

## **The Socialization Spectrum: Malay Students and Interethnic Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

Malaysia's multicultural society offers both challenges and opportunities for fostering interethnic engagement, particularly among students. This study provides an overview of the role of socialization in shaping Malay students' attitudes and behaviors toward ethnic diversity. It focuses on three key socialization agents: family, peers, and media. Within families, cultural incongruence may limit exposure to diverse perspectives, while ethnically homogeneous peer groups often reinforce in-group norms, reducing opportunities for meaningful interethnic interactions. Similarly, biased media portrayals can perpetuate stereotypes and hinder the development of inclusive attitudes. This paper explores the potential influence of these socialization processes, emphasizing the importance of fostering inclusive socialization practices to promote ethnic unity and cohesion. By highlighting the interplay between family, peer groups, and media, it offers a framework for understanding how these agents may shape students' perceptions of ethnic diversity. Although this is an overview, it lays the foundation for further research into the factors influencing interethnic engagement among Malay students and suggests practical directions for promoting a more inclusive and harmonious society in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Socialisation; Malay, Students, Ethnic, Ethnic Relation, Socialization

### **Introduction**

Malay students in Malaysia's diverse education system face unique challenges in navigating interethnic relationships and developing a strong sense of identity. Over 150 years of British colonial rule transformed Malaysia from a predominantly Malay society into one with three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Sani, 2009; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). This rich cultural diversity has profoundly shaped the education system, which plays a vital role in influencing the attitudes and values of younger generations. One notable characteristic of Malaysia's primary education system is its dual structure. Students can attend national

schools, where Malay is the primary language of instruction, or vernacular schools, where Mandarin or Tamil is used (Sani, 2009; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). While this structure aims to preserve the cultural and linguistic heritage of various ethnic communities, it has also created a divide between students of different backgrounds. This separation limits opportunities for interethnic interaction and may unintentionally deepen ethnic divisions, raising crucial questions about how education can act as a unifying force in such a multicultural society.

Promoting unity among students of diverse ethnicities is no small task. Despite efforts to foster tolerance and harmony through the curriculum, issues like ethnic prejudices and derogatory behavior persist (Maaruf et al., 2013). These challenges point to the need for more deliberate and impactful measures to encourage positive relationships between students from different communities. Some have called on the Ministry of Education to take bold steps to instill a stronger sense of national unity in schools (Azlan, 2018). Without such targeted efforts, schools risk mirroring or even reinforcing the broader divisions within society. One strategy to promote integration has been the adoption of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, intended to provide a shared platform for communication across ethnic lines and build a collective identity. While this policy has shown promise, language alone cannot address the deeper social and cultural divides that continue to exist. Bridging these gaps require more than just linguistic unity; it calls for meaningful interactions and collaboration that fosters understanding and empathy.

In Malaysia's rich and diverse cultural landscape, the education system plays a pivotal role in shaping a more inclusive and united society. For Malay students, growing up in this environment involves balancing their cultural heritage with a shared national identity. This balance ties into broader ideas like citizenship education and the concept of the "nation-of-intent" (Ahmad & Abdullah, 2022; Maaruf et al., 2013). While strides have been made to encourage interethnic understanding, challenges remain. Addressing these challenges requires thoughtful reforms and a genuine commitment to creating spaces where students from all backgrounds can connect, learn from each other, and contribute to a future that embraces unity without losing the richness of diversity. This study underscores the importance of understanding how socialization shapes attitudes toward ethnic diversity, particularly among Malay students. By leveraging these socialization processes, there is a real opportunity to foster more inclusive and harmonious relationships across communities. The findings of this research aim to provide practical insights that can guide efforts to build a society that not only celebrates its differences but also thrives on the unity those differences can create.

### **Socialization**

Socialization is one of the most important processes in life. It's how we learn the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors that help us become part of society. This process shapes how we see ourselves, how we interact with others, and even how we perceive people from different ethnic backgrounds. It starts early, in childhood, and continues throughout our lives, influencing our development and behavior. Key players in this process—like family, friends, schools, and even the media—pass down cultural norms and expectations (Baumrind, 1978; Pulerwitz et al., 2019). Family is the first and most significant influence in shaping who we are. From the very beginning, families introduce children to the cultural and social practices that

will guide their decisions and interactions later in life (Elsayed, 2024). Parents play a central role with teaching by example, showing their children how to behave and reinforcing good behavior through discipline and encouragement (Elsayed, 2024; Hughes et al., 2006). Research shows that the way parents discipline their kids can directly affect how socially competent and kind those kids become (Al-Hassan et al., 2021). These early lessons form the foundation of how children approach relationships and navigate the world.

