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Khauthar Ismail

*Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia*, khautharism@usm.my

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Does Ethnicity Matter in Friendship? A Comparative Study of Malaysian Students in Local and International Universities

Khauthar Ismail  
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia  
khautharism@usm.my

**Abstract:** Ethnic boundaries and friendship are intricately related in Malaysia. Many concerns have arisen about this issue, especially when it could indicate inter-ethnic acceptance, tolerance, and understanding. The objective of this paper is to discuss the importance of ethnic boundaries in Malaysian youth friendships. The data were drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted through in-depth interviews with Malaysian students in two universities located inside and outside Malaysia's geographical territory. A comparative study was selected due to the possibility that variations might exist across Malaysia's boundary. Through a comparative analysis in Penang in Malaysia and Glasgow in Scotland, this article demonstrates how, when, and why ethnicity becomes essential within Malaysian friendships. The findings demonstrate that the respondents' friendships worked within cultural boundaries—religion and language—but at different levels depending on the location of the interview. It can be inferred that ethnicity and its boundaries within the friendship are not fixed but are socially constructed, maintained, and heightened depending on social actors' particular needs, situations, and socio-political context.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, friendship, post-colonial country, tertiary institution, young adult

This article presents a theoretical and empirical analysis of the complex nature of friendships among Malaysian youth residing in urban areas both within and beyond Malaysia's territorial boundaries. Friendship, often regarded as a fundamental element of individual choice, is explored in this study within the broader context of Malaysia's social fabric. The aim of the study is to highlight the significance of ethnic boundaries in the friendships of Malaysian youth. It emphasizes that these relationships extend beyond mere personal preference and are intricately intertwined with the colonial epistemology deeply rooted in the country's social structures. By examining

friendship patterns among young individuals in post-colonial Malaysia, this research can significantly contribute to our understanding of inter-ethnic tolerance and preferences, offering valuable insights into the ongoing processes of social integration and identity formation in this diverse and dynamic nation.

Young people throughout the world are increasingly participating in internal and external migration. One of the migration forces for them is the education factor, especially in pursuing higher education qualifications (Global Migration Report, 2014; Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019). With these trends, global higher education enrollment showed consistent

increments from 1970 to 2011, particularly in the East and South Asia regions (UNESCO, 2014). Migration, in general, is prone to enforcing adjustment and adaptation to the local setting. Because most tertiary education institutions are in urban areas, the students inevitably must live and coexist with people from various cultural backgrounds. As strangers in a new place, social support from friendship is crucial for their adjustment to a new environment. Friendship, according to Devito (2016, p.275), “is an interpersonal relationship between two interdependent persons that is mutually productive and characterized by mutual positive regard.” It builds on trust, emotional support, and shared interests (Blieszner & Adams, 1992). Nonetheless, from the sociological perspective, friendship is not simply an autonomous and individualistic choice or convergence of interests. It is socially patterned within social and economic contexts with the flexibility to adjust to social surroundings and needs. Inter-ethnic friendships in a post-colonial country with a multi-ethnic population are more complicated due to the epistemology legacies rooted in the previous colonial economy structures, local political dynamics, and post-secularism.

Malaysia is one of the post-colonial countries in Southeast Asia. In the 19th century, a significant wave of migration from China and India to Malaysia took place during the British occupancy in Malaya. Today, its population comprises more than 40 ethnic sub-categories, each with its own cultural practices and beliefs (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011), but its main population is composed of Malays, followed by Chinese and Indians (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Despite over 60 years of independence, Malaysians’ inter-ethnic friendships remain vaguely established. This situation should be highlighted because inter-ethnic friendship can indicate inter-ethnic tolerance, understanding, and acceptance (Wan Husin et al., 2021). It is also crucial for Malaysia’s nation-building, especially among the younger generation. Previous studies on Malaysian friendship over the past few decades suggest consistency in Malaysian homophilous friendships, which have taken place at various levels and subjects regarding age, gender, and working sector. The preferences for friendship within one’s own ethnic group have persistently concentrated on two ethnic and cultural boundaries: religion (Armstrong, 1987; Olivier, 2020) and language (Tan et al., 2013; Singh & Jack, 2022). However, the studies mainly focused on Malaysian

friendships within the local context of Malaysia. This focus highlights a significant research gap in the comparative analysis of Malaysian friendships across diverse socio-political environments, especially in different countries, which the current study seeks to address.

