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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identity Negotiation in a Multilingual Context: Language Preference Among Malaysian Tamil Speakers

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ABSTRACT

The current generation of Malaysian Indians prioritise both spoken and written proficiency in English and Malay languages, while considering spoken proficiency in their heritage language, Tamil, to be sufficient. Such linguistic behaviour can be understood not merely as habitual language practice but as a deliberate performance through which individuals make conscious linguistic choices while interacting with others. This paper aims to examine how Malaysian Tamil-speaking young adults negotiate their identities through their language preferences and practices. Data collected through an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews revealed a strong preference for other languages, particularly English, Malaya and Mandarin, in comparison with Tamil. The findings further indicate that Malaysian Tamil-speaking young adults strategically select and mix languages to fulfil specific social and personal purposes, with these linguistic choices reflecting an awareness and negotiation of individual identity. Viewed through the lens of the Identity Negotiation Theory (INT), these patterns demonstrate how language use contributes to the dynamic negotiation of identity in response to relational goals, communicative contexts and social expectations.

1. Introduction

There are long-standing dynamics between language use and the processes of social assimilation (Naliannan et al., 2021). Language practices can enable individuals to interpret social cues, negotiate social relationships and gain acceptance within society. Following Malaysia's independence, the Indian community continued to contribute to the country's development, as they had prior to independence. However, members of the community continued to face socio-economic disparities, leading to the emergence of Indian advocacy groups which addressed issues related to employment, education and social welfare (Yusoff,2024). Frequent adjustments in self-presentation through language choice in response to social expectations may create tension between an

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individual's sense of identity and the need to conform to the surrounding environment. Such adjustments may reflect efforts to respond to environmental and social demands (Gaudet & Clément, 2009). Within the Malaysian Indian community, these processes can also be understood in relation to acculturation, whereby adaptation to the majority culture and associated language practices may be shaped by opportunities and constraints arising from historical, socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors (Yusoff, 2024).

In Malaysia, the use of Tamil among the Indian community has been reported to decline due to changing language preferences, reduced use of Tamil, and its perceived socioeconomic position relative to other languages (Muthusamy & Farashiyan, 2016). In addition, not all members of the community are equally literate or proficient in the heritage language, reflecting differences in language preferences, exposure and individual interests (Albury, 2018; Muthusamy & Farashiyan, 2016).

Over time, processes of acculturation may have contributed to more strategic language choices among Malaysian Indians, particularly in workplace settings, where different languages may be used to establish connections, build rapport, and maintain professional credibility while maintaining ties with their heritage language and culture (Zainuddin et al., 2025). The vitality of a language may also be influenced by sociocultural factors, including socioeconomic status, institutional representation, and the demographic strength of its speaker community (Ulbade et al.,2017). These factors may help explain the preference among some members of the Malaysian Indian community for English and other languages over their heritage language, particularly where these languages are perceived as providing greater socioeconomic opportunities (Rajantheran et al., 2012; Muthusamy & Farashiyan, 2016; Sinayah et al., 2017).

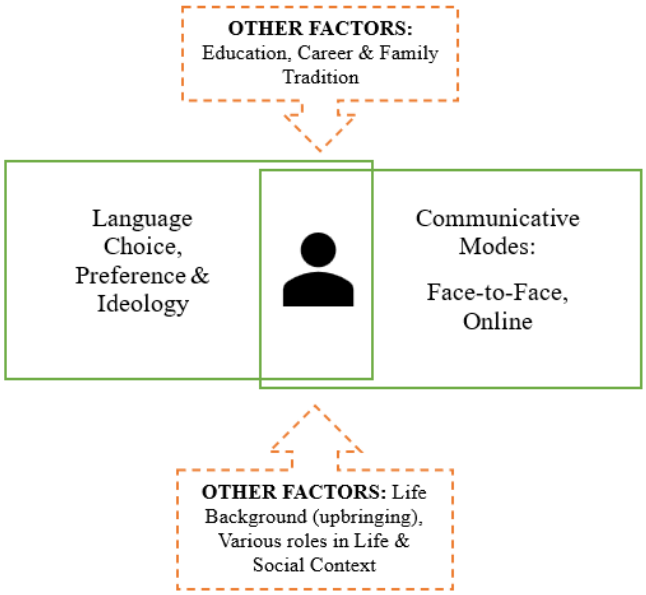
The availability of various modes of communication further shapes language use and language preferences. Face-to-face interaction enables individuals to interpret various interpersonal cues related to emotions, personality, attitudes, motivation, and relationships (Ambady et al., 2000). Online communication, meanwhile, can broaden opportunities for social interaction and participation, allowing individuals to exchange information, express their values, and manage the impressions they create among others (Lee et.al, 2011; Okdie et al., 2011; Wahab & Bahfen, 2021). In online environments, individuals are able to portray an image which they aspire to present of themselves. Their desired image allows them to engage with preferred groups and paves the way for wider opportunities.

