



ETHNIC IDENTITY PERCEPTION AMONG MALAYSIAN URBAN TAMIL YOUTHS DISCONNECTED FROM THEIR HERITAGE LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of language shift among Malaysian Tamils is well documented, highlighting both disconnection and preservation of the Tamil language. However, its impact on the community members' ethnic identity remains underexplored. This study examines the perceptions of ethnic identity among Malaysian urban Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language and their negotiation of ethnic identity without linguistic capital. It addresses the underexplored link between language shift and ethnic identity perceptions. This qualitative study involved twenty Malaysian urban Tamil youths who had shifted from their heritage language to English. The data were thematically analysed using Identity Process Theory (continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness) to frame their perceptions of Malaysian Tamil identity. Results showed polarised views. Participants with negative perceptions experienced identity threats, which they negotiated by disengaging from their Tamil identity. In contrast, those with positive perceptions asserted their ethnic identity through non-linguistic markers (food, cultural practices, and clothing). Further analysis of negative perceptions underscored stigma management strategies, wherein the participants distanced themselves from the threatening ethnic identity, resorting to masking or adopting superordinate identities (Malaysian, Indian). In contrast, positive perceptions interpreted through post-ethnic theory revealed the fluidity of ethnic identity formation, extending beyond linguistic markers, and foregrounding the dynamic nature of identity construction in a globalised, multilingual world.

Keywords: Malaysian Tamils, language shift, ethnic identity, heritage language, Tamil language

INTRODUCTION

The multicultural landscape in Malaysia officially recognises major languages, including Tamil, which is widely spoken by the Malaysian Indian community. It serves as the *lingua franca* in Tamil vernacular schools and places of worship, and is a significant component of ethnic identity that cements the Malaysian Tamils' distinct identity (How et al. 2015). However, Malaysian urban Tamil youths exhibit a paradoxical decline in Tamil fluency, maintaining only symbolic ties to the language (David and Govindasamy [2007] 2017; Nalliannan et al. 2021). This decline persists despite Tamil's formal status in Malaysia, indicating that official recognition does not preclude language shift — the process by which individuals or communities adopt a dominant language over their heritage language (Thamburaj et al. 2025). This phenomenon raises questions about how these youths construct their ethnic identity when their heritage language, a key foundation of ethnic identity (Kelleher 2010; Beqiri 2025), is absent from their linguistic repertoire.

The Malaysian Tamil community is one of the largest minority groups in Malaysia, with origins tracing back to the early second century, when Indian traders visited Malaya (Arasaratnam 1970; Belle 2015). The community experienced significant growth when the British colonial authorities initiated large-scale migration of Tamils from South India to Malaya to meet the high demand for labour on rubber plantations (Kesavapany et al. 2008; Lakshman 2024). The colonial administration attempted to retain these immigrants in Malaysia by offering incentives to preserve their language and cultural identity, primarily through three means: establishing Tamil vernacular schools (David and Govindasamy [2007] 2017), constructing temples and observing Tamil festivals (Willford 2015), and later, developing media such as Tamil newspapers, radio, and television channels (Sinayah et al. 2017).

Brought to Malaya by Indian immigrants, the Tamil language evolved into Malaysian Tamil—a variant with altered linguistic features influenced by contact with the local population (Schiffman 1995, 2002). Today, Malaysian Tamil is one of the official languages of instruction in Tamil vernacular schools; however, it is considered to have the lowest status among the major languages in Malaysia (Gopinathan and Mani 1983; Revathi 2025). Although prioritised in Tamil vernacular education, the language is gradually declining, as evidenced by the steady fall in student enrolment in Tamil schools (Shangkari 2025), raising concerns about the future of Tamil in Malaysia. Thus, this qualitative research examines the consequences of language shift on Malaysian urban Tamil youths' perceptions of their ethnic identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The absence of a heritage language threatens ethnic identity, as evidenced by case studies in Malaysia. For instance, Portuguese Eurasians in Malaysia, whose heritage language is Kristang, gradually shifted to English (Pillai and Khan 2011). This shift has caused identity confusion among the younger generation, who struggle to form an affiliation with a community whose language and practices have been eroded (Jeevita 2025a). Similarly, language loss among the Jahut community, an indigenous group in Malaysia, triggers an identity crisis, as they witnessed the erosion of traditional values due to external influences, a process that began with the replacement of their heritage language with bahasa Melayu (Choo et al. 2025). These studies consistently emphasise the importance of heritage language in forming ethnic identity, and its absence can have serious consequences, including ethnic identity threat and conflict.