## Literature Review

### *Ethnicity From a Constructivist Perspective*

Ethnic identity and groups, in everyday understanding, are typically defined and understood by their cultural boundaries. However, from a constructivist perspective, these boundaries are not what defines the group. Instead, they emerge as consequences of group organization and should be understood based on members’ interactions with opposing groups (Barth, 1969). Constructivism considers ethnic boundaries as social constructs shaped by extended political, economic, and social processes. These ethnic boundaries are not fixed; they are flexible, varying according to the context and relationships with others. In this tradition, ethnicity is viewed as a process of establishing and altering groups by defining the boundaries that separate them (Wimmer, 2008). In Malaysia’s socio-political landscape, the maintenance of ethnic boundaries is an interplay between top-down and bottom-up interactions. Authorities enforce ethnic boundaries at the institutional level through ethnic bureaucratization, whereas social actors often decide to maintain these boundaries (or not) based on self-identification during social interactions with their interlocutors. The flexibility of ethnic boundaries plays a significant role in how friendships are formed and shaped, but the maintenance of the boundaries at the structural level poses a challenge to inter-ethnic friendships, thus highlighting the complexity of friendships in the Malaysian context.

### *Ethnic Bureaucratization in Malaysia’s Context*

Ethnic bureaucratization pertains to scenarios where an individual’s membership in a particular ethnic category is bureaucratically determined or officially recognized (Siddique, 1990). However, this system tends to oversimplify complex identities, reinforce divisive ethnic stereotypes, and contribute to social stratification along ethnic lines (Hirschman, 1987). The official population census in Malaysia has

evolved through three main stages: pre-independence (1871-1957), post-independence (1957-1960), and from 1970 onwards. Each stage was influenced by different economic and political circumstances. The pre-independence censuses were closely tied to British administrative and territorial expansion. In contrast, the post-independence censuses from 1957 to 1960 were shaped by local authority political interests and international relations with Singapore (Hirschman, 1987). The 1970 census, however, represented the foundational blueprint of modern Malaysian demographics. Across these stages, the primary goal of the census was the identification and categorization of the population into respective ethnic groups. This categorization was regarded as vital for the state to facilitate the implementation of social and economic policies.

Additionally, during the whole period, the inclusion and exclusion of sub-ethnic groups frequently occurred, suggesting the flexibility of ethnic identification based on socio-economic and political contexts. Despite this, boundaries between Malay and Chinese communities remained distinct. The definition of “Malay,” as stated in Article 160 of the Malaysian Federation Constitution, was established by the British and related to Malay Reserved Land affairs (Shamsul, 2001). This definition encompasses those who speak the Malay language, practice Islam, and follow Malay customs. The identification of Malaysian Chinese, on the other hand, was initially based on their dialects of origin in China, a classification first used in the 1921 population census and still relevant today. In the 1970s, a new category, *bumiputera* (direct translation: “sons of the soil”), was introduced following the Malay-Chinese conflict in 1969. It comprises Malays, aboriginal people in Peninsular Malaysia, and native communities in East Malaysia. It also reinforces and strengthens Article 153, an existing affirmative action for native people outlined in the constitution. The formation of the *bumiputera* category can be seen as a consequence of Malaysia’s progressive inter-ethnic relationships, industrialization, urbanization, and democratic progress following the transition from British rule to local governance. The top-down identification and categorization of Malaysian Malays and Chinese have profoundly influenced the everyday perceptions and expectations of “Malayness” and “Chineseness.” These perceptions are reflected in cultural boundaries and practices, creating a habitus that impacts their

decisions and behaviors in ways that often reinforce existing social structures.

### ***Malaysia’s Educational System, Language, and Religious Boundaries***

Allport (1954) suggested that a positive attitude towards different groups can only happen if they have more exposure and contact. Exposure and contact can only happen with the availability and sharing of space. Feld (1981) commented that someone cannot be friends with another person if they never have or have only limited foci, which can offer an opportunity for interaction in real life: “Foci may be many different things, including persons, places, social positions, activities, and groups. They may actively bring people together or passively constrain them to interact” (p. 1018). People can make friends because of homogenous interests, characteristics, or aims through foci, and school is a suitable central point for inter-ethnic exposure.

Malaysia’s primary schools operate on a vernacular system, a by-product of the ethnic occupational and residential segregation that existed before independence. Interestingly, Malaysia is one of the only countries, alongside China and Taiwan, that offers Chinese vernacular primary schools (Ang, 2022). Currently, there are 1,302 state-funded Chinese vernacular primary schools in the country (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). Under specific conditions, Malaysian children are generally free to enroll in any school, depending on their parents’ preferences. However, it has been observed that most schools are predominantly attended by native speakers of the respective language (Balakrishnan, 2020). Upon completing primary education, pupils have the option to attend either national or private secondary schools. The medium of instruction in national secondary schools in Malaysia is primarily *Bahasa Melayu*, the national language. In private secondary schools, however, the choice of language varies depending on the school’s ideology, but it is typically *Mandarin*, *Bahasa Melayu*, or English.

