

Level of Cultural Attachment Among English-Dominant Malaysian Chinese University Students

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Abstract

In an era of rapid globalization and sociocultural transformations, understanding the impact of language dominance on cultural identity is crucial. This study addresses the under-explored area of the attachment of English-dominant Malaysian Chinese (EMC) university students to Malaysian Chinese Culture (MCC). Despite English's growing prominence in Malaysia, there is a paucity of research investigating its effect on EMCs' cultural attachments. Contrasting to the predominantly qualitative methods in the research filed, our research adopts a quantitative approach, offering an objective assessment of EMC students' cultural attachment. The study involved 74 participants, selected through purposive sampling, who completed a 12-item online questionnaire. The questionnaire adapted the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) as the Malaysian Chinese Cultural Identity Measure (MCCIM), validated through a pilot test with the Cronbach α score of 0.830. The results indicate a positive attachment of these students to MCC, suggesting resilience in cultural identity despite the predominance of English. This research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural identity preservation within the landscape of language shifts, offering a foundation for future studies in similar multicultural and multilingual settings.

1. Introduction

The advent of globalization has ushered in a multitude of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural changes worldwide. A prominent outcome of this shift is the emergence of language dominance, a phenomenon where one language gains disproportionate influence or proficiency over others in a bilingual or multilingual context (Gertken et al. 2014; Treffers-Daller 2016; Treffers-Daller 2019). In Malaysia's diverse ethnic tapestry, this has led to a complex linguistic landscape. Here, over 80 languages from six different language families coexist, with Malay as the official language and English playing a significant role in business, government, and higher education settings (Asmah 2004; Albury 2020; Carolina 2014; Ministry of Education Malaysia 2022).

The Malaysian Chinese community, representing about 22.7% of the national population, confronts the challenge of preserving its linguistic and cultural identity amid the prevalence of English. This situation involves issues such as identity reconstruction, language and education policies, and the dynamics of identity and mobility (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2022; Gill 2013; Ho et al. 2018; Luan & Beng 2018; Matondang 2016; H. Ting 2013). Despite these hurdles, there is a strong commitment to maintaining Malaysian Chinese culture

(MCC), particularly through the preservation of the Chinese language, which is key to their cultural identity and self-image in Malaysia (Ang 2017; Chin 2020; Matondang 2016; C. B. Tan 1997).

Language is fundamentally linked to a cultural group's way of life, thinking, and values, serving as a vital legacy and a repository of ancestral wisdom (Fishman 1996). However, the global emphasis on English, due to its importance in international communication, has led to a situation in Malaysia where English is often prioritized over other languages, including Chinese. This dominance of English could potentially reduce the Malaysian Chinese community's exposure to their native language, thereby weakening their attachment to MCC (Carstens 2018; S. I. Tan 2021). Understanding the relationship between the attachment of English-dominant Malaysian Chinese (EMC) university students to MCC in this context is thus critical.

Previous research has separately examined Malaysian Chinese culture and English language dominance but has not explicitly focused on the attachment of EMC to their heritage culture. This study aims to bridge this gap using quantitative methods to offer more objective insights into the subjective experiences of cultural identity and attachment. Notably, cultural identity formation becomes more pronounced during emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000), and the English-dominant environment of international universities provides a unique setting for this study. It explores how the emphasis on English proficiency in such environments influences EMC university students' attachment to MCC.

2. Cultural Attachment

Culture is a comprehensive and diverse concept that encompasses all aspects of human existence. It has a profound impact on every aspect of people's lives, including their daily activities, relationships, culinary practices, architectural styles, language usage, literary and artistic traditions, music preferences, customs and traditions, clothing choices, festive celebrations, ceremonial rituals, and more (Margalit & Halbertal, 1994). Furthermore, culture plays a significant role in shaping individuals' preferences for certain things or opportunities while also influencing their sense of identity and belongingness. It acts as an anchor for individuals to connect with others and influences how they perceive themselves as well as others around them (Margalit & Raz 1990). Notably, culture is not fixed or unchangeable; rather it evolves through ongoing conversations and engagements among its constituents (Tully 1996; Benhabib 2002). Therefore, culture is a collective and dynamic concept, and it refers to a set of norms, values and practices that characterize a group or a community.