An individual's online identity is affected by their offline social activities, reflecting the existence of two types of self, 'virtual self' and 'real self' (Yuan, 2018). These different communicative contexts raise important questions about how young Malaysian Indians use their heritage language and other languages to negotiate their identities across everyday interactions. Several previous studies have examined language and identity among the Indian community in Malaysia (David et al., 2011; Dealwis & David, 2011; Gopal & Karuppiah, 2013; Hundt, 2018; Mukherjee, 2011; Sankar, 2011; Rajantheran et al., 2012; Wong & Lau, 2016). However, less attention has been given to the strategies through which young Malaysian Tamil speakers negotiate their identities through language preferences across different modes of daily interaction.

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Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Identity Formation through Interaction



In developing and negotiating a sense of identity, young adults may be influenced by various motivations and challenges arising from their social and communicative environments. Hence, this research aims to understand how individual's social environments, language ideologies, and available communication resources shape their language use, identity negotiation and attachment to their cultural identity. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate the strategies used by young Malaysian Tamil community members in Peninsular Malaysia to negotiate their identities through language preferences in daily interactions, and the impact of these practices on their identities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language as a Reflection of Identity

The linguistic behaviour of individuals can be understood as a form of performance rather than merely a practice, with various psychological processes involved in the construction of ethnic identity (Noels, 2014). In this sense, linguistic performance may involve deliberate choices, as individuals are aware of their interactions with others and response to cues in their social environment. Practice, on the other hand, may be less deliberate, as individuals interact according to established linguistic l habits (Serreli, 2019). To achieve particular communicative or social goals, individuals make linguistic choices based on their existing linguistic resources, which may in turn contribute to the negotiation of identity. Such choices allow individuals to position themselves in relation to the social groups with which they interact (Serreli, 2019). In response to changing social needs (Lim et al., 2021), identities may be renegotiated as individuals encounter new circumstances and interact with people from different backgrounds, such as when pursuing further studies or progressing in their careers (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

In contemporary society, globalisation and language use also contribute to the shaping of identity by influencing how languages are perceived and used (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). With the increasing importance of digital communication, globalisation further provides

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opportunities for individuals to construct and negotiate how they present themselves and are perceived by others (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

With language use playing an important role in how individuals position themselves in different social contexts, identity can be understood as how individuals define, perceive and construct themselves in relation to others within their social environment (Keisling, 2013). Individuals, therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation from society, as identity is continuously shaped through different levels of social interaction and integration (Norton, 2013). Such integration may involve investment in a target language based on an individuals' linguistic preference (Sathiah et al., 2025). Through the use of a second or target language, individuals engage in identity construction and negotiation as they recognise the symbolic and social benefits associated with the language (Norton, 2013). This relationship between language choice, social integration, and identity negotiation is particularly relevant to Malaysian Tamil speakers, whose use of Tamil alongside other languages reflects the changing role of their heritage language within Malaysia's multilingual society.

