiences and strategies these students use to navigate their cultural identities. This gap raises critical questions about how EMC individuals negotiate their cultural identity in an English-dominant environment.

The fluid nature of identities, coupled with power dynamics like state policy, business opportunities, cultural dominance, and personal preferences, creates a tension that requires negotiation. This is particularly the case with immigrants who undergo a more severe identity crisis. Their process of identity negotiation is especially intricate because they have to consider their national, ethnic, and cultural selves. They are always in a dilemma between their cultural background and the culture that they have to embrace in the new country. This process is constant and results in the production of new and constantly transforming identities that are both global and local. Several empirical works have supported this, for instance, Berry (1992) and Erten *et al.*, (2018) calls this process of negotiation as “acculturation”.

Language is inseparable from culture and people’s identity. It is not only a tool of communication; the choice and the way of using a language is a reflection and an indication of one’s cultural affiliation and identity (Fishman, 1996; Hall, 1997). A lot of research has confirmed that language choice and use strongly correlate with an individual’s sense of belonging to their cultural community (Abubakr *et al.* 2019; Chung, 2006; Nilep, 2006; Vallejo *et al.*, 2023).

Globalization has led to the emergence of various linguistic environments and multilingualism. For the bilingual or multilingual individuals, the language that is most preferred and fluent is known as the

dominant language (Treffers-Daller, 2019). This concept is particularly relevant in multicultural societies with multilingual individuals who are able to juggle several personal and cultural identities in different languages. Some previous studies have indicated that language choice may be associated with acculturation beliefs and that cultural orientation may depend on language use and communication (Hinostroza-Castillo *et al.* 2022; M. Luo *et al.* 2021; Yim *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, language dominance is not just a matter of language proficiency but of emotional attachment and how people define themselves in their cultures.

In this regard, English-dominant Malaysian Chinese (EMC) can be taken as an example of the given phenomenon. Although Malay is Malaysia’s official language, English is also widely used in education, commerce, and government due to historical and socio-political reasons. Unique from other overseas Chinese community, Malaysian Chinese give a considerable emphasis on Chinese language education for the continuity of Chinese culture and Chinese identity (Ang, 2017; Chin 2020; Matondang, 2016; C. B. Tan 1997; Chiu, 2000; See, 2013; Wang, 2016). Research has also affirmed that preserving heritage language is important for the enhancement of cultural identity (Lee, 2002; Otçu, 2010; Otwinowska *et al.* 2019; Tse, 2001). In the case of EMC, their preference for English mostly comes from practical reasons such as better educational and career opportunities. This preference may result in lower usage and fluency in the Chinese language and threaten the preservation of Malaysian Chinese culture, but it cannot be arbitrarily said that they simply do not identify with Malaysian Chinese culture or that they identify only with English culture. The extent of their cultural affiliation, as well as the detail of their cultural identity negotiation, remains to be explored.

Given that cultural identity formation intensifies during emerging adulthood, a period generally defined as occurring between the ages of 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000), this research continues the work of (Al-Saggaf & Su, 2024), aiming to investigate how EMC university students negotiate their cultural identity within an English-dominated academic context at an international university in Malaysia. In this article, heritage culture refers to the cultural practices, values, and traditions

that individuals inherit from their Chinese ethnic or familial background, while mainstream culture refers to the English-dominant academic and social environment. It seeks to explore the strategies, approaches, and experiences of these students in their cultural identity journey. The subsequent sections of this paper will methodically examine these elements, offering a detailed understanding of the cultural identity negotiation dynamics among these students.

## Literature Review

### Cultural Identity

The Notion of Cultural Identity and Social Identity Theory, as proposed by Tajfel (1974), posit that an individual's self-concept is shaped by the recognition of belonging to a social group and the emotional significance attached to that affiliation (p. 69). At its core, social identity entails an individual's identification with social groups, making the identity meaningful within a social context.