As children grow, schools and peer groups take on a larger role in their social development, especially during adolescence (Bayram et al., 2021; Pulerwitz et al., 2019). These experiences often add to or even challenge what kids learn at home. Friends, for example, can heavily influence decisions about identity, belonging, and even risky behaviors like smoking (Bayram et al., 2021). Schools, on the other hand, are like mini societies. They not only teach academic knowledge but also instill values, ethics, and a sense of responsibility. Through lessons, group projects, and social interactions, schools help young people understand how to navigate different social settings and work with others from diverse backgrounds (Bayram et al., 2021). Then there's social media, which has become a huge influence in recent years. For students especially, it's everywhere—shaping how they interact, learn, and even see themselves. On the one hand, social media makes it easy to stay connected, learn new things, and share ideas. But on the flip side, spending too much time scrolling can hurt academic performance and even mental well-being (Boahene et al., 2019; Yessenbekova et al., 2020). Constant exposure to online communities also shapes what young people believe, value, and expect from others (Baria, 2021). Social media has the power to bring people together but can also spread stereotypes and misinformation if not used thoughtfully.

When it comes to understanding how socialization affects ethnic relations, some key theories offer valuable insights. Social learning theory, for example, explains that people learn behaviors and attitudes by watching and imitating those around them, especially influential figures like parents, teachers, or peers (McCullough, 2011). It's all about observing what works and what doesn't, and these lessons stick with us (McCullough, 2011; Proctor et al., 2020). Another perspective, symbolic interactionism, highlights how much communication and shared experiences matter. It focuses on how people use language, symbols, and shared meanings to understand their relationships and the world around them. This is especially relevant when it comes to how people from different ethnic groups interact and perceive each other. Socialization is a lifelong process, one that constantly shapes who we are and how we relate to others. From the powerful lessons learned within families to the broader influences of schools, friends, and social media, every stage of socialization leaves its mark. In a world that's becoming increasingly diverse, the way we socialize has a direct impact on how we understand and interact with people from different backgrounds. Inclusive and thoughtful approaches to socialization can help reduce stereotypes, foster mutual respect, and build stronger, more united communities. By understanding the dynamics of socialization, we can take deliberate steps toward creating a society where everyone feels valued and understood.

### *Socialization and Ethnic Relations among Malay Students*

Malaysia's demographic composition reflects a multicultural mosaic, where Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various indigenous communities coexist. These groups bring unique cultural and religious identities to the nation's shared history. While efforts such as *Rukun Negara* and Vision 2020 have sought to foster unity amidst diversity (Ahmad dan Abdullah, 2022; Sani,

2009), challenges persist. Ethnic disparities remain entrenched due to socio-economic inequalities and politically charged narratives (Ahmad & Abdullah, 2022; Comber, 2007; Hairol et al., 2020). Within this broader landscape, the role of socialization in shaping Malay students' ethnic attitudes is a critical yet underexplored aspect of fostering positive interethnic relations. Socialization, the process by which individuals internalize societal norms and values, plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes and behaviors toward other ethnic groups. As Odenweller and Harris (2018) explain, the form of interaction within the family is a key indicator of the formation of intergroup attitudes. Families often serve as the primary agents of socialization, transmitting cultural values and perspectives. Woo and friends (2020) emphasize that these early familial influences often align with broader societal narratives, which can reinforce either positive or negative perceptions of other ethnic groups.