Cultural attachment is situated within the framework of cultural identity. While culture alludes to the deeply ingrained practices, values, and meanings that shape our daily lives, identity is a personal and subjective experience, which refers to "our feelings of belonging to a collective" (Grimson, 2010). 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 involves the experience, enactment, and negotiation of dynamic social identifications within specific settings (Chen & Lin, 2016). From a naturalistic perspective, it relies on acknowledging commonalities, while at the discursive level, it's an ongoing process based on historical, cultural, and linguistic elements (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). This perspective challenges the assumption that individual's cultural identity always aligns with their heritage culture, thereby highlighting the potential for varying degrees of cultural attachment among individuals (Grimson, 2010).

Additionally, cultural identity formation intensifies in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Higher education institutions offer a distinctive platform for young individuals to delve into and comprehend their ethnic and cultural heritage (Phinney & Chavira, 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 & Yusof, 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 (S. H. Ting & Kho, 2023).

In essence, cultural attachment pertains to one's sense of belonging, attachment, and identification towards a particular culture. University represents the first exposure to diverse sociocultural contexts, prompting exploration and understanding of one's ethnic and cultural background.

2.1 Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)

Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) is a seminal tool in the psychological assessment of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992). Its relevance is amplified in multicultural societies where understanding ethnic identity is crucial for social cohesion, mental health, and educational outcomes. The MEIM offers insights into how individuals perceive and connect with their ethnic groups, which is a vital aspect of their overall identity.

The measure consists of 20 items that measure seven subscales, which are "Ethnic Identity (14 items), Affirmation and Belonging (5 items), Ethnic Identity Achievement (7 items), Ethnic Behaviors (2 items), Ethnicity (2 items), Other-Group Orientation (6 items), and Self-Identification (open-ended)" (Phinney, 1992).

Meanwhile, it defines ethnic identity as a combination of two elements: the examination of the significance and consequences associated with one's ethnicity, and dedication to one's ethnic community (Phinney, 2010).

Several studies have supported the MEIM's reliability and applicability in capturing ethnic identity across diverse populations. According to Phinney's (1992) findings, the Cronbach's alpha for the entire measure is .81 for a high school sample and .90 for a college sample, which proves its high level of reliability. Other research have also proved its internal consistency, construct validity, and measurement invariance across diverse racial and ethnic groups and different developmental periods of adolescence (Brown et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2020; Ponterotto et al., 2003).

Although MEIM primarily assesses ethnic identity, existing literature demonstrates that it can still be applied in the field of cultural identity (Helm et al., 2019; Iwamoto and Liu, 2010; Maehler et al., 2019; Ponterotto et al., 2003). As individuals explore the meaning and implications of their ethnicity in acculturation settings, they may also engage in a broader exploration of their cultural heritage and affiliations. This approach encompasses the ethnic identity aspect corresponding to experiences related to cultural identity, enabling researchers to quantitatively delve into the cultural identities of specific study groups.

In conclusion, MEIM plays a crucial role in understanding ethnic identity development and its implications. It offers a lens through which the complexities of identity formation in diverse settings can be understood, highlighting the intersection of culture, social context, and individual experience. This understanding is essential for developing interventions and policies that support positive ethnic identity development and overall well-being. Although MEIM is designed for assessing ethnic identity, it also demonstrates high efficacy in evaluating cultural identity among different populations. This approach encompasses the ethnic identity aspect corresponding to experiences related to cultural identity, enabling researchers to delve into the cultural identities of specific study groups.

2.2 Language Dominance

Conceptually, language dominance refers to the extent to which one language is more proficient, influential, or frequently used compared to the other language in a bilingual individual's repertoire, and it can be understood as the relative proficiency in different languages and the frequency of language use among bilingual or multilingual individuals (Treffers-Daller, 2019). Relative proficiency focuses on the overall competence in each language, while the frequency of language use examines how bilingual individuals distribute their linguistic abilities across various domains such as household, professional settings, academic pursuits, and social engagements (Fishman & Cooper, 1969; Treffers-Daller, 2019). Fishman and Cooper (1969) provide a useful explanation of these concepts, defining language proficiency as "what a person can do" and language use as "what a person typically does." According to the given explanations, the level of language dominance in a bilingual individual can be depicted as a two-dimensional area (Schmid & Yilmaz, 2018). This area is characterized by an x-axis that represents language X (L_x) and a y-axis that represents language Y (L_y). Figure 1 shows the schematic representation of this explanation.