There are various types of private secondary schools in Malaysia. Malays typically have the option of enrolling in private religious secondary schools, whereas the Chinese can opt for Malaysian independent Chinese secondary schools (MICSSs). The curriculum in the private religious secondary schools and some of the MICSSs is a blend of the national syllabus and

their respective educational philosophies. The *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) examination is mandatory in private religious secondary schools and optional in some MICSSs where students are required to take the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC). The SPM is a crucial national examination, serving as a fundamental prerequisite for local higher education and vocational training. On the other hand, the UEC is accepted as an entry requirement by only a few Malaysian private universities and universities abroad. The selection of primary and secondary education significantly impacts students' qualifications for tertiary education and their future career opportunities in government or private working sectors (Ismail, 2021).

Separate educational spheres with different language proficiencies lead to several consequences for inter-ethnic friendships. These environments restrict opportunities for inter-ethnic interactions and limit the chances of forming language connections vital for such friendships (McPherson et al., 2001). According to How et al. (2015), Chinese students in Chinese vernacular primary schools show lower proficiency in *Bahasa Melayu*—the national language—compared with their ethnic language. The preference for Mandarin is attributed to their fluency in it and limited opportunities to use the national language with students from other ethnic groups. In contrast, Tan et al.'s (2013) study suggested that inter-ethnic friendship between Chinese (the majority) and Malays (the minority) in Chinese vernacular primary schools was hindered by growing awareness of Islamic identity and the rise of the latter in these schools.

Islam is an official religion in Malaysia (Article 3) and Malays have a unique relationship with Islam, which is officially acknowledged by the federal constitution (Article 160). The religion is implied as part of Malay culture and vice versa, despite the existence of non-Malay Muslims in the Malaysian community. In the past decades, conversion to Islam by non-Malays has been an indication of “being Malay” or *masuk Melayu* (Siddique, 1981; Lindenberg, 2009). Islam has not only been instrumental in shaping Malay civilization but has also been crucial in forming the modern Malay culture and identity that is centered on *halal* ideology manifested in their daily and ordinary conduct (Majid, 2018). At the same time, the suggestion of introducing *Jawi* (traditional Malay script) as part of the curriculum in vernacular primary schools is facing opposition from some non-Malay individuals

and organizations (Wui & Wei, 2020). The aim of the proposal was to introduce *Jawi-Khat* to Standard 4 pupils in vernacular primary school by using six-page learning material. The proposal, however, was interpreted by some as religious propaganda directed at non-Malay communities in Malaysia (Ramlie et al., 2021).

Living in these ethnicized structures and spaces with the need to maintain cultural boundaries has inevitably encouraged homophilous friendship. It is, therefore, understandable that some Malaysians inevitably have to avoid inter-ethnic friendships because of a lack of opportunities to have meaningful interaction with or understanding of other ethnic groups throughout their life.

## Method

### *Research Design*

This research is an explanatory study based on ethnographic fieldwork, with semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary method. Explanatory research is suitable for achieving the objective of this study for several reasons. First, ethnicity is a multifaceted concept influenced by social, cultural, historical, and political factors. Explanatory research aids in understanding the complex relationships and interactions among these factors. It enables researchers to explore why and how ethnic boundaries are important in friendship (Neuman, 2014). Second, explanatory research is appropriate for investigating cause-and-effect relationships (Neuman, 2014). In ethnicity studies, this approach is valuable for examining how structural factors influence Malaysian youth friendships. Furthermore, combining explanatory research with ethnographic fieldwork is suitable for exploring the subjective and intricate nature of ethnicity. This method provides a deeper understanding of both individual and collective experiences, perceptions, and attitudes related to ethnicity.

### *Respondents and Sampling*

The respondents in this study represented Malay and Chinese students studying in Penang and Glasgow. Although Malaysia has over 40 sub-ethnic groups, the research narrowed its scope to these two prominent ethnicities rooted in their significant and longstanding roles in Malaysian politics and economics. Their

relationship, especially from the colonial period to the early years of Malaysia's independence, should be understood as "the economically disadvantaged are politically powerful and vice versa" (Lim, 1985, p. 251). Today, the Malays, as one of the indigenous populations in Malaysia, are supported by the affirmative action stated in the Federation. As the main population, their numerical strength is able to influence the direction of Malaysian political affairs. As for the Chinese, their economic prosperity was gradually built in the 19th century when they were given an opportunity by the British to be on the front line of economic activities. Based on the household income survey, the Chinese population continues to have the highest income category in Malaysia compared to other ethnic groups (Department of Statistics, 2020).