A social group consists of individuals who possess a shared social identification and view themselves as partakers of an identical social classification (Hogg *et al.*, 1985). As Tajfel (1978) argued, people naturally categorize themselves and others into social categories (such as ethnicity, gender, and nationality) and derive their identity from these group memberships. Social identity solidifies when individuals subjectively unite into a cohesive social group, marking a significant step in the group formation process.

Drawing from Social Identity Theory, cultural identity is regarded as a unique instance of social identity. Culture is a sort of social group which can be defined as a collective and dynamic set of norms, values, and practices that characterize a group or a community. It encompasses all aspects of human existence, such as daily activities, relationships, festival celebrations, language usage, and more (Margalit *et al.*, 1994).

Compared with culture, cultural identity pertains to individual's personal and subjective sense of belonging, attachment, and identification in a cultural context. It indicates the comprehension of their own culture, the significance of belonging to a cultural group, as well as the value and sense of belonging towards their cultural community. As summarized by Schwartz *et al.*, (2006, p.10), cultural identity

encompasses "the ideals and values of the cultural in-group with which the person identifies."

The complexity and fluidity of cultural identity, as defined by Chen *et al.*, 2016 as "the experience, enactment, and negotiation of dynamic social identifications by group members within particular settings", can be reflected in cross-field and multi-perspective interpretation. From a naturalistic perspective, cultural identity is based on one's acknowledging the common origin, shared characteristics, and common ideals with other individuals or groups; at the discursive level, the formation of one's cultural identity is a continuous and incomplete process that relies on historical, cultural, and linguistic elements to establish similarities and define boundaries of identity (Hall *et al.*, 1996). Hence, one's cultural identity does not always coincide with the culture to which he or she originally belonged, and cultural homogeneity may not necessarily exist in a cultural community, which indicates the possibility of diverse cultural identities within one cultural group (Grimson, 2010).

Cultural identity formation intensifies in emerging adulthood, typically defined as the period between 18 and 25 years old, when individuals are transitioning from adolescence to full adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Higher education institutions offer a distinctive platform for young individuals to delve into and comprehend their ethnic and cultural heritage (Phinney *et al.*, 1992). For example, in Malaysia, it is common for students to attend schools where they are predominantly surrounded by peers of the same ethnic background until they enter secondary education (Ahmad *et al.*, 2010; Majid *et al.* 2020). However, it is during their university years that Malaysians are presented with increased opportunities to engage in direct interactions with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Ting & Kho 2023).

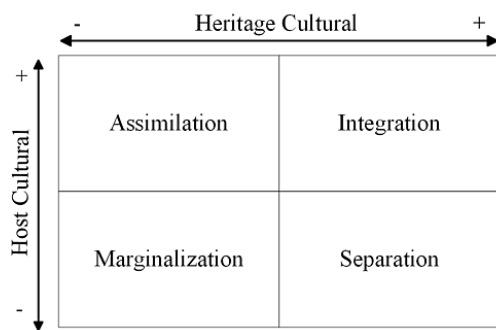
### Theories of Acculturation

While cultural identity revolves around an individual's self-concept in relation to a culture, acculturation is an intercultural transformation where individuals undergo psycho-social changes to adapt culturally and psychologically to a new society (Berry, 2017). In this process, they bridge their heritage culture—the cultural practices, values, and traditions inherited from their ethnic or familial background—with the

mainstream culture, which represents the dominant cultural norms and practices of the host society they are integrating into.

Various factors affect how individuals adjust to a new culture, such as their attitudes towards both their original and host cultures, their degree of contact with the new culture, and how much they maintain or adopt aspects of their heritage culture (Vishkin *et al.* 2021). These individuals may display diverse behaviors, preferences, and customs, including dietary choices, attire, language use, interpersonal interactions, and self-perceptions (Berry, 2017).

Acculturation is a bidimensional rather than a unidirectional process. Ryder *et al.*, 2000 noted that heritage culture and mainstream culture are not mutually exclusive but can coexist independently. This coexistence enables one to feel the sense of belonging and identification with both cultures in case one is exposed to both cultures. Berry's Acculturation Model (1992) provides a widely used framework for understanding acculturation, categorizing it into four strategies: These include assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. Some of the topics that have been investigated using this model include psychological health, culture, latent profile analysis, and interculture (Choy *et al.* 2021; Fox *et al.* 2013; Mesoudi, 2018; Van Der Zee *et al.*, 2022). Figure 1 visually presents Berry's Acculturation Model (1992).