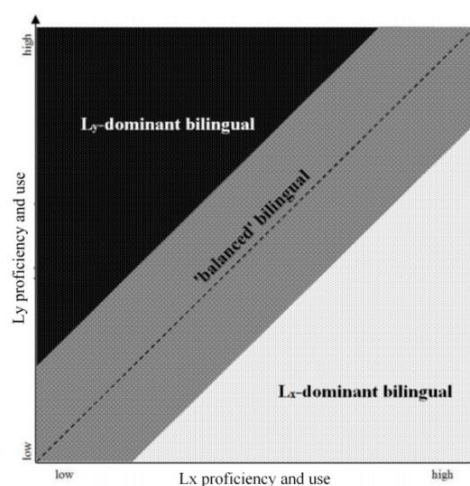


Fig 1 Schematic Representation of Language Dominance in Bilinguals
Adapted from Schmid and Yilmaz (2018)

The concept of language dominance has its origins in linguistic research and has been associated with linguistic, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic fields (Lanza, 1997). With specific points to cultural identity, an individual's cultural identity and dominant language are often two-way interactions. Language dominance can be influenced by one's cultural identity by various factors. Social factors, such as the prestige or dominant status

of a specific language in a particular region, as well as individual motivations and language preferences, contribute to shaping patterns of language use and dominance (Treffers-Daller, 2019). Bilingual individuals often choose to use a particular language in various aspects of their lives based on their cultural identity, considering it superior to another language. The dominant language typically aligns with their cultural identity and reflects their close connection to specific cultural groups or communities (Coulmas, 2013). Cultural factors also play an important role in determining language dominance. People's attachment to a specific language may be influenced by their cultural identity, traditions, and connections with specific linguistic communities. Additionally, maintaining cultural ties or meeting social expectations associated with a particular language can also impact language dominance (Khan, 2020).

In summary, language dominance is influenced by cultural aspects and plays a significant role in bilingual or multilingual environments. Language serves as a potent tool for transmitting and preserving culture; however, it does not solely determine one's cultural identity. The relationship between language and cultural identity is shaped by various factors such as generational disparities, ethnic backgrounds, and personal experiences. An individual's language dominance is interconnected with their cultural identity since they often prioritize one language over another based on their affiliation with a specific cultural community. Societal factors, personal motivations and preferences also contribute to patterns of language use and dominance.

2.3 Language Factors and Cultural Attachment

The nexus of language, linguistic dominance, and cultural identity forms a pivotal research domain, attracting substantial scholarly attention. This section is devoted to dissecting existing studies that scrutinize the influence of language dominance on cultural identity, and conversely, the impact of cultural identity on language use.

2.3.1 Multilingualism and Cultural Attachment

In the interdisciplinary fields of linguistic and cultural studies, the intricate relationship between multilingualism and cultural attachment presents a crucial area for exploration. This section delves into the ways in which language, a fundamental aspect of culture, shapes identity and cultural bonds, particularly in environments where multiple languages are spoken. One key aspect that adds complexity to this dynamic is the phenomenon of language shift, often observed in younger generations. As noted by Fishman (1991), there is a tendency for these groups to lean towards dominant languages, such as English in Malaysia, potentially weakening their connection to their ethnic cultural heritage. Similarly, Crystal (2003) comments on the rise of English globally and how it might redirect cultural identities towards a more international framework.

Supporting these observations, empirical studies provide deeper insights into these complex interactions. For instance, Yang's (2023) study illustrates the impact of Chinese as a heritage language on the ethnic identity of Chinese-Australian adolescents. In a parallel vein, Yu's (2015) research demonstrates a link between proficiency in the Chinese language and a stronger sense of ethnic identity and self-esteem among American-born Chinese youths. Furthermore, the significance of language preservation within family and community settings, as discussed by Tsung and Cruickshank (2009), highlights the role of language in maintaining cultural traditions and identity. However, this narrative is nuanced. For example, Su and Chao (2009) point out that high proficiency in Chinese does not always correspond with a robust ethnic identity among adolescents of Chinese and Mexican descent, indicating a more complex and layered relationship.

2.3.2 The Malaysian Chinese Context

Fishman (1996) poignantly articulates that language transcends its communicative function, serving as a vessel for cultural knowledge and identity. This notion is exemplified in multilingual societies where language choice becomes a defining factor in cultural identification. The Malaysian context, with its linguistic diversity encompassing English, Malay, Mandarin, and various Chinese dialects, is a prime example. The Malaysian Chinese community presents a unique case study in the exploration of language and cultural attachment. Tan (2021) highlights the complex interplay of Mandarin, Chinese dialects, Malay, and English, each contributing to diverse cultural experiences and attachments.

The Malaysian education system, featuring various linguistic streams, significantly influences language preferences and cultural affiliations. Gill (2005) notes the crucial role of this system in shaping these preferences, which in turn reflect and influence cultural orientations. R. S. Ting et al. (2023) delve into the profound impact of mother tongue heritage on cultural identification among Malaysian Chinese individuals, including those primarily English-speaking. Their study illuminates the significant role of language preferences and linguistic divisions, particularly among the youth, and the unique racial dynamics and social contexts they encounter.

