Exploration and Commitment to Ethnic Identity among Malaysian University Students

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ABSTRACT

This research uses Phinney's (1992) Multiethnic Group Identity Measure (MEIM) to study in-group ethnic identification and other-group orientation among 364 tertiary students (Polytechnic, 292; University, 72) from four ethnic groups in Malaysia: Malay, Indian, Chinese, and Indigenous. The MEIM measures the four components of ethnic identity—affirmation/belonging, ethnic behavior, out-group orientation, and ethnic identity achievement, the last of which comprise exploration of, and commitment to, ethnic identity. The respondents had the highest score on affirmation/belonging, which is moderately associated with ethnic identity achievement. Other-group orientation had the lowest score but was still marginally positive. There were no significant differences in the strength of the ethnic identity components, as well as in the exploration and commitment constructs of ethnic identity achievement. However, the mean scores indicated that the Malay and Chinese respondents were inclined towards a foreclosed ethnic identity, whereas the Indian and Indigenous respondents seemed to be closer to an identity-achieved state.

Keywords: ethnic identity, exploration, commitment, ethnic identity achievement, affirmation, ethnic behavior, other-group orientation, Multiethnic Measure

Introduction: Race in Malaysia

In multiethnic societies, ethnicity is often the most dominant aspect of an individual's social identity. In Malaysia, there is such a fixation with ethnic identification that even application forms for supermarket loyalty programs require ethnic background information. *Bangsa* (the Malay expression for race) is "the most important point of reference right down to everyday conversations in which the assertion of one's own and the other's *bangsa*-background is part and parcel of getting to know each other" (Holst 2012, 2).

In the country, Malays form the majority ethnic group. Together with the indigenous groups such as the Iban, Bidayuh, and Penan, they are referred to as *Bumiputera* (translated as "prince of the land"). The term "indigenous" refers to the native inhabitants of Sarawak. The *Bumiputera* accounts for 69.6 percent of the total number of Malaysian citizens, which stands at 29.7 million; those of Chinese descent account for 22.6 percent, those of Indian ethnicity, 6.8 percent. Both their ancestors migrated from China and India in the 19th and 18th century, respectively. The entire Malaysian population is 32.7 million (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2020).

For Ibrahim (2012, 455), Malaysia's ethnic relations are "precarious," a situation that took shape in 1963. That year,

> The Chinese and the Indians became citizens of the newly independent state but they have to acknowledge *ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay dominance. This means they have to accept "special Malay privileges" in education and government service, the Malay royalty as their ruler, Islam as the official religion and Malay language as the official language. (Shamsul 1999, 26)

A dark spot in the history of ethnic relations in Malaysia is the 13 May 1969 clash between the Chinese and the Malay. It arose after opposition parties made substantial gains over the Malay-dominant ruling coalition in

the 1969 general election. The long-term response to the riot is that Malay sensitivities should be the main consideration of the Malaysian government (Wicks 1971). Today, "[o]ne of the main challenges to social cohesion in multireligious Southeast Asia is the question of containing and reducing ethnic and religious cleavages.… One way of minimizing the possibility of conflict is to create more interest in, compassion for and understanding of the culture and civilization of the other" (Alatas 1999, xiv). For Ibrahim (2012), the assertion of cultural supremacy impedes pluralism, and is conducive to ethnic conflict, as in the case of Malaysia and Indonesia.

To manage this delicate situation, the Malaysian government has sought the cultural assimilation of ethnic groups via a project of national integration (Xia, Yang, and Lee 2018). In education, the Malay and *Bumiputera* secondary school students favored cultural assimilation, but the Chinese and Indian students preferred the "multiple identities" model of integration, which seeks to "cultivate the sense of political unity among diverse ethnic groups, while at the same time upholding and maintaining the social structures and cultural norms that make the groups disparate" (Nordin et al. 2018, 22). In contrast, non-Malay students find the idea of assimilation[1] "abominable" because it would erode their ethnic and cultural identity. Nordin et al. (2018) concluded that an integration model based on multiple identities is fragile. Furthermore, a strong ethnic identification is said to lead towards cultural pluralism in Malaysia, which hinders assimilation and acculturation to nation-building in a multiethnic society, since "each ethnic group will regard other ethnic groups with suspicion" and stereotype them somewhat (Rahim 2018, 157).

At present (2021), ethnic relations in Malaysia is still rife with tensions, which are evident in debates on religion, ethnicity, and language that occasionally surface in mass media and social media. The inclusion of Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the Pakatan Harapan coalition that ruled Malaysia from 9 May 2018 to 23 February 2020 also brought to the fore more sensitive issues such as the royal institution, whether Malaysia is an Islamic country, the privileged position of the Malays (e.g., in university

enrolments), and the role of the Malay language. The Malays felt threatened by the political power of the Chinese after the 14th General Election in 2018 (Muslim 2020).

Purpose of the Study

Using Phinney's (1992) Multiethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), the study examines the ethnic identity of Malaysian tertiary students in two higher education institutions. It investigates (1) self-identification with their own and their parents' ethnic group, (2) strength of ethnic identity and its components, namely, "ethnic identity achievement" via "exploration" and commitment; "affirmation/belonging;" "ethnic behavior;" and "other-group orientation," and (3) differences in strength of ethnic identity across four ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous. This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a background of the study and discusses the importance of researching ethnicity in a university context, related literature, and the contributions of using the MEIM. The study then outlines the MEIM, and describes the four components of ethnic identity, the methods and calculations, and provides a brief description of the field site and methodology. This is followed by a discussion of the results and ends with notes on further research and concluding remarks.