This shift from the heritage language is not novel in multilingual Malaysia, where many languages intersect, with bahasa Melayu (the national language) and English (a widely used second language) dominating the linguistic landscape. Language shift has been documented across various Malaysian communities. Recent reports attest to its progressive nature. For

instance, Penangite Chinese youths prefer English over Mandarin, losing proficiency in their heritage language (Ong and Troyer 2024). Analogously, the Malacca Chetti community's Malay Creole has been declared an endangered language due to a massive language shift to bahasa Melayu (Lee et al. 2025). The reasons cited for language shift include socioeconomic mobility and academic success, which catalyse language disconnection among urbanised communities (Volodina et al. 2021).

This progressive language shift signals a paradigm shift in ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is intricately bound to one's heritage language in a symbiotic relationship (Beqiri 2025). However, when language shift leaves its members disconnected from their heritage language, ethnic identity may undergo minor or major alteration, varying individually. Recent Malaysian studies report polarised findings on the effects of heritage-language disconnection on ethnic identity.

Studies of the Sindhi community in Malaysia found positive ethnic identification despite having few remaining speakers of the Sindhi language due to language shift. The community asserted its ethnic identity by adhering to cultural and religious practices (David et al. 2020). Similarly, English-dominant Malaysian Chinese university students exhibited a strong attachment to their ethnic identity through cultural practices, demonstrating belonging to their community despite minimal affiliation with their heritage language (Al-Saggaf and Su 2024). Another study of Malaysian university students examined their ethnic language use and ethnic identity. It reported that Malay and Chinese students demonstrated a moderate attachment to their ethnic language, while Indian and indigenous students expressed a weaker bond with their ethnic languages. However, all students demonstrated strong ethnic identity due to their families' insistence on cultural practices (Ting and Abidin 2023).

By contrast, heritage language disconnection also negatively affects ethnic identity, as illustrated by a study of Malaysian Chinese across generations (Zheng et al. 2025). Although the older Malaysian Chinese generation was strongly attached to both heritage language and ethnic identity, the younger generation, disconnected from their heritage language, maintained only a symbolic tie to their ethnic identity. This disconnection resulted in identity confusion and adoption stress.

These studies illustrate that the impact of language shift on one's ethnic identity, whether mild or severe, is evident. Even when ethnic identity was positively reported despite heritage-language disconnection, these individuals employed alternative means to affirm their identity, such as cultural practices. The negative perceptions of ethnic identity culminate in identity confusion among heritage-language disconnected individuals.

Turning specifically to the Malaysian Tamil community, Schiffman (2002) was among the first to investigate the status of Tamil among Malaysian Indians and the phenomenon of language shift. He concluded that the vitality of Tamil was closely tied to the socioeconomic backgrounds of community members. Those from upper socioeconomic strata and highly educated groups preferred English as their primary language of communication, shifting from their heritage language for economic and social reasons. Conversely, Malaysian Indians with lower levels of education, who at the time mostly lived on plantations, preserved the language.

Schiffman's findings were confirmed by studies of the shift and preservation of the Tamil language within the community in Kuching, Sarawak (Alagappar et al. 2016; Ramalingam 2017). The findings indicated a gradual shift from the community's heritage language towards English, a more economically advantageous and socially dominant language. This shift was driven by aspirations for higher academic achievement and better employment prospects. The findings aligned with reports that urban Malaysian Tamil youths were English-dominant and excluded Tamil from their linguistic repertoire (David and Govindasamy [2007] 2017).