In addition to avoiding missing crucial information and perceptions, this research also gave particular attention to the gender variable. As a result, the respondents recruited for this research had to fulfill the following specific criteria: they had to be young Malaysians, male or female, Malay or Chinese, and studying and living in Penang or Glasgow. These specific criteria were devised to ensure that comparable ethnic groups and gender perspectives were included so that any differences in terms of ethnicity, gender, and location could be fully explored (see Table 1). The respondents were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical standards set by the relevant institutional review boards. This included ensuring that informed consent was received from all participants before the interviews. Interview information was securely stored and accessible exclusively by the research team. Furthermore, to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all of the names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

## Data collection and analysis

Fifty-five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in person through face-to-face sessions in Glasgow and Penang. The interview was conducted in Bahasa Melayu, English, or a mix of two languages, based on participant preference. The interview started with questions on the respondents' socio-demographic profile, which included their hometown and the type of primary and secondary school they had attended, followed by the key questions, which were "Who is your friend and best friend?" "Are you from the same ethnic group?" "Do you have a friend from a different ethnic group?" "What kind of activities have you shared with your friends?" and "Who are you staying with on campus?" To gain more detailed insights, these key questions were followed up with "why" questions. The use of interview guidelines is important to ensure the research's reliability by maintaining consistency in the discussions of each interview. The guidelines also offered the researcher flexibility to ask questions based on the respondents' flow of information sharing without interrupting or missing crucial questions in any of the interviews. Although the data were contingent on the informants' comfort levels, using a guide ensured that the same general areas of information were collected from each respondent. This consistency made it easier to compare and analyze the data across different interviews. Regarding the validity of the findings, strategies included word-by-word transcription and maintaining the colloquial structure of the respondents' statements to retain the reality of their opinions. Additionally, peer discussions with mentors and subject experts were conducted to avoid biased interpretations and to enhance understanding.

**Table 1**

*Respondents Profile Based on Location of Interview, Ethnic Category, and Gender*

Ethnicity	Location of interview				Total
	Penang		Glasgow		
	Malays	Chinese	Malays	Chinese	
<i>Male</i>	8	7	7	4	26
<i>Female</i>	7	8	8	6	29
Total	15	15	15	10	55

The data were analyzed through comparative and thematic analysis, designed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) five-step model. The first step is data familiarization. The second is generating initial codes by focusing on noting interesting aspects and repeated themes. The coding at this stage is often general and broad. Third, searching for themes involved sorting, organizing, and collating all the codes into identified themes. At this point, the primary objective was to establish the connection between codes, themes, and various levels of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth step is thematic refinement. Here, it was decided whether the identified themes were coherent enough to address the importance of ethnic boundaries in friendships. In the final stage, a detailed analysis and discussion of each major theme was carried out, guided by the theoretical framework of constructivism and seeking to avoid creating an overlapping "story" of the data, as provided in the next sections.

## Results

Based on the analysis, religion and language boundaries were identified as two important elements in the respondents' friendships. However, the importance of these boundaries was flexible depending on their location and gender.

### *Religious Boundaries*

Religion is a crucial criterion for Malaysian Malays' *Malayness*. It has consequently led to an everyday connotation between Malay and Muslim. The findings of this research suggest that the religious boundaries in private and public spaces significantly outlined the respondents' friendships, which varied based on the location and gender factors (see Table 2). The respondents needed to observe, tolerate, or consider the religious boundaries based on their location, gender, and space.

In general, the Malay respondents' high observance of religious boundaries was greater in Penang, regardless of their gender. In Glasgow, however, the findings suggest that only Malay females were as highly observant as the Malay respondents in Penang on the religious boundaries in their private space.

The findings suggest that the Malay female respondents in Penang had a higher tendency than the Malay female respondents in Glasgow to articulate

their *Malayness*—manifested in the everyday understanding of religious gender expectations—in their friendships. For example, two Malay females interviewed in Penang, Amina and Suzila, were very selective about their friendships and about whom they could go out with during their leisure activities. They said that they felt more comfortable being surrounded by Malay female companions due to their religious obligation to pray five times a day, but at the same time, they preferred non-Muslim women to Malay men.

My priority is Malay women. I prefer Malays because it is easier for me to pray because I will have a friend to go with me. We can pray together. (Suzila, Malay female interviewed in Penang)

The Chinese females interviewed in Penang faced a similar issue regarding religious boundaries during their friendship with Malay friends. They admitted that they needed to limit their choices of foods and eateries when going out with their Malay friends, which they said had unfortunately challenged their friendship with Malays. Where to eat may sound like a trivial issue, but it has real implications for Malaysians in their everyday life. The question is not simply about the dishes but more about the space in which different ethnic groups can eat. As one respondent explained:

There are Malay students in my lab. If we want to go out for lunch, we will find a place that is *halal* and suitable. Other than that, I do not think there should be a problem. (Peng, Chinese female interviewed in Penang)

Meanwhile, in Glasgow, if a Malaysian Malay went to a restaurant without a *halal* sign, they would first ask whether the meat or chicken served there was *halal* or not. If there is no *halal* food there, they will order vegetarian food which does not contain alcohol, pork, or other meats, as explained by one respondent:

I usually went to a restaurant with a *halal* logo. If there is no *halal* logo, I would ask the waiter if the meat they serve is *halal* or not. Chicken is usually *halal*. *Halal* meats such as beef and lamb are quite difficult to get in any restaurant. If there is no option for *halal* food, I would order something suitable for a vegetarian or