2.2 The Use of Tamil Language Among Malaysian Tamil Speakers

Tamil is the primary language of communication among the majority of the Malaysian Indians due to their origins in Tamil Nadu in South India, a predominantly Tamil-speaking state (David et al.,2009). Comparatively, today, Tamil is used more for cultural, religious and entertainment purposes than as a vital tool for regular communication within the community (Muthusamy & Farashiyan, 2016; Wong & Lau, 2016). Among younger generations, a language shift can be observed from their heritage language, Tamil, towards Malay or English for specific purposes (Muthusamy & Farashiyan, 2016). These purposes include meeting new people, working and learning with members of other ethnic groups. Besides, the use of Tamil in Malaysia has been reported to decline due to its socio-economic position and limited societal and institutional support (Shankar, 2009). In the current economy, knowledge of Tamil alone may not provide access to a wide range of professional opportunities, thereby increasing the need to learn and use other languages.

Nevertheless, whether language choices are habitual or situational, their continued use may influence individuals' linguistic practices and identities over time. Understanding language practices developed from a young age, as well as those acquired later in life, may therefore help explain why individuals speak in particular ways or choose particular languages in different situations. English has become a primary preference among the younger generation, as they recognise its economic value and are encouraged to improve their English language skills (David et al., 2011). At the same time, maintaining language remains important for preserving cultural identity, as language can function as a cultural marker (David et al., 2011). The coexistence of these different linguistic needs highlights the importance of understanding how young Malaysian Tamil speakers negotiate their language choices and identities across different social contexts.

2.3 Means of Interaction

Several researchers have examined online interactions and their relationship with individuals' identity construction (Balakrishnan & Shamim, 2013; Darvin, 2016; Lee, 2014; Lee & Su, 2019; Shafie et al., 2012; Shafirova et al., 2020; Sinayah et al., 2017; Yuan 2018). Shafie et al. (2012) found that choices such as language and usernames on

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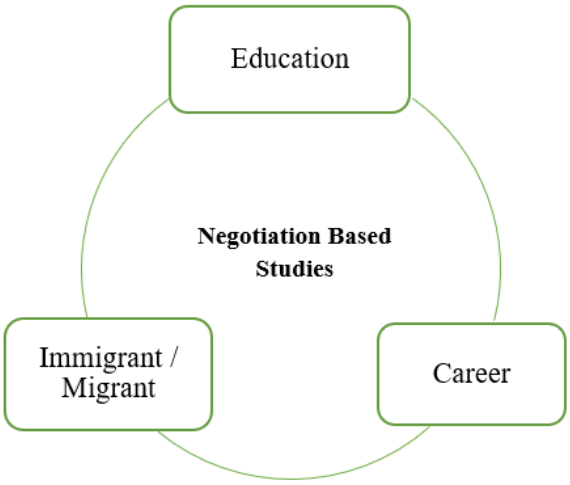
Facebook play a role in online identity and impression management. Online identities may be constructed and reconstructed based on factors such as popularity, social connection and peer perceptions. Identity management through language is apparent in different forms of computer-mediated discourse, and some individuals express linguistic attitudes by associating with particular groups of speakers (Lee, 2014). An individual's online identity may also be influenced by offline social activities (Yuan, 2018). While online platforms allow individuals to express their likes, dislikes, interests and identities as a form of self-validation among their social media peers (Balakrishnan & Shamim, 2013). Hence, individuals may present different aspects of themselves through what have been described as 'virtual self' and 'real self'. The virtual self refers to the identity portrayed through online platforms, while the real self refers to identity presented during face-to-face interactions.

Shafirova et al. (2020) further found that digital platforms facilitated the development of identity and L2 literacy, contributing to the development of confident and competent L2 users. Affinity spaces may therefore provide supportive environments for identity construction through the use of English as a second language. This may be particularly relevant given the widespread use of English in many online environments. Understanding the factors contributing to identity construction in virtual spaces can therefore provide insights into how individuals make' decisions about their self-presentation and interactions (Thatcher et al., 2017). More broadly, language choices across both online and face-to-face interactions may contribute to identity negotiation by allowing individuals to position themselves in relation to different social groups and communicative contexts.

2.4 Negotiating Identity

Identity negotiation has attracted considerable research attention across various settings and perspectives. In recent years, research in this area has been expanded to contexts such as migration, education, employment, and situations shaped by political and geographical factors. Identity negotiation has also become increasingly relevant with the growing use of digital media, which provides individuals with additional spaces to construct and present their identities.