The educational environment also holds significant potential to influence interethnic attitudes. Studies have shown that schools that foster diversity through inclusive curricula and collaborative learning environments can mitigate ethnocentrism and prejudice (Da'as, 2023; Gabaldón-Estevan, 2020). For Malay students, exposure to diverse peers in classrooms can enhance mutual understanding and respect, providing a foundation for positive interethnic relationships. This aligns with findings by Munniksma and colleagues (2023), which highlight the transformative role of inclusive educational practices in promoting social cohesion. However, challenges persist as stereotypes perpetuated by media and peer groups often counteract these positive influences (Woo et al., 2020). The socialization process extends beyond formal education. Peer interactions, particularly during adolescence, are crucial for shaping attitudes toward diversity. For Malay students, relationships with non-Malay peers can serve as both opportunities and challenges. While positive interactions often foster empathy and understanding, negative experiences or lack of interaction can reinforce ethnic divides. This underscores the importance of creating safe and supportive environments that encourage meaningful engagement among students from different ethnic backgrounds. Historical and socio-cultural factors also influence Malay students' attitudes.

Malaysia's indigenous communities, such as the Orang Asli, offer a lens into the complex dynamics of ethnic relations shaped by migration and cultural exchanges. The interplay between indigenous traditions and the dominant cultural narratives of Malays, Chinese, and Indians highlights the broader societal context within which Malay students are socialized (Aghakhanian et al., 2022). Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the factors that shape perceptions of ethnic diversity and inclusion among Malay youth. To enhance interethnic relations among Malay students, educational interventions must address not only content but also context. Schools should promote interaction-rich environments that encourage dialogue and collaboration among students of different ethnicities. Benner and colleagues (2018) demonstrated that such initiatives significantly improve ethnic attitudes by fostering empathy and reducing stereotypes. Furthermore, equipping students with critical thinking skills to navigate societal narratives and media portrayals is essential. As Azlan and colleagues (2018) suggests, challenging stereotypes and promoting nuanced understandings of Malaysia's multicultural identity are vital for cultivating a more inclusive mindset among youth.

**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 will be distributed to students at Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) using the convenience sampling method via an online platform. Google Forms will be utilized to collect responses by sharing the survey link with friends, HEI students, and lecturers, aiming to gather information from the perspective of Malay HEI students.

**Conclusion**

This paper provides an overview of the potential influence of socialization on ethnic relations among Malay students in Malaysia. Drawing from existing literature, it highlights the significant roles of family, education, peer groups, and the media in shaping students' attitudes and perceptions of ethnic diversity. Family influence is identified as a key factor,

with parental attitudes and teachings likely to shape students' values and interactions with individuals from different ethnic groups. The educational environment is also seen as a crucial domain where ethnic relations can either be strengthened or hindered. Inclusive curricula and multicultural interactions may foster understanding and unity, while segregated or biased practices could perpetuate stereotypes. Peer interactions in diverse settings further influence students' perceptions, potentially fostering mutual respect or reinforcing prejudice. The media, as another critical socialization agent, has the capacity to shape ethnic relations significantly, with positive portrayals encouraging acceptance and understanding, while negative stereotypes may reinforce existing biases. This paper underscores the importance of fostering inclusive and diverse socialization processes to promote interethnic unity and cohesion in Malaysia. Efforts should focus on promoting inclusive education, balanced media portrayals, and active family and community involvement to create an environment conducive to positive ethnic relations.

#### *Theoretical and Contextual Suggestions*

To understand how socialization influences ethnic relations, this study suggests using **Social Identity Theory (SIT)** as a framework. Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), SIT explains that individuals form part of their self-concept through their group memberships, such as ethnicity. According to SIT, people categorize themselves and others into in-groups (groups they belong to) and out-groups (groups they don't belong to), which influences their attitudes and behaviors toward different ethnic groups. In this study, SIT can help examine how socialization agents—family, education, peers, and media—shape ethnic identities and intergroup attitudes. For example, family socialization may reinforce in-group favoritism or promote inclusive attitudes toward out-groups. Educational settings and peer interactions can either reinforce ethnic divisions or encourage intergroup harmony. Media portrayals can influence attitudes, either fostering acceptance or perpetuating stereotypes. This study focuses on Malaysia's multicultural society, where ethnic diversity offers both challenges and opportunities for interethnic understanding. Socialization within families, peer groups, and media interactions plays a key role in shaping Malay students' views on ethnic diversity. Families can either reinforce ethnic boundaries or promote more inclusive perspectives, while peer groups often strengthen in-group norms. Media portrayals further shape students' perceptions, influencing either acceptance or bias. Future research applying SIT could clarify how these socialization agents influence ethnic identity and intergroup relations. Understanding these processes within Malaysia's diverse context could offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders working to foster more inclusive and harmonious interethnic relations.

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