In conclusion, the exploration of language's role in shaping cultural identity, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts, reveals the complex and diverse nature of this interplay. While empirical studies often illustrate the profound impact of language on cultural attachment and identity formation, this relationship is not

uniform across different settings and communities. This insight not only deepens our understanding of the role of language in cultural identity but also invites ongoing scholarly inquiry into the diverse ways in which language and culture interact within the globalized tapestry of human societies.

3. Research Method & Design

This research was conducted at Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM) in the academic year 2023-2024. XMUM is a Chinese overseas campus that conducts courses and programs in English, aiming to equip students with strong English language skills for global competitiveness and international career opportunities (Xiamen University, 2019). This approach was selected primarily for its ability to provide objective, measurable data that could be statistically analyzed to yield a clear, comprehensive understanding of the extent and nature of the students' cultural connection. Unlike qualitative methods, which focus on descriptive and thematic analysis often subject to interpretative biases, quantitative methods enable the generation of percentages and other quantitative measures. These measures offer a more precise, generalized view of cultural attachment among a larger group, which is essential for our study's aim of examining broad patterns and correlations in cultural identity.

3.1 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed in this research due to its specific focus on investigating particular groups. A sample of 74 participants was selected based on the criteria outlined in the questionnaire invitation, which specified that participants must meet the following conditions: 1. Be Malaysian Chinese citizens studying in XMUM; 2. Be born and primarily raised in Malaysia; 3. Prefer and predominantly use English in the daily lives.

3.2 Instrument

For the purpose of this research, an online questionnaire of 12 items has been adapted from MEIM to the Malaysian Chinese cultural identity Measure (MCCIM). The aim is to use statistical methods to generate percentages and other quantitative measures, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the extent and nature of the students' connection to Malaysian Chinese culture. This adapted measure aims to evaluate four aspects of cultural identity: Affirmation and Belonging (comprising 3 items); Achievement (comprising 4 items); Cultural Behaviours (comprising 2 items); and Other-group Orientation (comprising 3 items). The items are evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To establish instrument reliability, a pilot study involving 30 participants was conducted. The questionnaire's reliability was proved with Cronbach's alpha value .83, while its validity was also examined by three Malaysian Chinese professors from the English department at XMUM.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire invitation was launched online, and its link was shared through various channels, including on-campus distribution in high-traffic areas like canteens and the library, as well as online social platforms such as Facebook forums, WeChat groups, and Instagram stories. Participants accessed the questionnaire by scanning a QR code. For data analysis, this research utilizes descriptive statistics to calculate percentages using Excel, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the extent and nature of the students' connection to MCC. To enhance the clarity and interpretation of the findings, relevant data visualizations are incorporated for presentation. The statistical results are then carefully interpreted to derive meaningful discussions and conclusions, providing insights into the students' level of cultural attachment.

4. Findings

Based on the quantitative survey, the overall result suggests that the participants exhibit a high level of attachment towards MCC, with approximately half of the participants expressing a positive attitude towards MCC on the levels of Achievement, Cultural Behaviours, as well as Affirmation and Belonging.

4.1 Achievement

The Achievement level assesses participants' active engagement in understanding and exploring their Malaysian Chinese heritage. It involves actively seeking to learn about their heritage, understanding its significance, and reflecting on its influence on their lives. This level highlights the cognitive and exploratory aspects of participants' connection to their cultural identity.