Figure 2. Past Studies of Identity Negotiation



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In educational contexts, learners have been found to negotiate their positions and investment in learning when encountering identity conflicts across different school communities (Chen, 2010). They may also use their multilingual and multiliterate competencies creatively within safe and informal contexts (Marshall et al., 2012). Such practices may reflect agentive identity, which involves positioning oneself as responsible, active and in control of particular situations (Tun & Khairuddin, 2023). These experiences demonstrate how language and identity negotiation can begin within educational environments and continue as individuals move into professional contexts.

From a career perspective, expatriates have been found to employ various strategies to fulfil their assigned roles and requirements (Li et al., 2019). Professionals may also negotiate their personal and social identities to facilitate their engagement within multinational enterprises (Ma, 2023). In culturally diverse workplaces, organisations may further support this negotiation process by recognising individuals' skills and talents (Surakhmad, 2023). Identity negotiation can therefore occur across different stages of an individual's life, from education to employment, as social environments and communicative demands change (Xia et al., 2025).

Identity negotiation has also been examined in relation to ethnicity and bicultural identities. Chatman et al. (2005) found that African American youth negotiated their identities to maintain a sense of relevance and facilitate behavioural and positive psychological adjustment. Continued exposure to different information, contexts, and social situations may further contribute to the ongoing construction of identity. Bicultural identities (e.g. Asian/Caucasian) may similarly emerge through intercultural and mixed-heritage family backgrounds (Toomey et al., 2013), requiring individuals to negotiate their identities within intergroup relations. To describe communicative strategies through which bicultural individuals move between their cultural identities, Toomey et al., (2013) proposed a "double swing identity" model.

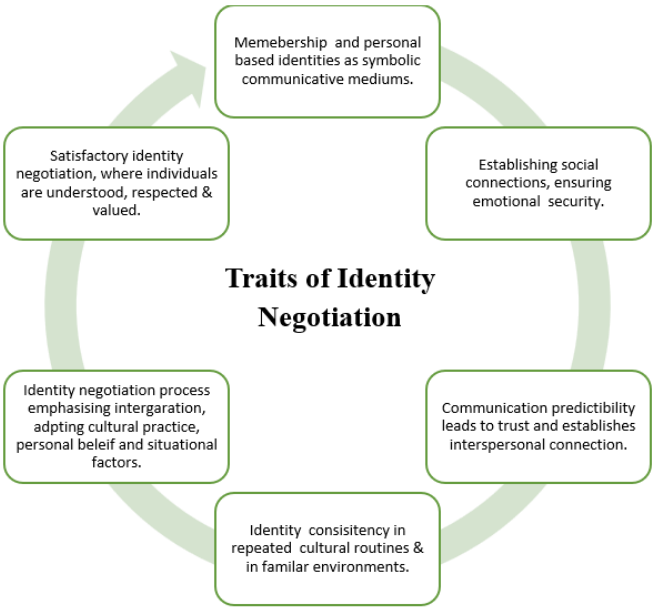
Across these contexts, identity negotiation can therefore be understood as a dynamic process through which individuals adjust how they position and present themselves in response to different social, cultural, and communicative situations. Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) provides a useful lens for understanding this process and how identities are negotiated through social interaction.

2.5 Identity Negotiation Theory (INT)

The INT theory draws attention to the importance of flexibly negotiating personal and sociocultural aspects of identity as individuals engage in cross-boundary interactions (Ting-Toomey, 2017). This negotiation occurs through transactional processes of interaction in which identities are communicated, recognised, and adjusted in relation to others (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2025). Successful identity negotiation during interaction may contribute to individuals feeling valued, understood, supported and respected in spite of intercultural differences (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2025). Individuals may also experience greater identity security and emotional safety in culturally familiar environments (Ting-Toomey, 2015), particularly when they experience acceptance and validation from others (Collie et al., 2010; Vine & Greenwood, 2020).