Why University Students?
The Microcosm and Future of Malaysian Society

The university environment differs from home and school; it is a place, or a stage, that prompts the youth to explore and understand their ethnic and cultural background to develop a coherent sense of self (Phinney and Chavira 1992). For instance,

> [m]any African American college students experience life away from home for the first time when they begin college, and are forced to adapt and develop identities as they encounter novel sociocultural contexts. Whether they select colleges that have

> more or fewer African Americans, and/or people of other races than they had previously encountered, students are likely to be challenged by their environment in a manner that is likely to result in exploration in the significance and meaning of their racial group membership. (Scottham et al. 2010, 25)

Something similar holds true in Malaysia. Although the different ethnic groups in the country have lived together for six decades since it gained independence from the British, interactions still largely occur within one's ethnic group. Students generally do not go to schools with peers from other ethnic groups until they reach secondary education (cf. Ahmad and Yusof 2010; Majid, Hassan, and Hassan 2019), although they do go through a curriculum that emphasizes, and socializes them into, an appreciation for ethnic diversity.[2] It is only in a university then that Malaysians have more opportunities to have direct interactions, in principle at least, with people across ethnic boundaries. Following Scottham et al. (2010), it thus represents a key stage in the process of forming and consolidating their ethnic identity in the aftermath of their prior socialization. Plus, in a university, Malaysian students today explore their identity as equals and with no broader legal or social barriers that militate against their assertion and formation of their identity. They grew up about 30 years after Malaysia became independent, which is well past the era when the citizenship of Chinese and Indian Malaysians were being negotiated or contested (Low 2017).

Furthermore, the study of race and ethnicity in Malaysian university settings arguably offers a microcosm of broader relations and processes of ethnic identity formation. They are the next generation who will enter the workforce, if not politics. "Almost 1.3 million Malaysian youths are pursuing tertiary education; 500,000 are enrolled in the 20 public universities and more than 600,000 are registered in private higher institutions" (Tapsir 2019). Another source places student enrolment in public higher institutions at 706,550 students in 2019 (Hirschmann 2021). University students account for about half of the 2.5 million Malaysians in the 20-24 age group (or 8.9 percent of the total population). At the same time, relations

in a university context also hint at how, if at all, relations and processes are changing (or otherwise). Needless to say, these findings can suggest policy recommendations or research directions, the provision of which is nonetheless outside the scope of this study. If for instance, ethnic relations in the university setting reflects broader trends, why is that the case and what (else) can be done about it? And if such relations are changing for the better, why is that so, and what (else) can be done and studied to advance that process?

Ethnic Identity among Malaysian Youth

Findings on the ethnic identity of Malaysian youth have been mixed. On the one hand, the younger generation is becoming more open to other ethnic groups, and may be less likely to view others using their own culture as the yardstick. For instance, Malaysian university students in Klang Valley and Selangor reported having some knowledge, appreciation, and understanding of other ethnic groups and their beliefs (Mustapha et al. 2009, 9). Mustapha et al. (2009) also explain that self-segregation by ethnic group may be more obvious among the Malays because as Muslims, they cannot share a room and eat in a restaurant that does not serve *halal* food. But although the respondents may have some negative attitudes towards other ethnic groups, they do interact with them through academic and social activities. Mustafa et al. (2009) concluded that university students had a medium degree of accommodation, acculturation, assimilation, and amalgamation. However, the strength of the students' ethnic identity was not measured.

On the other hand, in non-academic activities, only 19 percent of Sabah Chinese students socialized with students from other ethnic groups; this was 6 percent and 9 percent of Sarawak and West Malaysian Chinese students, respectively. Jawan et al.'s (2020) study in three universities in West Malaysia yielded similar results, with most students having friends from their own ethnic community. Also, for them, racial discrimination is a part of life: 63 percent have heard racist statements aimed at others, 38 percent had racist statements directed at them, and 22 percent had been subjected to discriminatory action (Jawan et al. 2020).

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)

While the foregoing studies have shed some light on ethnic relations among Malaysian youth, less is known about the processes through which they consolidate or have consolidated their identity. To fill this gap, we use Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure [MEIM] (Phinney 1992) to determine the extent to which Malaysian students explore and/or commit to their ethnic identity. The MEIM shows the different strengths (or weaknesses for that matter) of ethnic identity, as indicated by Phinney and Tarver's (1988) findings on Black females having particularly high scores in ethnic identity exploration. The MEIM has been used in various contexts, and findings show that it is a stable measure which is generally not affected by contextual factors (Habibi et al. 2021; Granhemat and Abdullah 2017; Phinney and Alipuria 1990; Ting and Rose 2014). In particular, the stages of ethnic identity and social class are not correlated among college students (Phinney and Alipuria 1990). Also, changes in ethnic identity do not differ significantly with ethnic group, gender, and socioeconomic status (Phinney 1989; Phinney and Chavira 1992). However, ethnic identity has also been associated with in-group attitudes, age, and gender in some contexts (Phinney, Ferguson, and Tate 1997). But recently, Habibi et al. (2021) and Granhemat and Abdullah (2017) show that MEIM is a valid and reliable measure to examine ethnic identity among Iranian and Malaysian students, respectively.