**Fig. 1. Acculturation model**

**Adapted from Berry (1992)  
Contextualizing Malaysian Chinese Cultural Identity**

Following the previous discourse on cultural identity, Malaysian Chinese Cultural Identity (MCCI) is defined as the psychological connection

that Malaysian Chinese people have with their culture. This includes their perception of Malaysian Chinese identity, the importance of being part of this community, and the attributes that come with it. MCCI is a construct in constant evolution, reflecting the migration and settlement processes, history, politics, and individual and social factors. Malaysian Chinese culture has its origin from the historical and traditional cultural background with mainland China but has developed over time through the Malaysian Chinese's day-to-day interactions with other cultures while maintaining the Chinese core values (Guek, 2023; Ho 2018; Luo, 2002). For instance, Malaysian Chinese make use of the Malaysian environment and globalization while at the same time showcasing their culture through traditions and food to assimilate the ancestral culture into the contemporary world (Matondang, 2016; Yen, 2016).

**Language Dominance and Cultural Identity**

"Language Dominance" is a term used to describe the degree of language preference and utilization of the two languages by the bilingual person. Originally, the term was used to refer to the difference in the way bilinguals write, speak, read or understand in the first language and second language; it has since been broadened to encompass even the manner in which language is used and the context in which it is used (Treffers-Daller, 2019).

Language dominance goes beyond the ability or the frequency of use of a particular language to social context and the phenomenology of language use (Olson, 2023). People can be more or less fluent and inclined to use certain languages based on the cultural background (Fishman *et al.*, 1969; Schmid *et al.*, 2018; Unsworth *et al.*, 2018). Meanwhile, cultural background is closely related to language dominance since the language that prevails in a given society determines the cultural environment in which a person exists. This is especially the case in the bilingual context where language is linked to culture and social interactions (Cantone *et al.* 2008; Puig-Mayenco *et al.*, 2018).

**The Impact of English Dominance in Multilingual Societies**

English is regarded as an international language and it holds a prestigious position in the multilingualism especially in the postcolonial countries like Malaysia. Its emergence in learning and work-related settings

affects cultural dynamics and the development of self. Linguistic imperialism according to Phillipson (1992) is a state in which English language negates local languages and cultures. In Malaysia this can potentially lock out Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and other indigenous languages of the country from being used widely.

English is also associated with cultural globalization since it has become the language used by many people around the world. Tomlinson (1999) and Appadurai (1996) have explored how the process of globalization through cultural flows alters the local cultural practices with the help of the English language. Tollefson (1991) opines that language preference is not only in communication; it is in culture and society. English is often selected for socio-economic reasons and reflects changes in identity.

In Malaysia, English is viewed as a means of social mobility and access to the international community and as such shapes the subject's cultural and career narratives. This is a rather interesting situation for Malaysian Chinese students who are in between the global trends and local culture.

### **Multilingualism, Code-Switching, and Identity Negotiation among Malaysian Chinese**

Language and culture are inseparable especially in the modern world where there is a free movement of people from one country to another. Language ensures that a community passes knowledge, history, culture and other important aspects of the society to the next generations hence creating a sense of togetherness (Tektigul *et al.*, 2023). According to (Bucholtz *et al.*, 2005), identity is co-constructed in and through language, which means that language is a very real form of cultural representation. Speaking one's native language enhances the relationship between language and ethnocultural identity, and assists people in gaining a better understanding of their culture (Fishman, 1996; Hall, 1997).

Scholars have extensively looked into the link between language and cultural identity in multicultural societies, and have also revealed that code-switching and the use of a mixed language are major aspects of the personal identity of bilingual and multilingual individuals (Abubakr *et al.* 2019; Chung,

2006; Nilep, 2006; Vallejo *et al.*, 2023). It is important to sustain the heritage languages because they help to strengthen the cultural identification (Lee, 2002; Otçu, 2010; Otwinowska *et al.* , 2019; Tse, 2001). Peng (2023) has done a study that indicates that EFL learners can construct their cultural identities from the process of learning English and intercultural communication.