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Figure 3. Traits of Identity Negotiation Theory (INT)



As individuals participate in different social environments, they may develop communicative strategies, including particular language choices, to facilitate integration, acceptance, and validation within desired communities (Collie et al., 2010; Rizzo et al., 2020; Vine & Greenwood, 2020). Digital media further provides spaces for individuals to develop and maintain relationships with different communities. Such affinity spaces may enable individuals to express their attributes, beliefs, and ideologies, develop relationships with members of other cultures, and maintain connections with their home communities (Yau et al., 2020). Digital technologies have also supported language learning initiatives, providing individuals with grated opportunities to negotiate their identities through language use (Ye, 2025).

Overall, identity negotiation involves both personal and social dimensions of the self (Ma, 2023). Rather than viewing the personal self as fixed by birth and the social self as determined solely by conscious language choice, these dimensions can be understood as interacting aspects of identity that are continually negotiated through social experience and communication. Language choice may therefore become one of the resources through which individuals express, maintain, or reposition aspects of their identities in different contexts. From the perspective of INT, examining language choices during interaction can provide insights into how individuals negotiate their personal and sociocultural identities in relation to others.

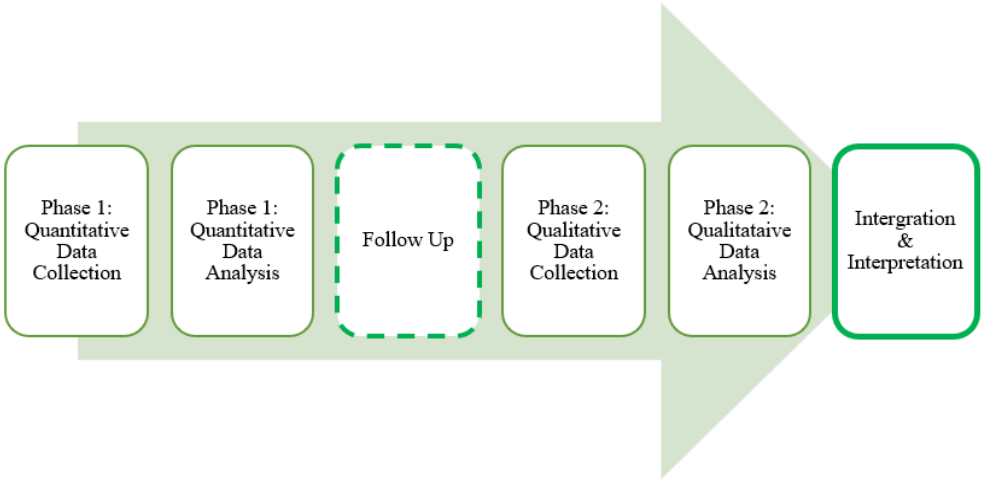
3. Research Methods

The research methodology for this study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, beginning with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis. The sequential explanatory design consists of two distinct phases (Cresswell, 2009). The first phase, involving quantitative data collection, provides a numerical overview of the participants' identity perceptions in relation to language use. Meanwhile, the second phase allows participants to explain and express themselves in greater depth, providing insights that may not be fully captured

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through the survey alone (Ivankova et al., 2006; Othman et al., 2021).

Figure 4. Sequential Explanatory Design Method



3.1 Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using a non-probability sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics, knowledge or even experiences. Among the different forms of purposive sampling, homogeneous purposive sampling was employed. The participants were Malaysian-born Indians aged between 18 and 35 years who used at least one social media application or platform and met the other specified criteria. In total, 385 respondents participated in the first phase, while 17 participants voluntarily.

3.2 Instruments

The use of questionnaires is a viable method for exploring identity-related experiences (Khatib & Rezaei, 2013). The questionnaire was pilot tested earlier prior to data collection and included an adaptation of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure Revised by Phinney and Ong (2007), this has a scale of strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree scale. Meanwhile the second part questions were adapted from Dweik and Qawar (2015) to identify and understand participants' commitment and attitudes towards their heritage language and other languages.