Phinney (1992) has been influential on studies on ethnic identity because, among other things, she introduced a different angle on the subject, moving away from Marcia's (1966) model of distinct ego identity statuses to study ethnic identity formation as a continuous process (Phinney and Ong 2007).[3]

The present study is not the first to use the MEIM in Malaysia. Ting and Rose (2014) used it to study teenagers who are not of university age. Granhemat and Abdullah (2017) used the MEIM to study the ethnic identity of university students. In both studies, Malay and Indigenous university students had a stronger ethnic identity than their Chinese and Indian peers.[4] However, Granhemat and Abdullah (2017) used only 12 items from the MEIM, and investigated ethnic identity in relation to language use in

the family. Also, while Ting and Ting (2020) also deployed the MEIM in studying the ethnic Malaysian Chinese, the present paper uses it to help determine in more detail the level of exploration and commitment of university students across several ethnic groups.

	Items	Ethnic Identity Components	Exploration or Commitment
1.	I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Exploration
2.	I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.	Ethnic Behavior	Exploration
3.	I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me.	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Commitment
4.	I like meeting and getting to know people from other ethnic groups.	Other-group orientation	
5.	I think a lot about how my life will be affected by belonging to my ethnic group.	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Exploration
6.	I am happy that I belong to my ethnic group.	Affirmation/Belonging	Commitment
7.	I sometimes feel it would be better if different ethnic groups didn't try to mix together.	Other-group orientation	
8.	I am not very clear about the role of my ethnicity in my life.	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Commitment
9.	I often spend time with people from other ethnic groups.	Other-group orientation	
10.	I really have not spent much time trying to learn more about the culture and history of my ethnic group.	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Exploration
11.	I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.	Affirmation/Belonging	Commitment
12.	I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me, in terms of how to relate to my own group and other groups.	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Commitment
13.	In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Exploration
14.	I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group and its achievements.	Affirmation/Belonging	Commitment
15.	I don't try to become friends with people from other ethnic groups.	Other-group orientation	
16.	I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs.	Ethnic Behavior	Exploration
17.	I am involved in activities with people from other ethnic groups.	Other-group orientation	

Figure 1: Questionnaire and Correspondence to Ethnic Identity Components

18.	I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.	Affirmation/Belonging	Commitment
19.	I enjoy being around people from other ethnic groups.	Other-group orientation	
20.	I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.	Affirmation/Belonging	Commitment

Figure 1: Questionnaire and Correspondence to Ethnic Identity Components (cont.)

Note: In the description of results, reference will be made to the questionnaire items in this figure, and Phinney (1992, 172–73) will not be cited for each individual item.

Figure 1 shows the table presenting the questionnaire items. It is followed by a definition of concepts.

Four Components of Ethnic Identity

The twenty items are directly taken from Phinney (1992, 172–73), but—as our own modification, albeit based on Phinney's other work—we then assigned each item to one of the four components of ethnic identity: ethnic identity achievement, affirmation/belonging, ethnic behavior, and other-group orientation, all of which Phinney discussed (1992) in other studies. The questions are all quoted verbatim.

Ethnic identity achievement involves "an exploration of the meaning of one's ethnicity (e.g., its history and traditions) that leads to a secure sense of oneself as a member of a minority group" (Phinney 1992, 160). Affirmation/ Belonging assesses "ethnic pride, feeling good about one's background, and being happy with one's group membership, as well as feelings of belonging and attachment to the group" (159). Ethnic Behavior looks at "involvement in social activities with members of one's group and participation in cultural traditions" (159). Other-group orientation accounts for the "attitudes towards, and interactions with, ethnic groups other than one's own" (161). Other-group orientation measures acculturation, i.e. willingness to interact with culturally different individuals, whereas the other three components measure the inclination towards retention of cultural identity (Erten, van den Berg, and Weissing 2018).

Given these definitions, we assigned each component to the following:

- Ethnic identity achievement has seven items - questions 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 13
- Affirmation/belonging corresponds to five items - questions 6, 11, 14, 18, 20
- Ethnic behavior matches up to two items - questions 2, 16
- Other-group orientation has six items - questions 4, 7, 9, 15, 17, 19

Ethnic Identity Achievement as Exploration and Commitment

Phinney (1996, 145) also defines ethnic identity as "a commitment and sense of belonging to one's ethnic group, positive evaluation of the group, interest in and knowledge about the group, and involvement in activities and traditions of the group." This definition underpins Phinney and her co-researchers' view—elsewhere and in later research—that ethnic identity is not only a label but also a developmental process that begins in childhood and may not be completed during adolescence. Individuals from ethnic minorities develop their ethnic identity through self-exploration, change, and consolidation (Ong, Fuller-Rowell, and Phinney 2010). When individuals leave home to work or to study in colleges and universities (as is the case with Malaysian university students), they encounter new experiences that lead them to explore their identity. They also seek "information and experiences relevant to one's ethnicity" (Phinney and Ong 2007, 272). In addition,

> Ethnic identity exploration is defined as the extent to which the individual has spent time thinking about and/or engaging in activities designed to help define what their ethnic identity mean. Ethnic identity commitment is defined as the extent to which the individual has committed to a particular meaning for their ethnic identity. (Scottham, Cooke, Sellers, and Ford 2010, 21)

Such a commitment also means that individuals can discuss "what it would be like for them to be a member of another group, of for another group member to join their group" (Phinney and Tarver 1988, 267).