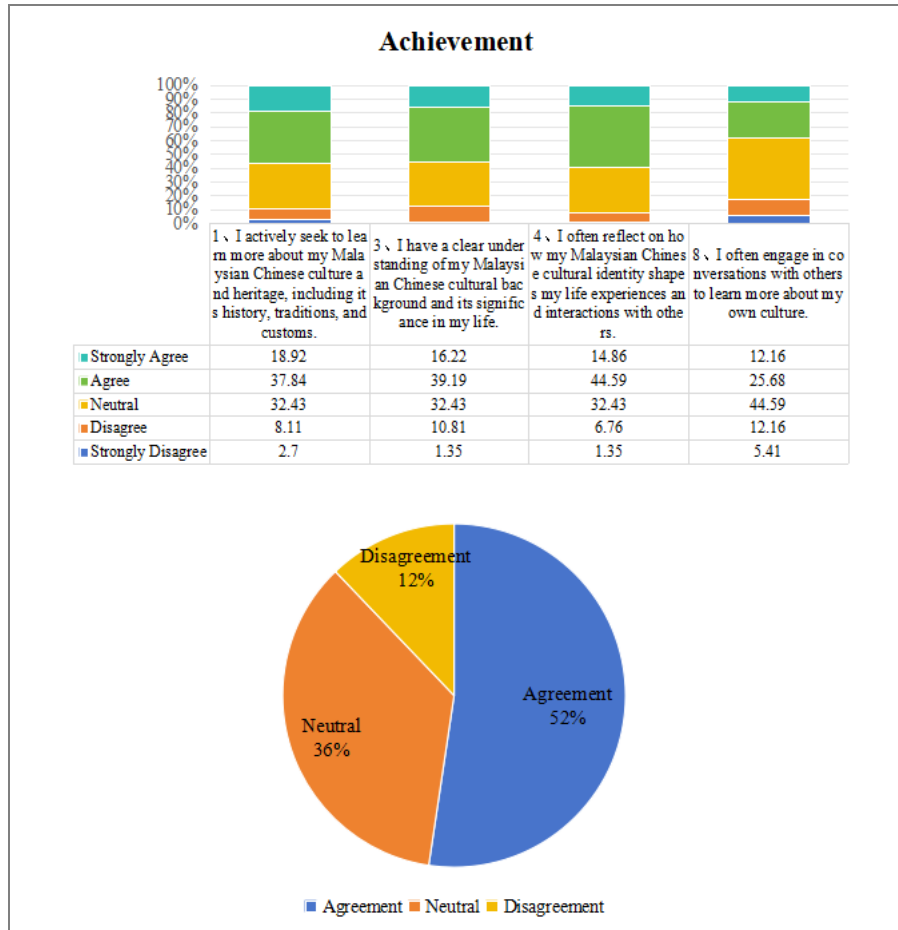


Fig 2 MCCIM: Achievement

Data reveals the participants' positive engagement to MCC. Over half of participants (52%) actively seek to learn about their heritage, possess a clear understanding of its significance, and frequently reflect on how it influences their lives. While their engagement in conversations about their culture varies (item 8), a significant interest in cultural exploration exists. This data underscores a strong connection between individuals and MCC, reflecting a sense of pride, curiosity, and self-awareness among the respondents.

4.2 Cultural Behaviours

Cultural Behaviors focuses on the participants' involvement in cultural practices and activities specific to the Malaysian Chinese community. It includes aspects like participation in cultural traditions and social activities with members of the Malaysian Chinese group. This level indicates the practical and behavioral expressions of their cultural identity.