Secondly, interviews were used as another important method of data collection, as supported by previous identity-related studies (Collie et al., 2010; Liu, 2015; Noels, 2014; Nystaad et al., 2017; Phinney et al., 2001; Rizzo et al., 2020; Toomey et al., 2013; Vine & Greenwood, 2020). The semi-structured interview questions were prepared based on the two domains investigated, namely language use during face-to-face interactions and language use during online interactions. The questions covered aspects such as participants' experiences, expectations, emotions, self-understanding and self-presentation.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of the online survey was conducted using SPSS software. The mean and

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standard deviation were calculated to analyse participants' responses to the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure Revised (MEIM-R) items. As the questionnaire consisted of two parts, the first part, comprising the MEIM-R questions, was analysed using SPSS software, while the second part, focusing on attitudes towards language use, was analysed using Microsoft Excel. Meanwhile, the interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. Prior to the analysis, each respondent was assigned a code, ranging from R1 to R17, to facilitate the organisation and reporting of the qualitative data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Questionnaire Findings

Based on the participants' MEIM-R responses, the dimensions of commitment and exploration indicate that the respondents generally demonstrated commitment to their ethnic identity and an interest in understanding their cultural background when given the opportunity as the mean score interpretation was found to be positive perception for 11 out of 12 statements. However, in terms of active participation in organizations involving their own ethnic community, the respondents appeared to be less involved, with a mean score of 2.45 (53.2% -disagreement). Nevertheless, commitment was demonstrated in other ways, particularly through their positive feelings about being part of the community. Table 1 illustrates the findings obtained for MEIM-R.

Table 1. The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-R

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.	5.5%	18.4%	48.6%	27.5%	2.98
I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.	18.4%	34.8%	30.4%	16.45	2.45
I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to.	3.6%	10.6%	36.4%	49.4%	3.31
I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.	4.9%	13.5%	38.2%	43.4%	3.20
I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.	4.4%	13.5%	45.7%	36.4%	3.14

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In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.	7.0%	22.3%	41.8%	28.8%	2.92
I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group.	3.6%	11.4%	36.9%	48.15	3.29
I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs.	5.2%	12.7%	36.6%	45.5%	3.22
I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.	5.2%	10.4%	39.5%	44.9%	3.24
I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.	2.1%	3.4%	37.7%	56.9%	3.49
I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better.	2.9%	19.5%	41.6%	36.1%	3.11
I have sometimes wondered about the meaning or implication of my ethnicity	22.9%	16.6%	46.2%	34.3%	3.12

The respondents were subsequently asked about their language preferences in different situations in their daily lives. The responses were grouped into three main categories: English and Tamil, English only and Tamil only. Other language choices were also reported but are not included in the table, as the analysis focuses on these three main categories. The findings presented in Table 2 are based on responses from all 385 participants.

Table 2. Language Preferences in Daily Life

No	Scenarios	English + Tamil	English	Tamil
1	With family and relatives at home I use...	167	62	107
2	With family and other relatives outside, during (events, gatherings, functions) I use...	219	59	67
3	During social interaction with others, I use...	162	153	20
4	During social interaction with fellow ethnic members, I use...	201	69	79
5	During religious conduct I use... (If you do take part= 50)	114	36	176
6	My Malaysian national identity is expressed via (based on	100	118	115

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	language) ...			
7	My ethnic identity is expressed via…	96	63	206
8	I prefer watching T.V channels/ programs in...	203	85	57
9	I prefer listening to radio stations in...	165	80	126
10	For interaction on social networking sites, I use...	83	277	9
11	I prefer to read materials (book, paper, article, magazine, etc) for leisure in...	80	261	18

Based on Table 2, English appears to play an important role in the daily lives of young Tamil-speaking Malaysian Indians. The use of English only, as well as English and Tamil, was reported in interactions with family and friends across both face-to-face and online contexts, as well as for reading. Nevertheless, Tamil continues to serve as an important marker of ethnic identity and a means of communication within families and during religious practices. To some extent, it was also associated with expressions of national identity and was used when listening to songs or radio stations.

The following findings are based on the interview sessions, with the data analysed thematically. The analysis identified two key themes, as presented in Table 3 and further elaborated in the subsequent sections.