**Table 2**  
*Level of Observation, Toleration, and Consideration on Religious Boundaries in Private and Public Spaces*

SPACE	RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES	LOCATION OF INTERVIEWS								SOCIAL DECISION	
		Inside Malaysia boundaries				Outside Malaysia boundaries					
		Male Malay	Female Malay	Male Chinese	Female Chinese	Male Malay	Female Malay	Male Chinese	Female Chinese		
PRIVATE SPACE	Sharing of private space	High observation	High observation	High observation	High observation	High toleration	High observation	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration
	Obligation for covering <i>aurah</i>	Nil	High observation	Nil	Nil	Nil	High observation	Nil	High observation	Nil	Nil
	Obligation for daily prayer	High observation	High observation	Nil	Nil	High toleration	High observation	High toleration	High observation	Nil	Nil
	Religious lifestyle values	High observation	High observation	Nil	Nil	High toleration	High observation	High toleration	High observation	Nil	High consideration
	Food preparation	High observation	High observation	Nil	Nil	High toleration	High observation	High toleration	High observation	High observation	High consideration
PUBLIC SPACE	Food access	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	High toleration	High observation	High toleration	High observation	High consideration	High consideration
	Obligation for daily praying	High observation	High observation	Nil	Nil	High toleration	High observation	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	Nil
	Selection of eateries	High observation	High observation	Nil	High consideration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	Nil
	Selection of dish	High observation	High observation	Nil	High consideration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	Nil
	Gender boundaries	High observation	High observation	High observation	Nil	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High toleration	High observation



vegan. (Indah, Malay female interviewed in Glasgow)

On the other hand, the Malay and Chinese males interviewed in Penang had no issue with inter-ethnic friendship. Even so, at the same time, they claimed that gender roles and expectations, especially for Malay women, create barriers between them—not only for Chinese men but also for some Malay men. The Malay and Chinese respondents—both male and female—interviewed in Glasgow, however, said that religion and gender were not the main factors for their friendships. They were more open and had friends not only from different ethnicities but also from different nationalities. Interestingly, the Chinese respondents in Glasgow had more Malay friends than the Chinese respondents in Penang. The same outcome applied to the Malay respondents interviewed in Glasgow.

Religious expectation was not only important in the respondents' friendships and social gatherings, but it also affected their choice of residential areas and roommates. The respondents were divided into those who stayed in university accommodation and those who stayed in private accommodation. The respondents in Penang who were staying in university accommodation explained that the ethnicity of their roommate(s) depended on the university's administrators but that they were usually given a roommate from the same ethnicity. An explanation for the decision lies in the religious expectations in Malays' daily activities, which made the choice of a roommate an important concern in university residences.

The same answer and justification were found among female respondents in Glasgow regardless of their ethnic group. The Malay female respondents were particularly strict in selecting their flatmate(s). The reason for this was their Muslim responsibility to preserve and practice the regulations, particularly in relation to religious obligations regarding *aurah* and food preparation and consumption.

Although the Malay respondents in Glasgow had many choices regarding manufactured goods, they had limited choices for *halal* butchery. Additionally, the Malay respondents also needed to avoid pork products, which made it even more convenient to live with other Malays. Those left with no choice would rather live with other Muslims regardless of their nationality—often Pakistani:

There are lots of Malay Malaysians in my residence area. At the beginning, I planned to find a flat in the city center but the Malaysian community suggested that I should rent a flat in my current residence area because it would be easier for me to get *halal* food. So far, that area is fine. The area is not really 'Glasgow' because there are lots of international tenants in my neighborhood. Most of them are not Scottish. The majority of them are Pakistani. (Rahim, a Malay male respondent interviewed in Glasgow)

The Chinese female respondents interviewed in Glasgow also agreed that food preparation and consumption were the main barriers limiting them from living with Malay Malaysians. Lifestyle choices and values such as drinking alcohol and cohabiting with persons of the opposite sex before marriage are prohibited in Islamic practices and might well be crucial factors when choosing a flatmate. The Chinese respondents were aware of this issue. So, to avoid any problems in the future, both ethnicities implicitly agreed to live separately while understanding and respecting each other's decisions.

On the other hand, the majority of the single male respondents in Glasgow—regardless of their ethnicity—appeared to be less selective about the identity of their flatmates. They seemed to have fewer issues with friends drinking as long as the friends respected their rights in regard to praying and food conduct. With this attitude, some Malay and Chinese male respondents had no issue about living with someone from a different ethnicity or nationality, as one respondent had experienced:

I never purposely chose to stay with someone from a different ethnic background. I was already renting the place. They came later. Interestingly enough, I have never lived with a Muslim throughout my study here. I am in my fourth year here. It is just by chance. I found a place that I am comfortable with. They also respect my religion [Islam]. I have my own cutlery set with pots and pans, and we keep them separated. I share some [food] with them. If they want to share with me, they will buy something that is vegetarian-friendly. They also are not the party-type, and even if they want to drink alcohol, they will make sure it is not in

front of me. (Suhaimi, Malay male interviewed in Glasgow)

This finding suggests that location of residency and gendered ethnicity played an important role in the respondents' decisions about their flatmate(s). The respondents in Penang were stricter with their selection—both Malays and Chinese, male and female. In Glasgow, however, only the female respondents (Malay and Chinese) were more observant of the boundaries compared with the Malay and Chinese male respondents.