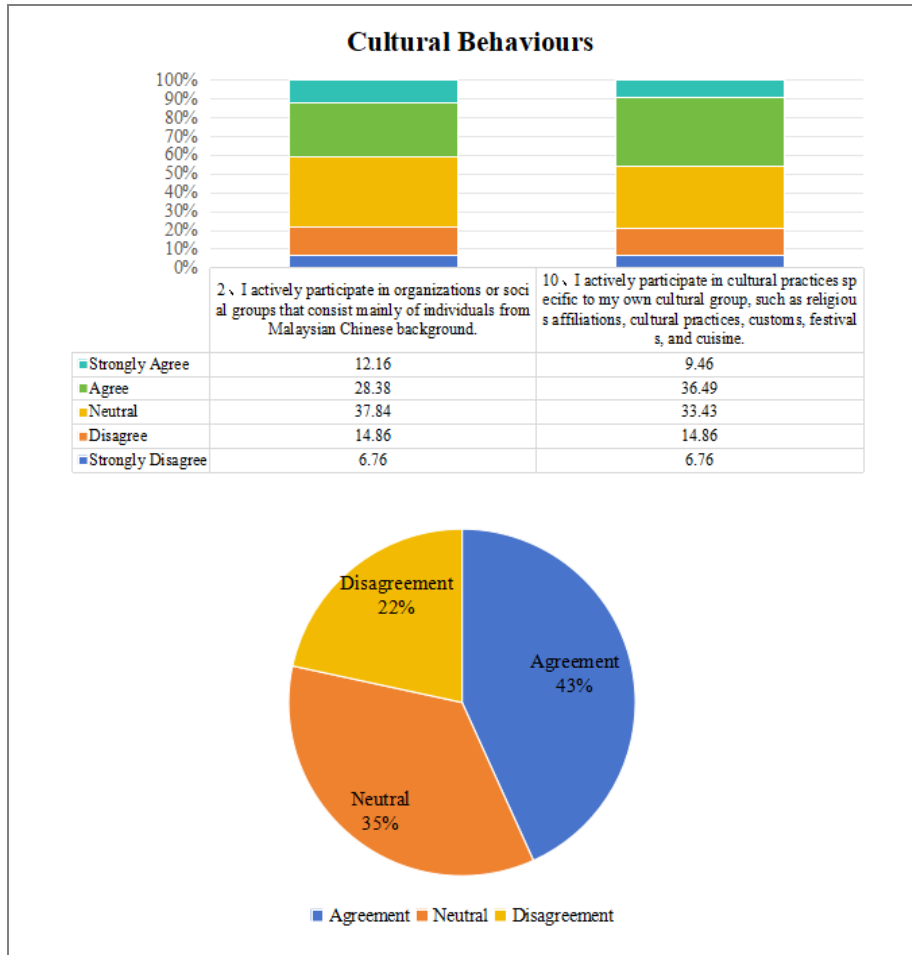


Fig 3 MCCIM: Cultural Behaviours

Participants' responses reveal their engagement with Malaysian Chinese cultural activities and organizations. While there is a spectrum of engagement levels, the data suggests a prevalent inclination among respondents to actively participate in Malaysian Chinese cultural organizations and practices, indicating a generally positive cultural involvement within the surveyed group, with a substantial portion of participants (43%) actively participating in cultural practices and organizations specific to their cultural background.

4.3 Affirmation and Belonging

Affirmation and Belonging evaluates participants' feelings of belonging to the Malaysian Chinese community and their attitudes toward this group. It includes elements like cultural pride, feeling good about their cultural background, and being happy with their cultural group membership. This dimension reflects the emotional and affective connection the participants feel towards their cultural heritage.