In the case of the Malaysian Chinese, studies reveal political marginality especially under Malay nationalist frameworks (Guek, 2023; Matondang, 2016). These disadvantages include cultural recognition and education equity hence resulting in feelings of division and alienation. The policy to make Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, unfair treatments given to Chinese schools, and rising restrictions have continued to fuel their fight for the Chinese languages and their cultural rights (Matondang, 2016).

Among these difficulties, resilience shine through. Compared to other overseas Chinese communities, the Malaysian Chinese community highly value the Chinese language and education. For them, the Chinese language is an ancestor's precious inheritance, and should be passed down to future generations through education (Ho *et al.* 2018). Their emphasis on Chinese language and education is evident in the comprehensive Chinese education system, the widespread usage of Chinese language varieties, and the importance attached to the Chinese language subject in Malaysian Chinese public primary schools (Ang, 2017; Chiu, 2000; See, 2013; C. B. Tan 1997; Wang, 2016). This emphasis aligns with recognizing the pragmatic value of the Chinese language in transmitting cultural and ethnic identity (How *et al.* 2015; Vollmann *et al.*, 2018). Chinese languages, including Mandarin and Chinese dialects, are commonly used for family interactions and business contexts, while languages such as Bahasa Pasar, Malay, and English serve as means of interethnic communication (Vollmann *et al.*, 2018).

Recently, Guek, 2023 explored language's role in shaping MCCI, highlighting that the younger generation tends to lean towards English and Mandarin, and exhibits fluency in code-switching known as Bahasa Rojak, which emerging as their new identity. R. S. Ting *et al.* (2023) examined the

significant influence of mother tongue heritage on the cultural identification of Malaysian Chinese individuals. Importantly, the study emphasizes the discrimination experienced by individuals with English as their mother tongue, underlining the detrimental effects of discrimination on the mental well-being of younger adults. These findings encourage the further analysis of EMC's cultural self-definitions and their identity negotiation process.

In summary, the review above shows that the phenomenon of multilingualism and code-switching in the globalized world and the intertwined link between language and cultural identity of Malaysian Chinese are rather multifaceted. Malaysian Chinese's ability to maintain their language as the marker of their identity is a good example of the role of language in the modern world. This scenario provides a good background to the cultural identity negotiation among EMC.

### **Research Methodology**

This research builds on the quantitative findings from (Al-Saggaf & Su, 2024), which investigated the attachment of EMC students to their heritage culture using a structured questionnaire. The current qualitative study aims to further explore how EMC students negotiate their cultural identity in an English-dominant academic context, focusing on the experiences, approaches and strategies they use to balance their heritage culture with the mainstream environment.

The study consists of two phases: the use of an open-ended questionnaire and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

#### **Phase 1: Open-Ended Questionnaire**

In the first phase, an open-ended questionnaire was developed based on a comprehensive literature review on cultural identity, acculturation, and language dominance. The questions focused on the challenges of maintaining Malaysian Chinese culture and the influence of English on participants' cultural identity.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants with specific characteristics relevant to the research focus. 30 participants were selected based on the criteria as follows:

- Malaysian Chinese citizens;
- Individuals who predominantly use English in daily life;
- Current university students in Xiamen University Malaysia, an overseas campus with an international focus.

Before conducting the formal study, a pilot study was conducted with 10 EMC students. The aim was to refine the open-ended questionnaire. Participants provided feedback on the clarity and relevance of the questions. Based on their input, necessary revisions were made to improve the wording and structure of the questionnaire to ensure it would effectively capture the cultural identity experiences of EMC students. Additionally, the open-ended questions were reviewed by three experts from Malaysian Chinese background at Xiamen University Malaysia, whose feedback on cultural relevance and appropriateness was incorporated into the final version, ensuring the instrument accurately captured the specific cultural dynamics of EMC students.