Studies revealed that the Malaysian Tamil youths who were disconnected from their heritage language acknowledged that Tamil was observed and preserved in religious rituals (Willford 2015). They also recognised Tamil as one of their identity markers (Naji and David 2003; Sathiah et al. 2025). However, Tamil was not the primary medium of communication for urban Malaysian Tamil youths. Consequently, it played a peripheral role, weakening its position as a heritage symbol that grounded these youths in their ancestry.

Beyond social motivations, the decline of the Tamil language among Malaysian Tamils is also linked to the struggles of under-resourced Tamil vernacular schools despite receiving government funding. These schools teach Tamil while also providing instruction in Malay and English, which are vital for a smooth transition to secondary education (Arumugam 2002; David and Govindasamy 2005). Consequently, Tamil vernacular schools have received inadequate attention because they produce fewer students proficient in English and Malay. This has affected the status of the Tamil language in the country (Jeevita 2025b). These factors reinforce the academic and economic opportunities that prompted the Malaysian Tamil community to shift from Tamil to English, reinforcing earlier reasons for language shift. These factors also corroborate the earlier observation regarding the declining number of students enrolled in Tamil vernacular schools (Shangkari 2025).

The corollaries of language shift extend beyond language loss to directly affect ethnic identity. One study revealed that the urban Malaysian Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language had a weaker affinity towards their ethnic identity, due to a minimal belonging to their community. Language differences created communication barriers, especially with older generations, leading youths to detach from the Malaysian Tamil identity (Muttu 2024). Meanwhile, a study of Malaysian Tamils in multilingual contexts found that Tamil proficiency was diminishing among the younger generation, and their ethnic identity fluctuated from weak to non-existent attachment to their community (Nalliannan et al. 2021). Conversely, English-dominant Malaysian Tamils also maintained a positive ethnic identity despite lacking their heritage language, primarily due to family influence (Mahalingam 2023).

Although past studies addressed this topic, heritage language absence among urban Malaysian Tamil youths and its impact on their ethnic identity remain understudied. This gap is problematic because without empirical evidence, community leaders and policymakers lack the necessary perceptiveness to support this growing demographic, and existing models such as Identity Process Theory remain untested in the context of Malaysia's multilingual urban landscape. Moreover, overlooking the various ways youths negotiate identity, risks intensifying stigmatisation of those heritage-language-disconnected youths. Fishman's (1989) claim that language is key to shaping ethnic identity necessitates a systematic examination of this population's perceptions using a robust theoretical framework and rigorous methodology. This study addresses this concern by applying Identity Process Theory to a previously underexplored population, providing empirical evidence of polarised identity negotiation strategies. It also highlights the possibilities for policymakers and educators seeking to support ethnic identity formation beyond linguistic markers in multilingual, globalised contexts.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

While previous studies have documented language shift and preservation efforts of Tamil in Malaysia, how individuals disconnected from their heritage language negotiate their ethnic identity remains underexplored. Identity Process Theory (Breakwell [1986] 2015) addresses this gap by outlining four key elements of identity maintenance—continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness—in response to identity threats of Malaysian urban Tamil youths.

Continuity refers to the intergenerational transfer of linguistic, cultural, and social values (Zixuan 2023). This transfer may fail or change when the linguistic link is broken, and the younger generation becomes disconnected from their heritage language. This study explores how Malaysian urban Tamil youths maintain ethnic identity continuity, examining how disconnection from Tamil has shaped their ethnic identity perceptions.

Furthermore, Identity Process Theory's self-esteem component examines how an individual perceives their identity positively or negatively (McLeod 2023). A positive perception of an identity increases self-esteem when affiliating with that identity, whereas a negative perception diminishes it. In this study, self-esteem helps understand whether participants, despite being disconnected from their heritage language, perceive their Tamil identity positively or negatively.

Self-efficacy is a core element of Identity Process Theory, augmenting an individual's ability to maintain their identity despite life changes and reducing the risk of identity threat when higher (Breakwell 2021). Thus, this study investigates the influence of self-efficacy on participants' ethnic identity perception, given the absence of a significant ethnic identity marker, the heritage language.