Of course, exploration and commitment are "distinct processes" and are related. As Phinney and Ong (2007, 278) write, "exploration is unlikely without at least a certain level of commitment, and more exploration is likely to lead to a stronger commitment. Likewise, a commitment or attachment to one's group is expected to promote interest in exploring one's ethnicity." Identity achievement is the same as commitment, referring to "the secure sense of self" (Phinney 1992, 160). Commitment to a particular ethnic identity can indicate the strength of the ethnic identity.

Because of the close connection between exploration and commitment, we assigned items 2 and 16 (ethnic behavior) and items 1, 5, 10, and 13 (ethnic identity achievement) to cover "exploration," while items 6, 11, 14, 18, and 20 (affirmation and belonging) and items 3, 8, and 12 (ethnic identity achievement) with "commitment."

Method of Study

Like the original MEIM (i.e. as used by Phinney 1992), the questionnaire we designed used a four-point Likert type scale, from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4). Also, at the beginning of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to write down their ethnic group ("In terms of ethnic group, I consider myself to be ___"). At the end, after the MEIM items, respondents were asked to indicate their father and mother's ethnicity ("My father/mother's ethnic group is ___").

This question follows Phinney (1992), who stressed the importance of collecting data on ethnic self-identification because the ethnic labels they use in daily life may differ from what they put on official documents such as birth certificates, identity cards, and passports. Individuals in multiethnic societies may identify themselves as part of an ethnic group, because one or both of their parents are from that group. They do so without knowing what

that entails. In Malaysia, parents have to "register their newborn children with the National Registration Department as per paternal race" (ethnic group) but the regulation was amended in 2008 to allow the child to follow either the father or mother's race (Lim and Doksil 2011, paragraph 2). The ethnic group on the birth certificate and identity card is for the official record, but the extent of an individual's exploration and commitment to the official ethnic identity may vary for any reason whatsoever.

Also, in the questionnaire above, the first three components—ethnic identity achievement, affirmation/belonging, and ethnic behavior—were used to calculate for, and correspond to, the mean scores for exploration and commitment, two concepts which appear in Phinney's later work on the developmental nature of ethnic identity formation (Phinney and Ong 2007).

Other-group orientation items were excluded because it is distinctly different from in-group identity. As Phinney (1992, 161) remarks, "attitudes towards other groups are not part of ethnic identity, but they may interact with it as a factor in one's social identity in the larger society."

Field Work

A descriptive study on ethnic identity was conducted among 364 students in two Malaysian institutions of higher learning (Polytechnic, 292; University, 72). In Malaysia, polytechnics offer applied skills-based courses to students who completed a Form Five education, and they graduate with certificates or diplomas, whereas universities offer degrees on academic and theoretical subject matters. The study took place in these two institutions because the researchers work there.

The student-respondents comprised Malays (311 or 85.44 percent), Chinese (34 or 9.34 percent), Indigenous (11 or 3.02 percent), and Indians (8 or 2.02 percent). *Bumiputera* make up a larger proportion of the student population in public universities, while private universities have more Chinese students because of affirmative action quotas (Thornett 2019). The larger percentage of Malay students in this study thus reflects general

trends. For instance, a survey on social interaction and ethnicity involving 1,034 Malaysian university students had 83 percent Malays (Mustapha et al. 2009).

The ethnic identity questionnaire was distributed by the two researchers to their students, usually at the end of lectures. They explained the study, and invited them to participate. The researchers also told them that the questionnaire did not require them to give personal particulars, so that their responses were anonymous. They were also told that their responses would be kept confidential in reports arising from the study. If they agreed to participate, they may take a copy of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were collected upon completion.

The data were keyed in, and raw data for four items were reverse-coded (e.g., "I don't try to become friends with people from other ethnic groups" under other-group orientation) so that a higher score indicated a more positive attitude.

Then, the mean scores on the overall strength of ethnic identity were calculated for each respondent, that is, the respondent's score for each of the 20 items in Figure 1 were averaged to compute for the overall strength of ethnic identity. This is reported in the last column of Table 2.

In addition, mean scores were also calculated for the four ethnic identity components, and the second column of Figure 1 shows the items belonging to the four components. For example, for ethnic behaviors, the respondent's score for items 2 and 16 are averaged to obtain the mean score. The same computation is done for the other three components. Each respondent would thus have a mean score for each of the four ethnic identity components. For the whole group, each respondents' mean scores are totaled and divided by 364 to obtain the mean score for the whole group. These are reported in the last row of Table 2.

The mean scores for the four ethnic identity components can also be separately calculated for each ethnic group. The denominator used for dividing the total mean score is the number of respondents in the ethnic

group. For example, for the Malay students, the total mean score of 311 for a particular ethnic identity component is divided by 311, and these results are reported in Table 2. This was done for ethnic group comparison.

Finally, Pearson correlation tests were run to find the relationship or association between two variables. The relationship may be positive, meaning that when the value of one variable increases, the value of the other variable also increases, or negative, when the value of one variable rises, the value of the other variable decreases. However, when there is no relationship between the two variables, changes in the value of one variable does not influence the value of the other. In this study, Pearson correlation tests were run to find the relationships among the four ethnic identity components. Mean scores of an ethnic identity component for all the Malay respondents were selected and correlated with another component's mean scores for all the students. The correlation coefficient given by the statistical test was interpreted to determine the strength of the relationship.