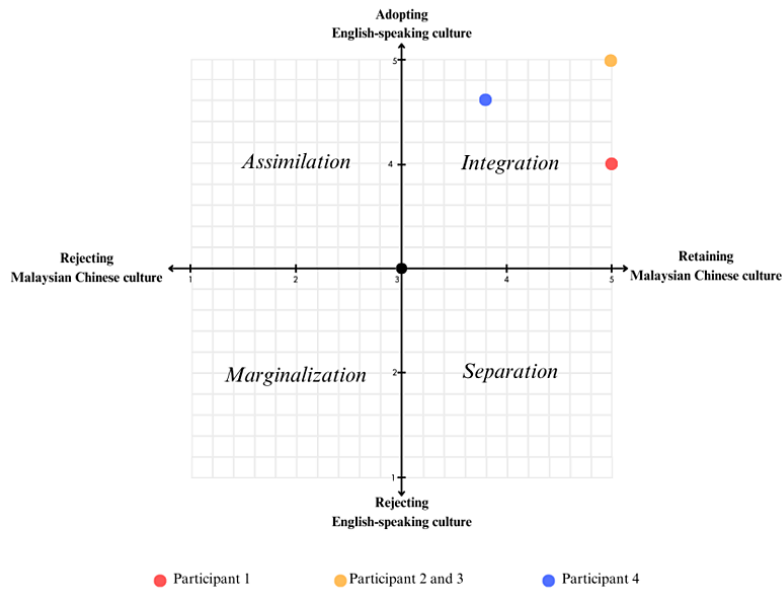
#### **Phase 2: Focus Group Discussion (FGD)**

The second phase involved the FGD, designed to explore in greater depth the themes that emerged from the questionnaire phase. The FGD focused on participants' attachment to Malaysian Chinese culture, language use, and identity in a multilingual setting, providing an opportunity for participants to discuss their personal challenges and strategies related to cultural identity negotiation.

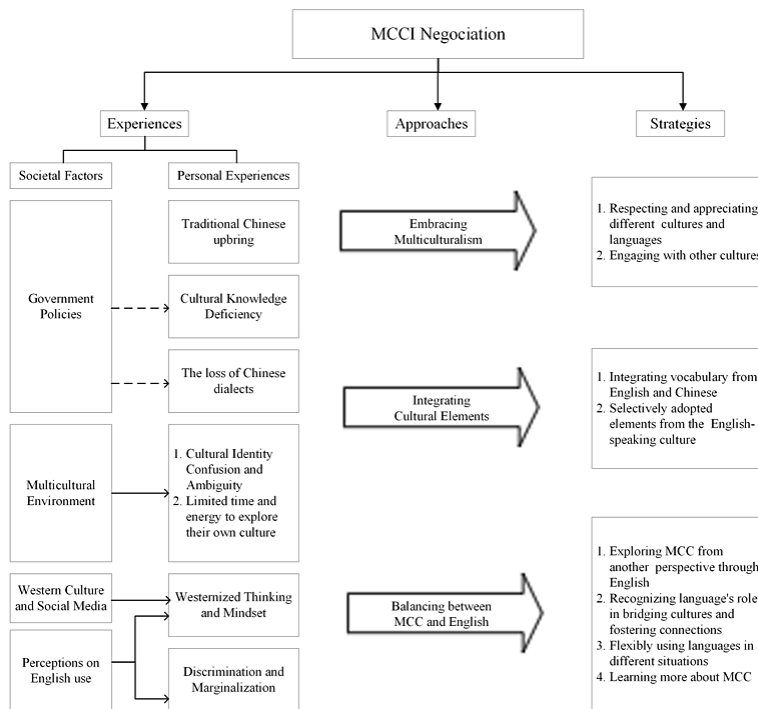
Purposive sampling was employed to select 4 participants from the initial pool of 30 questionnaire respondents, based on their degree of attachment to Malaysian Chinese heritage culture reflected in their questionnaire responses. Given the qualitative nature of the study, a smaller sample size was appropriate, as the primary goal was not to generalize findings but to gain a deep understanding of individual experiences and the complex process of cultural identity negotiation. The four participants were labeled as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and Participant 4, according to their attachment levels, from highest to lowest. This intentional selection process ensured a diverse range of attachment levels, allowing for a broad spectrum of perspectives to emerge during the discussion.