Distinctiveness describes how an individual or community differs from others through identity markers. It also addresses the importance of this uniqueness in preserving identity (Phillips et al. 2025). When individuals are disconnected from their heritage language, the ethnic identity they construct differs significantly from that of those who speak it. This study uses distinctiveness to examine how participants reconfigure their ethnic identity when heritage language no longer serves as a marker. Rather than categorising ethnic identity perceptions, these four elements of Identity Process Theory explain the logic underlying participants' perceptions, enabling identification of the identity negotiation strategies they adopt.

METHODS

This investigation employed a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews to analyse the perceived ethnic identity of Malaysian urban Tamil youths who had shifted away from their heritage language. Underpinned by the constructivist paradigm (Braun and Clarke 2013), the qualitative design facilitated examining youths' lived experiences related to their ethnic identity.

To capture these lived experiences, this study focused on Malaysian Tamil youth aged 23 years old to 30 years old. The older generation (above 30 years old) was not considered, as they have typically achieved identity "stability" (Klimstra et al. 2010: 152), a stage where negotiations are complete and concrete identities have formed. This may hinder their ability to articulate the strategies they used. The age range for youths was defined by the Women and Youth Empowerment Division (2019): youths in Malaysia are aged 15 years old to 30 years old. However, the participant pool included individuals aged 23 years old to 30 years old, as they were still in the "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2007: 68), a phase where individuals forge their identities rather than passively following family-ascribed identities. The younger generation was excluded from the pool because they were still firmly bound to their families' linguistic ecosystem, which limited their understanding of identity to family frameworks. Beyond age, the youths were selected based on two additional criteria. First, they were raised in urban areas, the vanguard of language change due to the presence of dominant languages (Sharapova 2025). Second, they self-identified as Malaysian Tamils with limited proficiency in Tamil and used English.

Participants' Tamil proficiency was assessed based on their ability to sustain a five-minute conversation in Tamil without switching to English. Only participants who could not sustain it for five minutes were included. This was confirmed during screening interviews, which also

examined the candidates' language preferences. Since the majority of identified and referred participants were university students, the researchers restricted the sample to this group to ensure a homogeneous socioeconomic background. Consequently, all participants were undergraduate or postgraduate students from Malaysian public and private tertiary institutions. Participants' universities were excluded from the selection criteria as this factor was peripheral.

The screening interviews also included questions about non-linguistic Tamil practices of potential participants, such as ethnic rituals, consuming Tamil media, and joining Tamil social media groups. This step was crucial for assessing participants' disconnection from their heritage language.

To identify participants, two sampling methods were employed: purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of "information-rich cases" (Patton 2014: 308). Therefore, participants chosen through this method provide detailed insights into language shift among Malaysian urban Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language, while also capturing diverse ethnic identity experiences. The researchers approached sixteen university students from five institutes who met the criteria and were known to them. After screening, eleven participants were recruited, and five were excluded.

In addition, the snowball sampling accessed hard-to-reach populations (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), such as heritage-language-disconnected urban Malaysian Tamil youths. After identifying a participant through purposive sampling, the researchers asked them to refer others meeting similar criteria (i.e., within the age range, residing in urban areas, and disconnected from the Tamil language). Any referrals were screened only after the referrer obtained permission from the referred individual to share their contact details. The researchers screened all referrals to ensure they met the selection criteria before recruitment. This sampling method produced nine participants.

Combining both sampling methods ensured diversity in participants' perspectives. Purposive sampling captured the lived experiences of Malaysian urban Tamil youths who openly expressed their disconnection from their heritage language. In contrast, the snowball sampling explored the experiences of those less vocal about their disconnection, even though they had drifted from their heritage language. Together, the sampling methods enabled the researchers to recruit twenty participants for this study. They were enrolled in various programmes across eight Malaysian public and private universities. They came from Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Kuching, Malacca, Johor Bahru, Petaling Jaya, Pulau Pinang, Shah Alam, and Kota Kinabalu. This provided a well-rounded geographic representation of urban areas in Malaysia.