Table 3. Themes Identified

Research Question	How do Malaysian Tamil young adults negotiate their identity in relation to their language preference?
Theme(s)	Selecting mixed language use to fulfil specific social and personal agendas Language use to project and negotiate individual identity

4.2 Selecting Mixed Language Use to Fulfil Specific Social and Personal Agendas

Based on the analysis of the interview data, Malaysian Tamil-speaking young adults were found to place considerable importance on English while also recognising the importance of maintaining their heritage language. Their interest and intention to learn languages other than Tamil also reflected an awareness of the social and practical value of different languages in improving their opportunities in life However, English emerged as the preferred language among the respondents, while Tamil was used more selectively in particular contexts. These findings suggest that the younger generation strategically draws on both English and Tamil to negotiate their identities across different social groups and communicative contexts, while maintaining connections to their cultural identity.

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4.3 Language Use to Project and Negotiate Individual Identity

Under this theme, Malaysian Tamil-speaking young adults generally believed that maintaining a balance between languages helped them navigate different social contexts, while viewing language primarily as a tool for communication. However, some participants acknowledged that they negotiated aspects of their identity through their language choices:

> *"Yes. I focused mostly on the English language, I was a person who sort of looked down at the Tamil language as well, a lot actually and then I feel these days I don't understand why I ever did that because at the end of the day it is my identity, I am indian ... and you know and I am speaking more fluently in Tamil these days and I am speaking more widely in Tamil these days, especially if the participants are indians, I would start the conversation in English but when I find out that they can speak n Tamil , I speak Tamil with them . but I do regret looking down at the language, because I feel ahmm it's my language. If I were to look down at my language, it's like looking down at myself." (R10)*

> *"Yes.. until the age of 9 like I said. At this point of time, I think no, cause I am making an effort but before this yeah. Well, sometimes people like to associate knowing ...ummm certain ethnicities to certain jobs or certain values right. So, being a minority in Malaysia, most Indians were categorised to be you know …how to say they do nothing good, they end up in jail, they steal stuff, they are notorious people and turns to gangsterism and all that. So, when I heard some people speak Tamil, when I was younger, it didn't sound... So felt it sounded very rugged, … so I thought knowing their language would make me sound unprofessional person. Even in school, until I finished the upper secondary, so I didn't tell anyone I spoke Tamil because I had a fear that these kids that did speak Tamil, the notorious ones would try to interact and mingle with me. You know like they say, wrong place wrong time, I am seen mingling with these people, I will be judged as well. They show your friends, I tell you who you are right, so I didn't want to be judged because of them. In a way I feel bad about that but that was the reality at that time. And all I could think about as a school going kid." (R4)*

During the earlier stages of their lives, English appeared to be more important to many participants, but as they grew older, they became increasingly aware of the importance of maintaining their heritage language. The young Malaysian Indian adults displayed efforts to maintain their cultural roots and practices while also aspiring to achieve greater social recognition and economic opportunities. They expressed pride in being Malaysian while continuing to maintain their cultural identity. These findings suggest that identity negotiation occurs among young Malaysian Indian adults as they make language choices in response to different social and personal needs, while remaining aware of their cultural identity. Such awareness may enable them to maintain connections to their cultural heritage while pursuing their social, professional and personal aspirations.

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4.4 Discussion

An individual's identity is viewed as a reflective self-image that is constructed, experienced and communicated within particular cultural and interactional contexts (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). To comprehend the perceived effects of identity negotiation and the feelings associated with it among Malaysian Tamil young adults, respondents were asked about the impact of their language use based on their personal experiences. Some indicated that they had never consciously considered such an impact and believed that their language choices had little influence on their daily lives. Others, however, perceived positive impacts, particularly in relation to career and personal development. Knowledge of multiple languages was also viewed as enabling individuals to perceive situations from different linguistic perspectives, influencing how they interpret information and shaping their ways of thinking. Nevertheless, for some participants, their identity was found to be closely associated with English, as the language had played an important role throughout their childhood, education, and professional lives.