At the conclusion of the FGD, participants were asked to assess and rate their own cultural orientation using an Acculturation Coordinate System. This allowed participants to reflect on their

cultural identity and provided a visual representation of their orientation between the Chinese and English-speaking cultures. Figure 2 displays the results of this cultural orientation assessment.



**Fig. 2. Results of the acculturation coordinate system**



**Fig. 3. MCCI negotiation visualization**

For data collection and analysis, data was collected from the responses of the open-ended questions and the FGD. All responses and discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. For the analysis phase, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns from the data.

### Results

This research uncovers the intricate process of cultural identity negotiation among EMC university students. This journey is far from being a solitary effort; it's heavily shaped by broader societal influences and personal life experiences. Key themes have emerged that highlight the experiences, approaches, and strategies these students use to navigate their Malaysian Chinese Cultural Identity (MCCI). Figure 3 provides a visual representation of our findings.

### Experiences of Negotiating MCCI

The experiences of negotiating MCCI is operated as the lived encounters, perceptions, and reflections of EMC students regarding their engagement with Malaysian Chinese cultural elements. This includes the subjective aspects of their cultural identity negotiation, such as the challenges faced, successes achieved, and personal growth throughout the process.

Participants highlighted the role of their traditional Chinese upbringing in preserving their cultural identity. As Participants 1 and 2 in FGD expressed, "[we] come from a traditional Chinese family ... we celebrate all the festival also and we enjoy all the Chinese cuisine and we interact with, most of the people are Chinese too". This statement reflects not only their engagement with cultural traditions but also the psychological comfort and sense of security they derive from being part of a close-knit cultural community. Their traditional upbringing offers them a stable foundation from which they navigate their identity in a changing world.

However, this strong connection to their cultural roots also creates a psychological conflict when they encounter societal barriers. Government policies, particularly the emphasis on Bahasa Malaysia and the lack of recognition for Chinese independent schools, possibly have created a barrier in maintaining a strong connection to their cultural roots. One questionnaire participant

noted, "Certain parties ... want to make Bahasa Malaysia the exclusive medium for education & daily communication ... language often serves as a reflection and carrier of a particular ethnic culture, and removing them could lead to the loss of that culture". This not only poses an external challenge but also creates an internal sense of cultural erosion, where participants feel that their identity is under threat, leading to feelings of anxiety and frustration about losing an essential part of their heritage.

The multicultural environment in Malaysia introduces complexities into students' cultural identity negotiation, often leading to cognitive dissonance and identity confusion. As one participant in the questionnaire expressed, "sometimes I would get confused about which practices originate from Chinese culture, since Malaysia has many different cultures". Participant 4's statement echos this sentiment: "Because we live in the multi-racial place, so we have to understand everyone's culture. So we don't have that much time and energy left to understand more about our own culture.". Living in Malaysia requires them to explore multiple cultures, often diverting their time and energy away from understanding their own heritage.

Additionally, the encroachment of Western culture and the pervasive impact of social media further contribute to a shift in thinking and mindset. The participants stated that they are "Mainly get influenced by western culture," and are "Influence by social media". Additionally, participants highlighted the difficulty in making others understand their culture in a multiracial country, stating, "In a multiracial country, it's hard to make every people understand our culture". The rapid dissemination of Western cultural elements through digital platforms accentuates the challenges faced in preserving traditional practices in the face of globalizing forces.

The societal perceptions surrounding English use further complicate students' emotional responses. Some participants noted that English is associated with being "show-offish" or "atas" (snobbish), which has led to a reluctance in using English in interactions with fellow Chinese speakers to avoid such social stigmas. Meanwhile, some participants also express a sense of detachment from their ancestral roots due to the influence of English, particularly during their formative years. The participants reflect on

this experience, describing feelings of being “white-washed”, having “westernized mindset” or detached from their cultural heritage.