Individuals who met the exclusion criteria were deemed ineligible for this study. Since this study focused on Malaysian Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language, moderate and fluent Tamil speakers were excluded. Additionally, individuals raised in rural areas were excluded, as this study explicitly targeted Tamil youths from urban areas. The researchers chose urban youths because past studies reported language shift in urban rather than rural areas (Schiffman 2002; Alagappar et al. 2016; Ramalingam 2017; Sharapova 2025).

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, with questions based on Identity Process Theory's principles (continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness) (see Appendix for the full list of interview questions). The goal was to explore how Malaysian urban Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language perceived their ethnic identity as Malaysian Tamils. Semi-structured interviews allowed focusing on participants' perceived ethnic identity, enabling participants to introduce new themes and contribute fresh insights to the literature (Misoch 2019). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews aligns with Identity Process Theory's fluid nature, which supports open-ended exploration rather than structured frameworks.

The questions were piloted with two Malaysian urban Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language who met the inclusion criteria. They were excluded from the final sample to avoid data duplication.

The pilot test was followed by the main data collection. Each participant was interviewed once, with the session lasting 60 minutes to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in English, their preferred language, at locations convenient to them. Every session was recorded using a Sony ICD-UX570F (Sony Corporation, Tokyo, Japan) digital voice recorder, with participants' consent.

Throughout the data collection process, strict ethical protocols were observed. Participants received written informed consent that explained this study's purpose, guaranteed anonymity, clarified voluntary participation, and offered the option to withdraw at any point during data collection. The researchers assured participants of data confidentiality by excluding identifying elements (such as names) from interview transcripts and data extracts. However, the participants were informed that their age, location, and gender (if mentioned in the extracts) would be included in the findings. Nevertheless, the participants were made aware of their right to request transcript redactions if they were uncomfortable sharing any information. The consent form, available in English, was provided to each participant once they had been screened and confirmed to meet the inclusion criteria. The researchers obtained ethical clearance from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee.

Once collected, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis following a six-step process: data familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, naming, and reporting (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis allowed identifying emerging patterns within the interviews without restricting new themes to a framework, and to map the findings onto Identity Process Theory, the guiding framework. This two-pronged approach enabled a comprehensive analysis that reported participants' perceptions of their ethnic identity, a subjective account of their lived experiences aligning with the constructivist paradigm adopted. The following section illustrates the thematic development of the collected data, grounded in Identity Process Theory. Each interview extract demonstrated inductive code derivation, which was later categorised into subcomponents of Identity Process Theory and finally analysed for emerging themes.

Data Analysis Process

Table 1 illustrates the thematic development of the data collected for this study, grounded in the Identity Process Theory.

Table 1: Example of thematic development of data

Data extract	Inductive code	Identity Process Theory grounding	Emerged theme
I was born into a Tamil family. Who else can I be? (P9, aged 30 from Ipoh)	Born into identity	Continuity	Ethnic identity is assigned at birth
Come on, I dress as an Indian, watch Tamil movies...with subtitles though, and do everything a Tamil does. Not speaking Tamil is not going to exclude me from the group. (P4, aged 23 from Petaling Jaya)	Being Tamil without Tamil	Self-esteem	Redefining "Tamilness"

(continued on next page)

Table 1: (continued)

Data extract	Inductive code	Identity Process Theory grounding	Emerged theme
Watching movies, my Facebook pages full of Indian recipes, my opinions on Tamil movies, don't these things show I'm Tamil? I'm a proud Tamil. Why speaking the language is so important to be one? (P10, aged 26 from Malacca)	Tamil pride	Self-efficacy	High self-efficacy
I don't speak Tamil, but I follow the Tamil life anyway. My food, my clothes, I celebrate Tamil festivals, Tamil society member, there's a list going on. Language alone doesn't show me I'm Tamil. (P20, aged 29 from Kuching)	Other Tamil markers	Distinctiveness	Asserting alternative identity markers

Notes: The extracts shown are real data collected. This table is a partial description of thematic analysis performed to exemplify the process.