Furthermore, individuals, regardless of their background, are constantly engaged in negotiation in their daily lives as they respond to and manage different situations (Surakhmad et al., 2023). This was also evident among the Malaysian Indian young adults in this study. Some participants felt that not speaking Tamil did not make them less Indian while others emphasised the importance of maintaining a good balance between the languages they knew. Some had also begun to recognise the importance of their heritage language, expressing an intention to maintain their culture and acknowledging their ability to express themselves more effectively through Tamil. Individuals may make particular decisions regarding language choice and use as they learn to position themselves and seek acceptance from preferred social groups (Collie et al, 2010; Vine & Greenwood, 2020). This resonates with the experiences of some participants, who feared being judged because of their Malaysian Indian identity, having encountered preconceived stereotypes that associated Indians with illegal activities and other negative behaviours. Such experiences, in turn, influenced how they negotiated their identities through their language choices.

According to Ting-Toomey (2015), individuals may experience greater identity security and emotional safety in culturally familiar environments They may therefore use their linguistic resources to position themselves and seek acceptance within their preferred social groups (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001; Collie et al., 2010; Vine & Greenwood, 2020;). When asked what it meant to be a Malaysian Indian, participants provided several perspectives. Some associated Malaysian Indian identity with the ability to speak Malay, Tamil, and English, while others emphasised being born and raised in Malaysia. Participants also highlighted the importance of maintaining Indian culture while living in Malaysia. For some, Malay and Tamil represented important aspects of their heritage, while familiarity with Malaysian culture further contributed to their sense of identity. In short, the findings indicate that Malaysian Tamil-speaking young adults define their identities in different ways, drawing on their multilingual abilities, cultural practices, heritage, and experiences of growing up in Malaysia to negotiate both their ethnic and national identities.

The use of Tamil is believed to have undergone changes within Malaysia's multilingual environment, as reflected in speakers' language choices across different domains, which may also reflect the language ideologies of the participants in this study (Naliannan et

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al., 2021). In addition, some participants considered the ability to balance different languages sufficient, even when their Tamil proficiency did not extend to reading and writing. Overall, English appeared to provide many participants with greater comfort and confidence and enabled communication across a wider range of contexts,while Tamil remained important for cultural practice, family interactions and entertainment. These patterns indicate the presence of identity negotiation as participants navigate Malaysian society while simultaneously maintaining and constructing identities according to their social and personal needs. They may also reflect an ongoing shift in particular domains from Tamil towards English, in line with findings by Mukherjee and David, (2011).

Though some respondents expressed confidence in their ability to balance their linguistic knowledge, the findings suggest that such balancing may itself represent a form of identity negotiation. Language choices appeared to be shaped partly by participants' desire to be accepted, respected, and recognised within the communities in which they interact, as well as by the social and professional opportunities associated with different languages. Hence, most individuals have the habit of exhibiting a transitory identity negotiation among these participants can therefore be understood as fluid and context-dependent, with individuals alternating between languages according to their situational, social, and personal needs.

5. Conclusion

A notable characteristic of the Tamil-speaking young adults in this study is their conscious approach towards language use. In a world where communication is increasingly fast-paced, digital, and transient, these Malaysian young adults appear to be increasingly aware of how they communicate in their daily lives. Language, for them, is not limited to the exchange of information but also serves as a resource for shaping and maintaining their identities. Whether through text messages, social media posts, or professional conversations, participants demonstrated awareness of their language choices and how these choices may influence how they are perceived and how they relate to others. Moreover, their linguistic choices are shaped not only by personal identity considerations but also by the changing demands of the national and global environments. The findings suggest that these young Malaysian Tamil speakers recognise the potential value of language proficiency for their career prospects, social participation, and cultural engagement. In particular, the global reach of English appears to motivate the use and development of English not only for economic and professional opportunities but also for broader communication, cultural exchange and access to international networks.

Through the lens of the Identity Negotiation Theory (INT), these language practices provide a more dynamic understanding of how individuals manage and negotiate their identities in response to relational goals, communicative contexts and social expectations. INT posits that individuals continuously negotiate their identities through interaction as they seek acceptance, maintain a sense of identity, and respond to situational demands. From this perspective, language functions as an important resource through which participants position themselves differently across social contexts while negotiating their personal, cultural, and social identities. The findings therefore reinforce the view of identity negotiation as a fluid, adaptive, and relational process rather than a fixed outcome.

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Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

This study adheres to the research ethic guidelines of Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). The procedures involving the participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in line with regulations set by Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC).

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest for this work.

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