### **Approaches and Strategies for Negotiating MCCI**

In this study, approaches are conceptualized as the overarching methodologies or mindsets adopted by EMC students to deal with challenges and opportunities related to their Malaysian Chinese Cultural Identity (MCCI). Strategies are defined as the intentional plans, methods, or actions employed by EMC students to navigate, maintain, or reconcile their MCCI in diverse social contexts.

The first approach observed among EMC students is embracing multiculturalism, which involves adopting a mindset that values and respects the diversity of cultures they encounter in Malaysia's multicultural context. Within this approach, participants employ several strategies to engage with other cultures while maintaining respect for their own. Participants 1 and 3 in FGD encouraged embracing cultural diversity while avoiding negative judgments, emphasizing that “language are equally beautiful” and “you shouldn't talk bad ... in ways that will harm other people's viewpoint on certain culture”. To them, effective communication transcends notions of hierarchy or superiority between languages, serving as a means to bridge cultures and foster connections. Overall, participants express a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, acknowledging the richness it brings to their lives.

Another approach involves the integration of cultural elements from both Malaysian Chinese and English-speaking cultures. This approach reflects a mindset of adaptation and hybridity, where students incorporate elements of both cultures into their identity in ways that reinforce their sense of self.

As part of this integration approach, students employ two primary strategies. First, they integrate vocabulary from both Chinese and English, creating a unique form of communication that reflects their cultural blend. For example, some participants stated that “I oftenly mix english and chinese when speaking” and “my english have mix a lot of chinese words”. Second, they selectively adopt elements from the English-speaking culture. As Participants 1 and 2 in FGD highlighted, “some of the English cultural I may not that agree with, but some I take

the good one and then I expel the bad one” and “we can get more understanding about ourselves not to reject others, but we absorb their knowledge, their staff and it kind of reflect ourselves”, appreciating other cultures did not diminish their own but rather enhanced their understanding of global diversity. This selective adoption reflects a conscious effort to balance the benefits of English-speaking culture with their own cultural values.

A third approach centers on the delicate balance between Malaysian Chinese culture and English. Participants are aware of the need to navigate both cultural spaces, balancing the demands of the English-dominated academic environment with their desire to preserve their Malaysian Chinese identity. For example, Participant 3 emphasized the need to “progress towards both sides,” acknowledging that a dual engagement with both cultures is essential. Similarly, Participant 4 reflected on their role as a cultural mediator, stating, “I will be the bridge of both sides,” highlighting how bilingualism helps them facilitate communication and understanding between Chinese and international communities. Participants also noted the importance of flexibility in using languages, adapting their language use based on the context and audience. This flexibility is crucial in helping them navigate between cultures while remaining connected to their Malaysian Chinese roots. Finally, their commitment to learning more about their culture through both languages reflects a broader strategy for cultural preservation and growth. As Participant 4 stated, “I realize that I'm a Chinese myself and I should understand my own culture.”

### **Discussion**

This article aims to give a detailed analysis on how EMC university students negotiate their cultural identity. In this study, we employed a qualitative research approach to explore how these students manage to balance their cultural backgrounds with the English-speaking context that characterizes their learning and social experiences. The findings of the study are aligned with the prior research and contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

The findings of this paper regarding the EMC students' experiences are consistent with the cultural identity and language use theories that have been established in the literature over time. Like in Guek's

(2023) research, participants reported a feeling of being overwhelmed by historical and cultural aspects of their roots. This is mainly because Chinese independent schools are not well recognized and Bahasa Malaysia is given much importance in the governmental policies. According to Ho *et al.* (2018) and Ang (2017) this regulatory framework makes it necessary for EMC students to be resilient so that they can maintain their cultural identity despite the adversities that are systematically put in place.

The multicultural environment in Malaysia further complicates the cultural identity of EMC students. This is in line with Matondang's (2016) study, which emphasizes the need for individuals in multicultural societies to balance multiple cultural identities. Participants often used terms such as 'sometimes,' 'sometimes not,' 'a little,' 'not really,' 'maybe,' and 'I am not sure,' when discussing about their cultural practices, which shows the complexity of cultural dynamics in their lives.