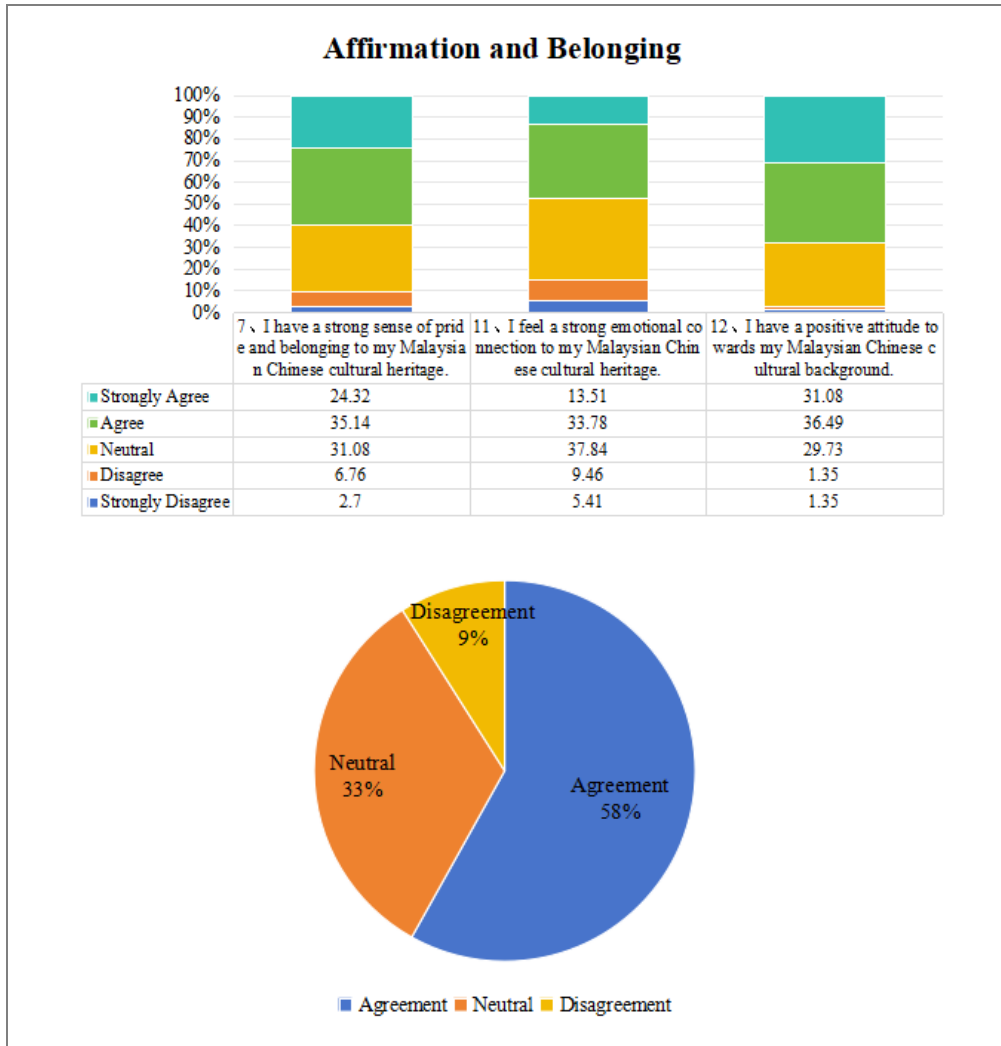


Fig 4 MCCIM: Affirmation and Belonging

Data reveals that the majority of respondents (58%) expressed positive feelings and a strong connection to their cultural identity. The results indicate a strong sense of cultural pride, emotional connection, and positive attitude among the participants towards their Malaysian Chinese cultural heritage.

4.4 Other-group Orientation

Other-group Orientation aspect assesses the participants' attitudes toward and interactions with cultural groups other than their own. It is not a direct component of cultural identity but interacts with it as a factor in one's social identity. This dimension reflects the dynamics of cultural preservation, willingness for engagement, and social preferences in Malaysia's multicultural context.

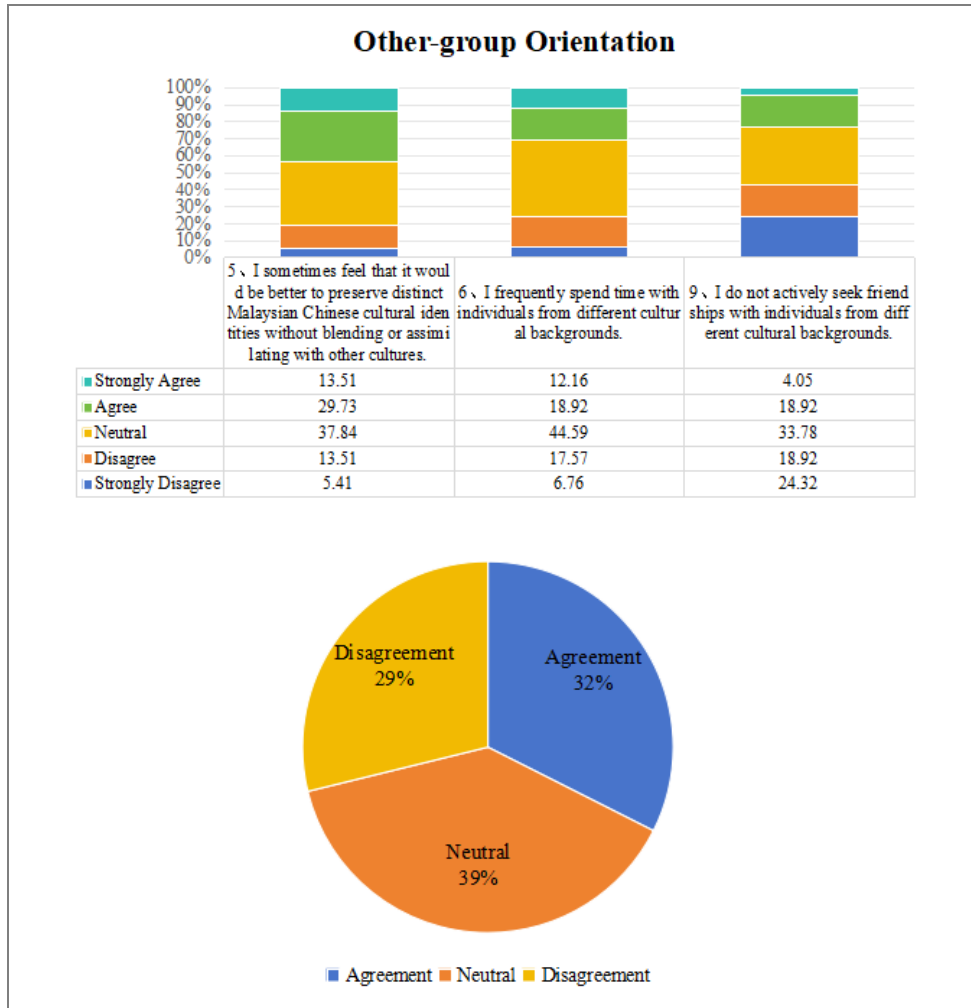


Fig 5 MCCIM: Other-group Orientation

The data reveals an ambivalent and complex picture. A significant portion remained neutral across the items (39%), indicating ambivalence or a lack of strong preference. Noticeably, there is a subtle inclination towards preserving the distinct MCCI (with the ratio of Agreement being 32%). Overall, this section reveals a complex interplay of cultural preservation, willingness for engagement, and social preferences within the surveyed group, reflecting the intricate dynamics of cultural identity and social interactions among the surveyed community.