RESULTS

The participants were interviewed about their perceptions of ethnic identity as Malaysian Tamils in the absence of their linguistic capital, the Tamil language. Identity Process Theory (Breakwell [1986] 2015), which underpinned the interview design, also guided the analysis and informed the findings and discussion. The analysis revealed four themes aligned with the Identity Process Theory: continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness. Participants expressed polarised views within each theme, ranging from identity threat and withdrawal to positive redefinition and alternative identity construction. The following sections present these four themes, supported by interview extracts.

Continuity

Breakwell ([1986] 2015) explained that continuity refers to a person's desire to extend their identity from birth until death. Collective identities, such as ethnic identity, can transcend human mortality because they are preserved across generations, especially through the intergenerational transfer of ethnic values. The participants' perceptions of continuity fell into two categories.

First, some participants opined that ethnic identity is assigned at birth and does not depend on language proficiency. As P3 (aged 24 from Kuala Lumpur) stated:

My ID says who I am. The minute I was born, people decided I'm a Tamil because my parents are. Even if I don't speak the language, just because I speak English, no one is going to call me English. If I marry a Tamil, my children are Tamils, too, although most probably, they'll just speak English. But they will live a Tamil life.

A similar thought was shared by P15 (aged 25 from Ipoh), who remarked:

I've Tamil parents, so not knowing Tamil is never an issue. It's not like speaking the language is the criterion, right? Like people don't conduct oral exams in Tamil to confirm membership. If I've children later, I'll give them Tamil names, and they're Tamil too. I can't teach them the language, I don't speak it. But I'm Tamil, they'll be Tamil.

These participants' firm belief that their identity was "decided (as) Tamil(s) because (their) parents were" (P3), and how having "Tamil parents" made "not knowing Tamil never an issue" (P15), instilled confidence in continuing their Tamil identity despite their lack of linguistic capital. Furthermore, these participants shifted the focus of ethnic identity continuity from individual responsibility to bureaucratic validation—citing legal documentation, such as "ID" (P3). Their affirmation of transferring "Tamil life" (P3) and "Tamil names" (P15) to future generations—while excluding the heritage language—was not viewed as a weakness but as a deliberately structured negotiation strategy to continue their ethnic identity.

In contrast, some participants relied on the wider Malaysian Tamil community's collective efforts to maintain identity, thereby exempting themselves from responsibility. P19 (aged 24 from Kuala Lumpur) explained:

I don't think I've to be passionate about continuing my Tamil identity. It's not like if I don't do, the whole thing goes extinct. There are many Malaysian Tamils out there. Even if I stop being one, just saying, it's not like tomorrow there's no Malaysian Tamil anymore. I don't have the kryptonite power to kill the ethnicity just by speaking English. I can't force things on my children when I don't understand half of it.

P1 (aged 25 from Pulau Pinang) similarly noted:

I'm not the lone crusader for Tamil. Many Malaysians speak Tamil, and be Tamil. If I become someone else, many people out there can just continue the Malaysian Tamil community. Seriously, I don't feel like one, and I won't ask that of my kids. They can be whoever they want. Others out there can crusade.

These participants regarded the Malaysian Tamil community as a large group safeguarding the Tamil language, exempting them from being "the lone crusader(s) for Tamil" (P1). They found reassurance in asserting the collective identity of the Tamil community, seeking to ensure the continuity of ethnic identity while relieving themselves of the burden of its survival. Their realignment of ethnic identity—from personal to collective—in response to their inability to engage with the heritage language, coupled with their decision not to "ask their kids" (P1) to acquire a language they themselves "(did not) understand" (P19), illustrates their coping mechanism to identity threat. Their freedom to allow their future generation to "be whoever they want" (P1) reflects "strategic disengagement" (Wanka 2018: 134–135), demonstrating their fluidity and adaptability in remodelling their ethnic identity perception.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to a person's sense of social worth within their community (Breakwell [1986] 2015). In this study, self-esteem reflects the heritage-language-disconnected participants' positive or negative evaluation of their value within the Malaysian Tamil community. Data analysis revealed two contrasting themes within self-esteem.