Results and Discussion

Self-identification of Their Own and Their Parents' Ethnic Group

To calculate the percentage, the number for each of the three types of ethnic identification was divided by 364 and multiplied by 100. All the respondents identified themselves using the same broad ethnic label or dialect as their father's. Table 1 shows that 73.35 percent of the respondents did so, but 9.34 percent identified with their mother's. For example, one respondent indicated his father as "Penang Malay" and his mother and his own ethnic group as "Pahang Malay." That the majority of the respondents identified themselves using their father's ethnic or dialect reflects the typical patriarchal patterns of patrilineal descent in East Asian cultures. At the same time, "compared to patterns in East and South Asia," the Malays are less likely to exhibit "the typical patriarchal patterns of patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence of newly married couples, and preference for

male children" (Hirschman 2016, 33). Indeed, the Malays have a stronger matrilineal system than the Chinese, who adheres to the patrilineal system. This could explain why some Malay respondents identified themselves with their mothers' Malay dialect rather than their father's. Mothers nurture their children and become a socialization agent, alongside other factors such as their peers, school, and ideology.

Table 1: Identification of Their Own and Their Parents' Ethnic Group (N=364)

Ethnic Identification	Number	Percentage
Follow father's ethnic group or dialect	267	73.35
Follow mother's dialect group	34	9.34
Different from parents' dialect groups	67	17.31
Total	364	100.00

Other respondents (17.31 percent) did not identify themselves with their parents' dialects. For instance, one identified with the "Sabah Malay Dialect," but both his parents were "Johor Malay," probably because his parents had been working in Sabah, and he grew up in Sabah speaking the local Malay variety there. At any rate, the 26.65 percent (17.31 + 9.34) of respondents who identified their subethnic group differently from the norm (i.e., following their parents) is a new finding.

Ethnic Identity Components

Table 2: Mean Scores for Components of Ethnic Identity for the Four Ethnic Groups (N=364)

Ethnic Group	Affirmation/ Belonging	Ethnic Behaviors	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Other-Group Orientation	Overall MEIM
Indian (n=8)	3.50	3.63	2.84	2.94	3.11
Indigenous (n=11)	3.64	3.18	2.83	2.85	3.07
Malay (n=311)	3.27	2.87	2.83	2.71	2.91
Chinese (n=34)	3.12	2.79	2.68	2.54	2.76
Average	3.25	2.87	2.82	2.70	2.90

Table 2 shows that the respondents had a marginally high strength of ethnic identity (M= 2.90). On a range of one to four, a score of four shows a strong identity with 2.5 as the median score. In this paper, scores above the mid-point will be referred to as "high" (marginally high or strong if it is close to the median of 2.5 on the four-point Likert scale) and scores below the mid-point will be considered "low" (marginally low or weak if it is close to 2.5). The highest score was for affirmation/belonging (M=3.25), followed by ethnic behavior and ethnic identity achievement. The lowest was for other-group orientation (M=2.70). These results concur with Ting and Rose's (2014) study on indigenous adolescents in Sarawak, whose affirmation/belonging score was the highest, followed by other-group orientation and ethnic behavior. Some of them had indeed a clear sense of their ethnic background, the role of their ethnicity in their lives, and the implications of their ethnic group membership on their own group and others.

1. Affirmation / Belonging

The results in Table 2 show the respondents' strong sense of affirmation to their ethnic group. Most of them were happy about belonging, had a great sense of pride in the group's achievements,[5] and were committed to their ethnic group.

2. Ethnic Behavior

Most of the respondents were active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of their ethnic group. It is interesting that the ethnic behavior score of the Malay respondents is the second lowest (M=2.87), while having the highest affirmation/belonging score. On university campuses, Malay-based food is served in cafeterias and meetings. Also, many activities such as the Hari Raya celebrations, are based on their culture, and most events begin with a Muslim prayer. Malay music and clothing (e.g., *Baju Melayu, baju kurung*) are shared with the other ethnic groups, until they are not seen as exclusively Malay. So common are these events that the Malay respondents might not have viewed participation

in them as something "Malay," even as Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution states that a "Malay" is a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom" (Laws of Malaysia 2009).

For ethnic behaviors, the Chinese respondents' score (M=2.79) was the lowest. The two items in this component focused on active participation in Chinese-centric organizations, social groups, and cultural practices, "such as special food, music, or customs" (Item 16, Figure 1). These are traditional behaviors, which no longer attract the younger Chinese. Ting and Ting's (2020) study of Chinese Foochow college students showed that they reported lukewarm participation in Chinese cultural activities, while their parents had more interest. Chinese university students in Malaysia are hardly seen in their traditional costumes, and not all Chinese own traditional wear. Because of this, the ethnic behavior score of the Chinese respondents in this study is low, making it seem as if they are hardly exploring their ethnicity. But the Chinese in Malaysia are inclined is to view ethnicity as an attribute inherited from parents (Ting and Puah 2015; Puah and Ting 2016). Ethnic behavior associated with the Chinese are speaking Chinese, eating Chinese food, watching Chinese movies, spending time in Chinese areas, reading Chinese newspapers and magazines, celebrating Chinese festivals, and studying Chinese, all of which Chinese-American college students at New York University practice (Yip and Fuligni 2002). General observations by the authors show that many of these behaviors are also exhibited by the Chinese in Malaysia, with the exception of watching Chinese movies, which the younger generation may no longer prefer.