5. Discussion

This study's exploration of cultural attachment among EMC university students offers novel insights that both align with and diverge from established literature. A critical finding is the non-diminishing cultural attachment among students proficient in English, a global language. This challenges the conventional belief, as discussed by Fishman (1991) and Crystal (2003), that proficiency in a global language might erode ethnic cultural ties. Instead, our findings resonate with the observations of R. S. Ting et al. (2023), who noted that language preferences, including proficiency in English, do not preclude strong cultural identification within the Malaysian Chinese community.

Our research also underscores a significant trend diverging from traditional literature that often focuses on dominant cultural influences over minority languages. Our approach, investigating the impact of English on cultural attachment within a specific ethnic community, aligns with current cultural studies emphasizing the fluidity of identity in a globalized environment. This perspective is supported by Tsung and Cruickshank (2009), who highlighted the importance of language maintenance in family and community contexts for preserving cultural traditions and identity.

Remarkably, our study reveals a high level of engagement with cultural practices and traditions among English-proficient students. This finding suggests that language proficiency and cultural attachment can coexist, enabling meaningful engagement with both global and local cultures. This observation is particularly relevant in the context of the Malaysian Chinese community, as discussed by Tan (2011), where a complex interplay of Mandarin, Chinese dialects, Malay, and English contributes to diverse cultural experiences and attachments.

Furthermore, our study challenges the findings of Su and Chao (2009), who noted that high fluency in Chinese does not necessarily correlate with strong ethnic identity among Chinese and Mexican adolescents. In contrast, our research suggests a more direct correlation between language proficiency and cultural attachment in the Malaysian Chinese context, indicating a unique interplay of linguistic and cultural dynamics.

In summary, our study contributes to the broader discourse on cultural identity preservation within the landscape of language shifts, offering a foundation for future studies in similar multicultural and multilingual settings. The findings indicate a complex relationship between language proficiency and cultural affinity, shaped by factors like globalization, educational settings, and social environments. This insight invites us to reconsider traditional models of cultural assimilation and better understand the ways individuals connect with their cultural heritage in a globalized society.

6. Conclusion

In concluding this study, we have illuminated the intricate dynamics of cultural attachment among English-dominant Malaysian Chinese university students. Our research, grounded in quantitative analysis, has unveiled a striking phenomenon: proficiency in English, a global language, does not necessarily erode cultural attachment in these students. On the contrary, our findings indicate a profound level of engagement with Malaysian Chinese culture (MCC), characterized by active participation in cultural practices and a robust affirmation of cultural identity. This discovery challenges prevailing theories that suggest a direct correlation between language dominance and cultural assimilation, thereby offering new perspectives on the complex relationship between language proficiency and cultural affinity.

Our study has revealed a nuanced interplay of factors influencing cultural attachment, including globalization, educational settings, and social environments. A key revelation is the dual identity navigated by these students – a balance between global language proficiency and a strong sense of ethnic cultural belonging. Notably, an unexpected outcome was the high level of cultural practices and traditions engagement among English-proficient students, highlighting that language proficiency and cultural attachment can coexist, enabling individuals to engage meaningfully with both global and local cultures.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, particularly in the realms of educational policy and curriculum development in multilingual and multicultural contexts like Malaysia. This research underscores the necessity of designing inclusive and culturally sensitive educational environments that respect and nurture the dual identities of students. Moreover, it provides valuable insights for community leaders and policymakers in formulating programs and initiatives that promote cultural engagement and identity affirmation among young adults.

Looking forward, the study paves the way for future research to adopt a more diversified approach, incorporating broader samples across various cultural backgrounds. This would offer a more generalized understanding of the impact of language dominance on cultural attachment. Incorporating standardized language proficiency assessments and exploring the correlation between English dominance levels and attachment to MCC will deepen our comprehension of the intricate interplay between language and identity. Additionally, examining how Malaysian Chinese students negotiate their cultural identity in different local and global contexts will further enrich our understanding of cultural identity dynamics in an increasingly globalized world.

In summary, this study not only challenges existing paradigms but also opens new avenues for understanding cultural identity in the context of language dominance. It invites us to rethink traditional models of cultural assimilation and consider the diverse ways individuals connect with their cultural heritage in a globalized society. The insights gained from this research offer a compelling reminder of the resilience of cultural identity in the face of linguistic globalization.

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