Although the previous research have paid much attention to the dominance of English and its effects on the cultural identity in Malaysia, the present study is different from the previous study as this study is limited to EMC students studying in an international university only. These students are in an English dominated academic environment, which in turn increases the process of cultural identity construction in comparison to the rest of the Malaysian Chinese students. The participants' experience of the effects of Westernization and social media indicates that the change of the mindset is even deeper than what has been depicted in prior studies. This goes further to show that, with the advancement in technology, the exportation of western culture is on the rise and this poses a challenge to EMC students who are trying to uphold cultural practices.

Moreover, our research offers new perspectives on the strategies and approaches EMC students employ to negotiate their cultural identity. The use of code-switching and Bahasa Rojak as identity markers illustrates their adaptation to a multilingual environment, consistent with findings by Abubakr *et al.* (2019) and Vallejo *et al.*, (2023) on the role of language in cultural identity. However, the perception that the use of English is associated with 'show-off' or 'atas' (elite), adds a factor not well discussed in the literature. This social stigma discourages some

students from using English, pointing to a specific difficulty of the EMC students in preserving their cultural identity while facing the society's prejudice.

The study also reveals that EMC students adopt a hybrid identity approach that combines both Malaysian Chinese and the English speaking cultures. This strategy is in concordance with Berry's (1992) acculturation model which asserts that cultural adaptation is a two-dimensional process. Thus, embracing multiculturalism, these students are able to maintain the balance between their roots and the world, proving their ability to exist in multicultural environments.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand how English-dominant Malaysian Chinese (EMC) university students negotiate their cultural identity. Hence, adopting a qualitative research design, we gathered detailed data from questionnaires and focus group discussions, which offered an understanding of the participants' individual experiences and perceptions.

The results of the study show that EMC students operate in a complex environment where they are constantly constructing and reconstructing their cultural self through socialisation processes, experiences and language use. This paper shows how these students are able to maintain multiculturalism while at the same time retaining their ethnic identity, thus depicting the fluidity of cultural identity.

The fact that the students are able to adopt some aspects of both Malaysian Chinese and English speaking cultures proves that they are flexible and can persevere. Thus, they are able to preserve and develop their own culture that is constantly changing and interacting with the global culture while incorporating only the most suitable and appropriate elements of it.

This study advances the literature on multiculturalism and identity development in the context of globalization. It emphasizes the need to ensure that students from culturally diverse backgrounds are given a chance to learn in schools without feeling out of place or discriminated against. In light of Malaysia's multicultural context, the findings

open the door for a follow-up study to track how EMC students' cultural identity negotiation evolves after they graduate and enter the workforce, offering insights into how their strategies may shift in professional and societal contexts beyond academia. Additionally, the findings can inform the development of effective policies and practices that promote the cultural health and well-being of the Malaysian population.

#### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Mohammad Ali Al-Saggaf for his invaluable guidance and mentorship throughout the course of my undergraduate thesis. His advice and supervision were instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the English Department of Xiamen University Malaysia, which has been like an academic family to me. The warmth, support, and love I received from this community have been truly remarkable. My time there has not only enriched my academic experience but has also played a crucial role in shaping my future career path in research.

#### **Funding Sources**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) do not have any conflict of interest.

#### **Data Availability Statement**

The voice recording file can be obtained by contacting the author of this research.

#### **Ethics Statement**

This research did not involve human participants, animal subjects, or any material that requires ethical approval.

#### **Informed Consent Statement**

The study Cultural Identity Negotiation Among English-dominant Malaysian Chinese University Students involved English-dominant Malaysian Chinese university students in Malaysia who participated in open-ended questionnaires and a focus group discussion. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the research objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. All data collected were anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of participants, and privacy was strictly maintained throughout the research process. The study followed the ethical standards applicable within Malaysia.

#### **Authors' Contribution**

The sole author was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

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