3. Ethnic Identity Achievement

Table 2 shows a marginally high level of achievement of ethnic identity (average M=2.82) among all four ethnic groups. Three had scores close to the mean. Only the Chinese students had a lower mean score of 2.68, which is still marginally positive since it is above the 2.5 median score. In comparison to the other three ethnic groups, the Chinese students seem

to spend relatively less time trying to find out more about their own ethnic group's culture and history, and had slightly less clarity about what their ethnic background meant to them or the role of their ethnicity in their life. They also thought less about how their life would be affected by their ethnic group membership, and did not talk as much to other people about their ethnic group.

To reiterate, items 2 and 16 (ethnic behavior) and items 1, 5, 10 and 13 (ethnic identity achievement) measure "exploration," while items 6, 11, 14, 18, and 20 (affirmation and belonging) and items 3, 8, and 12 (ethnic identity achievement) account for "commitment.

The ethnic identity achievement component has two dimensions. Following Phinney and Ong (2007), to calculate exploration and commitment dimensions of ethnic identity achievement, the seven items for ethnic identity achievement were used. The seven items from the ethnic identity achievement scale are items 1, 5, 10, and 13 (exploration), and items 3, 8, and 12 (commitment). When the means were calculated separately for exploration (4 items, M=2.82) and commitment (3 items, M=2.82), as shown in Table 3, they were found to be the same as the combined ethnic identity achievement score (M=2.82).

Table 3: Exploration and Commitment Scores of Ethnic Identity Achievement for the Four Ethnic Groups (N=364)

Ethnic group	Exploration	Commitment
Indian	3.20	3.21
Indigenous	3.08	3.14
Malay	2.85	3.05
Chinese	2.71	2.94
Average	2.96	3.08

When a Chi-square test of independence was run, the results showed that the differences in the exploration and commitment constructs were not significantly different for the Malay, Chinese, Indigenous, and Indian respondents, X^2 (3, N=364) = 0.006, p=0.99.[6] All had similar marginally positive scores for exploration and commitment.

The exploration of ethnic identity encompasses ethnic behavior and aspects of ethnic identity achievement. With a mean score of 2.96, the level of exploration of ethnic identity is considered quite high. In this study, as in Phinney (1992), the students spent some time to find out more about their own ethnic group, such as its history and traditions (item 1, Figure 1), as well as learning more about their culture (item 10). Most of them had also thought about how their life would be affected by belonging to their ethnic group (item 5). They had also been involved in activities such as talking to other people about their ethnic group in order to learn more about their ethnic background (item 13).

In their study on Malaysian university students, Granhemat and Abdullah (2017) found that Indians formed the largest percentage of students with a strong ethnic identity, while the Malay, Chinese, and Indigenous peers had a moderately strong one. Granhemat and Abdullah (2017) used the term "moderate ethnic identity" to refer to scores lying between -/+ 1 standard deviation. However, in the present study, the differences among the ethnic groups were not statistically significant.

The commitment to an ethnic identity encompasses affirmation/ belonging and the commitment aspects of ethnic identity achievement. For the four groups as a whole, the average mean score of commitment (M=3.08) is slightly higher than the average mean score for exploration. In this study, the Chinese respondents had a marginally positive commitment to their ethnicity (M=2.94), while the other three ethnic groups had higher mean scores ranging from 3.05 to 3.21.

All in all, the respondents may not have yet fully worked through both the exploration and resolution of identity issues, and yet remain committed

to their ethnic identity. This state is referred to as a foreclosed ethnic identity (Phinney 1989), i.e. they are committed to their ethnicity, but have no extensive exploration of the meaning of their ethnicity, possibly due to the influence of their parents and the community. A comment by a Black subject in Phinney and Tarver's (1998) study captures this succinctly when he said, "I know I'm Black but I'm not sure what it means."

4. Other-Group Orientation

Among the four ethnic identity components, the other-group orientation had the lowest mean score, although it was still positive (M=2.70). This score shows that over half of the respondents "liked meeting and getting to know people from other ethnic groups, and spending time with them" (item 4, Figure 1). Many had also tried to become friends with (item 15), and to be around people from other ethnic groups (item 19). Over half of them believed that it was good for different ethnic groups to mix together. At any rate, it is normal for the other-group orientation score to be lower than those of the other three components of ethnic identity, with their focus on the in-group. In-group bias, or favorable attitudes towards in-group rather than out-group members, is normal based on the Social Identity Theory of intergroup behavior (Tajfel and Turner 2004).

The Chinese students had the lowest score for other-group orientation (M=2.54), and this contributed to the relatively lower mean score in this category for all the four ethnic groups (M=2.54). This result needs further attention because of its proximity to the neutral score of 2.5. The marginally positive other-group orientation score indicates that the Chinese respondents were somewhat comfortable with other ethnic groups, probably because they accept intergroup relations as a part of Malaysian life.