### Language Boundaries

The initial findings on language boundaries and friendship suggested that primary and secondary schooling experiences in Malaysia had had an impact on the respondents' exposure to inter-ethnic friendships. In schools dominated by Malay and Chinese populations, inter-ethnic interactions may be challenging. This challenge is not solely based on the social preferences of the respondents but rather on the likelihood and opportunity for them to encounter individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.

Interestingly, being a minority group in a school offered different types of friendship for the respondents. A Malay respondent in a Chinese-dominated school stated that even in a Chinese-dominated school, all of his close friends were Malays and Indians. He confessed that he could be friends with the Chinese students, but language was the main barrier between them. For this reason, he admitted that he felt more comfortable being around Indians as they preferred to talk in the Malay language, even when conversing amongst themselves. He commented:

My secondary school was an SMK [a national secondary school], but it was located in a Chinese area. I was in the Science class. There were only a few Malay students. Most of my classmates were Chinese and Indians. They were all my friends, but Indians were closer to me because they are the same; they are like Malays. They speak the Malay language even among themselves. (Amir, Malay male interviewed in Glasgow)

On the other hand, a Chinese respondent in a Malay-dominated school was willing to be a friend of Malays and said that the school environment gave an opportunity for her to have friends from different ethnic groups compared to her siblings who went to a Chinese school:

Compared with my sisters, I have a lot of friends. My sisters mixed around with Chinese only but I mixed around with different people. So I grew up with a lot of contacts. I feel very happy with a lot of friends. (Anna, Chinese female interviewed in Penang)

However, at the tertiary institution level, the analysis suggests that language is an important factor not only in inter-ethnic friendships but also in intra-ethnic friendships. These relationships intricately oscillate between ethnic categories and regional origins. The diversity of regional dialects in Malaysia provided different outcomes for the respondents. Geographically, Malaysia is divided into the west and east. The west comprises 13 regional areas: Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Johor, Perak, Selangor, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. The east, on the other hand, consists of Sabah, Sarawak, and Labuan. The respondents in this research originated from multiple regions before pursuing their studies at various local and international tertiary institutions (see Table 3).

Regional dialects in some locations can connect Malays and Chinese. For example, the Chinese from Kelantan, Sabah, and Sarawak were frequently mentioned by respondents (interviewed in both locations) as those with whom they were more likely to socialize and be accepted into the Malay community. Kelantan's population is homogeneously Malays and is administered by a Malaysian Muslim political party, and the Chinese are the minority in Kelantan. The populations in Sabah and Sarawak are, however, not dominated by Malays or Chinese but by other *bumiputra* native groups such as the *Iban*, *Bidayuh*, and *Kadazan-Dusun*. Proximity between the Malays and the Chinese originating from these states is easily built due to their ability to speak in respective Malay-regional dialects.

In these circumstances, the Chinese from Sabah and Sarawak frequently felt comfortable being around Malays. At the end of our discussion about

**Table 3***Location of Respondents' Hometown in Malaysia*

Hometown	Location of Interview				Total
	Penang		Glasgow		
	Malays	Chinese	Malays	Chinese	
<i>West Malaysia</i>					
<i>Kedah</i>	5	-	2	1	8
<i>Perlis</i>	-	-	-	-	0
<i>Kelantan</i>	4	1	2	1	8
<i>Terengganu</i>	-	-	2	-	2
<i>Johor</i>	1	2	3	2	8
<i>Perak</i>	2	3	1	1	7
<i>Selangor</i>	1	-	2	4	7
<i>Pahang</i>	1	-	1	-	2
<i>Negeri Sembilan</i>	-	1	1	1	3
<i>Melaka</i>	-	-	-	-	0
<i>Kuala Lumpur</i>	-	-	1	-	1
<i>Penang</i>	-	5	-	-	5
<i>East Malaysia</i>					
<i>Sabah</i>	1	-	-	-	1
<i>Sarawak</i>	-	3	-	-	3
Total	15	15	15	10	55

his social circle, Danish admitted that most of his friends were *bumiputras*. Malays are not the only *bumiputras* living in Sabah and Sarawak; there are several other *bumiputra* groups, such as *Bidayuh*, *Iban*, and *Melanau*, who live side-by-side with Malays and Chinese in the east of Malaysia. Because Malays and Chinese are not the majority group in Sabah and Sarawak, the languages used in these locations are not necessarily Malay or Chinese. The importance of dialect and its role in friendship was agreed upon by the Chinese-Penangites interviewed in this research. One female Chinese-Penangite claimed that some of the Chinese-Penangites were selective about whom they wanted to socialize with. In some cases, favoritism was shown on the basis of intra-ethnic levels because the Chinese-Penangites preferred to be with Chinese from Penang than from other states. She stated:

We will have group discussions, and we [Penangite Chinese students] normally gather

with the island group [Penang]. (Jenny, Chinese female interviewed in Penang)

This preference was supported by other Chinese respondents. One of them, Alex, interviewed in Penang, had lived for more than 15 years in Sarawak (East Malaysia) before moving to Penang (West Malaysia) because of his father's work. Based on his experiences of residing in two different locations, Alex stressed that language only acts as a boundary between Malays and Chinese residing in the west of Malaysia. Another Chinese respondent who was from the east of Malaysia and was studying in Penang also expressed the same idea, arguing that the gap between Malays and Chinese exists widely in Penang compared with her previous hometown.

Another Chinese respondent, Danish, who was from Sarawak and was interviewed in Penang, noticed that there was a difference in his treatment by peninsular Chinese, especially those from Penang.

He said that the Chinese-Penangites were the most unapproachable based on his experiences with his roommate—a Chinese-Penangite. Although both of them were Chinese, their family dialects were different. Danish's family dialect was *FooChow/Hokchiu*, which is different from the Chinese-Penangite dialect, Hokkien. Hence, the dialect difference heightened the boundary between them. Historically, the Chinese immigrants during the British administration were categorized based on their original provinces in China and their dialects of conversation: *Hokkien*, *Cantonese*, *Hakka (Kheh)*, *Teochiu*, *Hainan (Hailam)*, *Kwongsai*, *Hokchiu*, *Hokchia*, and *Henghwa* (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Purcell, 1951). Previously, the Hokkien had generally resided in Singapore, Penang, and Malacca, but some *Hokkiens* preferred to live in Johor, Selangor, and Perak. The Cantonese commonly scattered around the towns in Perak. There were quite a few *Teochius* in Kedah (Purcell, 1951). A majority of Hainanese lived mainly in Terangganu, and the *FooChow/Hokchiu* lived mainly in Sarawak.

Despite all this, they admitted that the situation would be different if they were outside the country. Language was not important to them, and they were willing to be friends with any Malaysian. In other words, language as an ethnic boundary only works significantly in Malaysia's geographical and political territories.

## Discussion

The eateries in Malaysia serve as more than a space for eating and drinking. In Malaysia, this establishes an unseen boundary within the process of segregation between Malays and non-Malays. Muslim Malays are concerned about their diet. They only eat Syariah-permitted products, so *halal* signs are compulsory at specific restaurants where the food, especially animal products, has been certified as *halal* by JAKIM, the Malaysian Islamic agency. The *halal* eateries in Malaysia also indicate that there is no alcohol sold or served to customers. The Malaysian Chinese who are aware of the Malay religious norms will respect the boundaries by following the Malay religious food taboos or avoiding social gatherings with Malays. Ethnic divisions based on religion are, however, hard to maintain in a city such as Glasgow.

There exist two types of food in Islam: the *halal* (حَرَام) or the permissible, and the *haram* (حَلَال) or the prohibited. Muslims are permitted to eat everything from land and sea under specific conditions: the product must not be harmful to its consumers, and the (land) animals must be slaughtered by Muslims prior to consumption by others. In addition, Islam prohibits alcohol and pork and its derivatives for Muslim consumption. In Penang, non-Malays in a group will either have to agree with their Malay counterparts' decisions or follow their personal taste and choice, which will separate them from their Malay friends.

This decision is significantly related to actors' life decisions, as suggested by Hoffstadter (2011, pp. 214–215), consequently resulting in “increasing withdrawal into one's own religion-ethnic milieu.” Consumption practices have often been central to the assertion of identity because they involve the choice of what one takes into oneself. The sense of internalization is symbolically important here. It reveals that identity is about a “core” or essence from the inside. It echoes the “you are what you eat” attitude. This discussion also demonstrates how religious boundaries can be understood as a salient element for identifying and categorizing Malaysians in their everyday actions, which in turn has an effect on the decisions and actions to be performed within the appropriate spaces.

Religion is intricately related in the Malay community and customs. This is inevitable, especially because Islam is a way of life for Muslims (Frisk, 2009), covering both public and private spaces (Tan et al., 2013). This justification can also be used for those who lived in private accommodation when they claimed that it was their personal decision to stay with someone from the same ethnicity even without any intervention from an authority. The main reasons were daily religious activities and food types and preparation. This finding is consistent with Yeoh's (2006) finding, which highlighted religious boundaries as a primary factor in roommate selection among students at local universities, significantly affecting their openness to inter-ethnic friendships.