The relatively low scores of the Chinese students for out-group orientation is consistent with Holst's (2012) study in a public university, which revealed that the Malay students have more contact with Chinese students, but the Chinese students found it easier to befriend other Chinese. Similar findings were obtained by Ting (2012) from her study of Malay,

Chinese and Iban secondary school students in Sarawak. Most of the Malay students have Iban friends and vice versa, but very few Chinese students have friends among the Malay and Indigenous groups. The Chinese are segregated from other ethnic groups in some aspects of societal life. For example, public primary schools are mostly attended by *Bumiputera* students, while Chinese and Tamil students attend Chinese- and Tamil-medium schools, respectively (Tan, Ngah, and Darit 2013). Similarly, about 27 percent Chinese university students from Sarawak always did assignments with other ethnic groups, but the percentage dropped to 12 percent for dining together, and 6 percent each for doing revisions, socializing, and having recreational and sports activities (Tamring et al. 2020). In this light, it is not surprising that there is stronger ethno-grouping among the Chinese than the Malay or Indigenous students (Holst 2012; Ting 2012; Tamring et al. 2020). The Chinese students kept largely to their own ethnic group, and that 91 percent shared their problems with Chinese friends rather than with those from other ethnic groups.

Correlation between Ethnic Identity Components

Pearson correlation tests were run to find the association or relationship among the four ethnic identity components, namely, affirmation/belonging, ethnic identity achievement, ethnic behaviors, and other-group orientation. Table 3 shows that correlations were low to moderate at 95 percent confidence level. A low correlation coefficient of 0.246 between affirmation/belonging and other-group orientation means that there is no association between these two components. In other words, an increase in feelings of affirmation/belonging to one's ethnic group is not associated with a rise or decline in other-group orientation (i.e. attitudes towards other ethnic groups). The results did not show any strong correlations among the ethnic identity components, and correlation coefficients indicative of strong correlations range from 0.75 to one. In the rest of this section, the correlational relationships, if any, will be explained.

Table 4: Correlations among Ethnic Identity Components (N=364)

Ethnic Identity Components	Affirmation/ Belonging	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Ethnic Behaviors	Other-Group Orientation
Affirmation/Belonging	1			
Ethnic Identity Achievement	0.445	1		
Ethnic Behaviors	0.324	0.253	1	
Other-group Orientation	0.246	0.320	0.265	1

Affirmation/Belonging is moderately correlated with ethnic identity achievement (r=.445, p<.05), suggesting that respondents who have reached a secure sense of their ethnic identity are also likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group. This affirms Phinney and Ong's (2007, 274) findings. However, the correlation between affirmation/belonging and ethnic behavior is low (0.324), and the correlation between affirmation/ belonging and other-group orientation is also even lower (0.246). These results mean that respondents who have strong affirmation/belonging to their own ethnic group do not necessarily exhibit stronger ethnic behavior, that is, they do not participate actively in organizations promoting their cultural practices. Similarly, a strong sense of belonging does not necessarily lead to having more positive or negative attitudes towards other ethnic groups.

As for ethnic identity achievement, it is not significantly correlated with neither ethnic behaviors nor other-group orientation, as shown by the low correlation coefficients of 0.253 and 0.320, respectively. The results show that the respondents who have a clear sense of their ethnic identity do not necessarily exhibit or take part in ethnic behaviors. Clarity about their ethnic identity also does not translate to a more positive or negative other-group orientation.

With a low coefficient of 0.265, the results show that ethnic behavior is not significantly correlated with other-group orientation. In other words, whether or not the respondents were active in activities or groups involving people from their own ethnic group is not associated with how much they like mixing with other ethnic groups.

To sum up, there is no significant relationship between other-group orientation and the other three components of ethnic identity in MEIM. This result is consistent with Phinney's (1992) findings on other-group orientation as clearly distinct from the other three-interrelated components. Although the relationship is too weak to be of statistical significance, the positive direction of the correlation shows that it is possible for Malaysian tertiary students to have positive attitudes towards their own ethnic group, as well as to other ethnic groups (evident in the mean scores in Table 2).

In Malaysia, individuals grow up knowing they are part of a multiethnic society; mass media and school books often bombard them with pictures of different ethnic groups doing activities together. The results of the correlation tests are reassuring for ethnic harmony in a multiethnic society, and dovetail with findings elsewhere. For instance, Malaysian university students viewed "unity in diversity" as a way of life (Mustapha et al. 2009). In a university in Sabah, there was also a moderate level of integration among students of different ethnic groups (Tamring et al. 2020). At any rate, positive in-group orientation and other-group orientation can indeed co-occur (Phinney 1989), and that "individuals with a more secure ethnic identity have more positive intergroup attitudes" (Berry, Kalin, and Taylor 1977; cited in Phinney, Ferguson, and Tate 1997, 956). Moreover, young people with Asian and Latino backgrounds with an achieved ethnic identity have more a positive orientation towards other groups than those in a state of ethnic identity diffusion (Phinney et al. 2007).

Further Research

The study was cross-sectional, which yielded results on ethnic identity at one point in time, and in one specific locale. Since "the process of ethnic identity formation involves the construction over time of one's sense of self as a group member and of one's attitudes and understandings associated with group membership" (Phinney and Ong 2007, 275), further studies

should investigate the change in ethnic identity over time, in the university and in the workplace. It will also be interesting to pinpoint the factors that make some of the youth question or retain their ethnic identity.

Chinese ethnic identity development should also be further investigated, since they appear to be the ethnic group that has the least positive other-group orientation (cf: Ting and Ting 2020). It could be a case of stronger ethno-grouping (Holst 2012; Ting 2012; Tamring et al. 2020), but an interesting point of contention is that the Chinese university students also reported more lukewarm ethnic identity strength than the other ethnic groups.

Interviews will also uncover the depth of in-group and out-group bias in multiethnic societies, where minority groups have to relate to the dominant group and "the focus is in how they relate to their own group as a subgroup of the larger society" (Phinney 1990, 501). In the area of school choice, for instance, interviews can capture ethnicity-based reasons, but not through questionnaires because of the social desirability bias (Bagley 1996; Elacqua, Schneider, and Buckley 2006). Ting and Lee's (2019) school choice study in Malaysia yields similar results. The interviews can also identify intergroup tensions which may simmer beneath the apparent amicable interactions.

Conclusion

The study examined the exploration of and commitment to ethnic identity among students in two Malaysian institutions of higher learning. The study showed that a majority identified their ethnic group based on their father's ethnic group, or in the case of Malay respondents, their father's Malay dialect group. However, a small group defined themselves differently from both their parents. This is a new phenomenon, and further research is warranted.

Using the MEIM, the study showed that the university students had a strong ethnic identity. Indeed, all four ethnic groups had the highest score on affirmation/belonging, which is moderately associated with ethnic

identity achievement. There were no significant differences in the strength of ethnic identity (measured via its four components). The same goes for the exploration and commitment constructs of ethnic identity achievement. Though it was still marginally positive, other-group orientation component still had the lowest score. The present study also suggests that strong ethnic identity and positive other-group orientation can coexist.

The present study has also uncovered that while university students appear to be committed to their ethnic identity, and practice ethnic behaviors characteristic of their group, they are still exploring it further. For some of them at least, their ethnic identity need not be rooted in the history and traditions of their group. Phinney (1989) describes this as a foreclosed identity, where there is little or no exploration of ethnicity. There is, however, apparent clarity about one's own ethnicity to make a commitment, usually made on the basis of parental values.[2]

Our findings show that the university students are inclined towards the "multiple-identities" approach (Nordin et al. 2018, 22); they accept that different ethnic groups will uphold their respective ethnic identities. Certainly, the positive attitudes to other ethnic groups are an improvement from the post-independence era, when there were outright racial conflicts (Wicks 1971). Without denying the realities of discrimination, the findings offer some hope for Malaysia, which is still grappling with ethnic tensions that are explicitly played out in the political arena.

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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Endnotes

1   The three integration models studied by Nordin et al. (2018, 22) are as follows:

    a.   The cultural assimilation model seeks to "integrate the cultures of the ethnic minorities into a centralized national culture or central political ideology of a dominant ethnic group;"

    b.   The multiple identities approach seeks to "cultivate the sense of political unity among diverse ethnic groups, while at the same time upholding and maintaining the social structures and cultural norms that make the groups disparate;" and

    c.   The multiculturalism model "recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society."

2   However, Nordin, Alias, and Siraj's (2018) study among Form Four and Form Five secondary school students suggest that schools have little influence in promoting integration among the students.

3   Phinney (1989) used Marcia's (1966) model of four ego identity statuses to describe the states that individuals may traverse during ethnic identity development, though not necessarily in a sequential manner. The four identity statuses are categorized depending on the presence or absence of exploration and commitment. The definitions of the four identity statuses are as follows:

    a.   Diffused identity: Little or no exploration of one's ethnicity and no commitment or clear understanding of the issues;

    b.   Foreclosed: Little or no exploration of ethnicity, but apparent clarity about one's own ethnicity to make a commitment, usually made on the basis of parental values;

    c.   Moratorium: In the process of exploration to understand the personal implications of their ethnicity, without having made a commitment, that is, there is some confusion about the meaning of one's own ethnicity and ambivalence about belonging to the ethnic group; and

    d.   Achieved: Evidence of exploration followed by a firm commitment, that is, a clear, secure understanding and acceptance of one's own ethnicity.

4   Ting and Rose (2014) found that indigenous adolescents have not reached the stage of ethnic identity achievement. The indigenous secondary school students in Ting and Rose's (2014) study were from Berawan, Bidayuh, Bisayah, Iban, Kayan, Kelabit, Kenyah, Kiput, Melanau, Murut, Penan, and Saban groups, some of which had a small population.

5   Indigenous groups have pride in the achievements of certain individuals in their ethnic group, reinforced by Sarawak-based newspapers like *The Borneo Post* which often features prominent figures in education, politics and social arenas (e.g., Borneo Post 2019a; Borneo Post 2019b). This way, the media help create a sense of belonging for the indigenous groups.

6   X^2 is used to represent Chi-Square. The degrees of freedom and sample size are enclosed in brackets. Here (3, N=364) means that there are three degrees of freedom which is obtained by subtracting the number of groups by one (four ethnic groups − 1 =3). N shows the sample size in this study, which is 3654. The Chi-Square statistic value shown is 0.006, and this needs to be interpreted by referring to a Chi-Square table. The table identifies the value to be too small for the four ethnic groups to be different from one another because the p-value is 0.99. Such a p-value indicates that the confidence level is only 1 percent. The confidence level usually used is 95 percent (Siegle n.d.). Therefore, the Chi-Square results show that there are no significant differences among the four ethnic groups. This explanation is made with reference to Social Science Statistics (n.d.).

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