Understanding ethnicity requires us to understand the maintenance and the challenges of cultural boundaries that can separate one group from another. Because Malays are strongly connoted as Muslim, this made the choice of friends for the Malay female respondents an ethnic issue. In other words, ethnicity always had a role in their friendships. It is also

clear that gender played a role in the respondents' friendships. Therefore, their decisions should also be understood to be a gendered issue. Although religion is important, gender seems to be one of the crucial determining factors here. Taking into consideration the first point, it is safe to state that ethnicity in Malaysia indeed works inside its gendering, creating different gender expectations that are central to ethnic reproduction. Additionally, location played a role in the respondents' friendships and their maintenance of ethnic boundaries. In Penang, the boundaries—religion and gender expectation (based on the respondents' understanding)—were very visible compared with Glasgow. The gendered ethnicity also worked more competently in Penang than in Glasgow.

Language plays a multifaceted role in the formation of inter-ethnic friendships, particularly in tertiary educational institutions. Here, the choice of friendships becomes more complex, influenced not only by language but also by the respondents' life experiences and their exposure to different ethnic groups in their hometown. Additionally, regional language commonalities and the prevailing political conditions also play a significant role. Language is one of the main reasons for the ethno-political contestations that have long been debated between politicians in the peninsula. For assimilationists, a homogenous language is important for building a nation, whereas pluralists want other languages to be considered part of Malaysian culture in order to ensure the coexistence of diverse languages and cultural elements (Ishak, 1999). This conflict of differing perspectives is more highly and historically distinguishable in the west than in the east of Malaysia. The number of vernacular schools in the former is also significantly higher than in the latter, with 996 and 306, respectively (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022).

Even though the respondents in Penang recognized the religious factor as a challenge for inter-ethnic friendships between Malays and Chinese and different languages for inter- and intra-ethnic friendships, they were very optimistic about Malay/Chinese relationships on the basis of nationality abroad. This suggests that the importance of ethnic boundaries is changeable based on situation, context, and interlocutors, which allow identity to oscillate between ethnic and national identification. In contrast with the respondents in Penang, ethnic language could be the least significant barrier to Malay/Chinese friendships

in Glasgow, as English could be used to connect them. Thus, language as an ethnic boundary was not strongly maintained between the Malays and the Chinese in Glasgow compared with the respondents in Penang. This is because the pressure on being Malay or Chinese according to which language they use is less observed by or expected from them abroad. The result of friendships among the respondents in Glasgow appears to be less homogenous in comparison with the respondents in Penang. The intricate nature of religious and linguistic boundaries in the friendships between Malays and Chinese living in Glasgow exemplifies a distinct expression of ethnic diaspora. They exhibited a religious diaspora in line with the Malaysian state's categorization of Malays as Muslims. Simultaneously, they demonstrated cross-border formations anchored in their Malaysian nationality, which aids in bridging ethnolinguistic divides.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the friendships made by Malaysian young people—based on their preferences for friends and choices of roommate/flatmate—were established differently in ethnicized (Malaysia) and non-ethnicized (Glasgow) spaces. The decision was outlined by religious and language boundaries embedded in their identity built through Malaysian structures and daily experiences, which work differently within gender expectations and the regional sphere. In Glasgow, religious obligations, rules, and expectations were treated more flexibly by the respondents compared with their counterparts in Penang. However, the Malay female respondents in both locations were more conscious about the boundaries, especially in terms of sharing private space, due to their female Muslim regulations. The situation had drawn them into intra-ethnic friendships only with other female Muslims. In the Malaysian context, this would limit their friendships to Malay females as all Malays are Muslim. Language boundaries, on the other hand, were not applicable to the gender factor but more based on regional and group dialects. It was particularly interesting to find that the respondents in Glasgow had more inter-ethnic friends than those interviewed in Malaysia, their home country. The factors identified for this were their sharing an identity as Malaysians and possibly a lack of expectation to observe the

ethnic boundaries in this neutral ethnopolitical space as in Malaysia. In Penang, non-Malay respondents originally from areas with high numbers of Malays (such as Kelantan) or from areas populated by other *bumiputra* (such as Sarawak) were more open to inter-ethnic friendships regardless of ethnic identity compared with respondents born in Penang. In sum, friendship, in general, should be considered a private matter, but in a post-colonial country such as Malaysia, friendships are more complicated because of the country's historical trajectory and inevitable ethnicized spaces and structures. Through the comparative analysis, this research shows that the importance of ethnicity and its boundaries are dependent on location. However, this study is not without its limitations. Its geographical scope is confined to just one local and one international university, which may not accurately reflect the experiences or conditions at other institutions. To gain a deeper understanding of this subject, the scope should be expanded to include more international and local universities, particularly in the east of Malaysia.

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