First, some participants felt their self-esteem threatened by the absence of their heritage language, as lamented by P8 (aged 30 from Johor Bahru):

My friends always tease me. You know "banana" right? Yellow outside, white inside? Chinese who can't speak Chinese? My friends call me "mangosteen". You know? Dark outside, white inside. Because I'm dark like an Indian, I'm one too, but no Tamil language. So, they think I behave like a fair-skinned English. It hurts to be teased. Sometimes, I just don't reveal I'm a Tamil. Easy. People assume I'm from another community.

P14 (aged 28 from Kuching) echoed, saying:

When I visit my relatives, I've to mentally prepare myself. My aunties always go on and on about how I act like a foreigner with my English, not responding in Tamil. It's not that I don't want to, but I really don't understand. So, I tend to avoid mingling with my relatives. My friends do that too. My postgrad mates just called me out last week for not speaking Tamil at all. They asked me, "Are you even Indian?". If not speaking Tamil is a problem in being Indian, I really think I just should sit that one out.

These participants' experiences of negative comments—"mangosteen" (P8) and "act(ing) like foreigner(s)" (P14)—from relatives and friends about their inability to speak Tamil reflect social sanctioning (Sorokoletova 2024). This is a form of ethnic policing where individuals are punished for not conforming to the community-prescribed features, especially lacking heritage language proficiency.

Furthermore, the sobriquets, such as "mangosteen" (P8) and "foreigner" (P15), fuelled participants' low self-esteem and established a clear distinction between others and these participants. The verbal punishment the participants received under social sanctioning threatened their self-esteem. In response, they negotiated their identity by employing a masking mechanism—an act of hiding their true identity—to cope. The participants indicated they "(did) not reveal" their Tamil identity (P8) and preferred excluding it from their identity by "sitting that one out" (P15). They chose identity withdrawal (Schwartz et al. 2023) as their coping mechanism for the low self-esteem from their disconnection from their heritage language.

Meanwhile, some participants attempted to redefine "Tamilness" rather than fully withdrawing from their Tamil identity, as described by P2 (aged 29 from Petaling Jaya):

Yes, I don't speak Tamil. Don't understand that much too. But why should I let a language identify me? I'm wearing my *pottu* (a small dot on forehead) I wear saree when attending functions, I perform *pranama* (touching elders' feet for blessings) on auspicious days, when I take tests, so why can't I be a Tamil? I'm as cultured as those who speak Tamil.

P2's perspective aligns with P18 (aged 23 from Malacca), who reflected:

I'm not worried. I don't speak the language but I live a Tamil life. I've a Tamil name, I eat Indian food, love it actually. I celebrate all the Tamil festivals. I even join Tamil events. Just organised a Tamil book launching ceremony. I'm the curator for their Facebook. So, I don't feel less Tamil. I still reach out to other Tamil people.

Contrary to the threatened self-esteem reported in the previous section, some participants demonstrated high self-esteem as Malaysian Tamils despite being disconnected from their heritage language. These participants were aware of their limited Tamil language skills, but this did not prevent them from identifying as Malaysian Tamils, as language was not their primary marker.

They engaged in practices such as performing *pranama* (P2) and celebrating "Tamil festivals" (P18)—unwritten yet firm traditions in the community—despite lacking Tamil proficiency. This re-engineered ethnic identity still placed them within the community. The absence of language did not make them any less Tamil than those who spoke the language. Instead, they preferred asserting their redefined ethnic identity through cultural rituals (*pranama* and ethnic festivals), diet (Indian food) and ethnic adornments (*pottu* and saree), in contrast to participants who withdrew from their identity.

Furthermore, the participants challenged the notion that linguistic capital is necessary for identifying them as Tamils when they “live(d) a Tamil life” (P18) even without the language as a marker. These participants demonstrated active engagement by promoting their Tamil identity globally on social media, such as “curat(ing book launch ceremony’s) Facebook” (P18). The participants’ ethnic identity extended beyond possessing the heritage language, compensating for the language absence in negotiating a newly constructed ethnic identity.

Self-Efficacy

In Identity Process Theory, self-efficacy (Breakwell [1986] 2015) describes how individuals perceive their ability to control or influence the outcomes of their ethnic identities. In this study, self-efficacy is examined in relation to the participants’ language shift experience, and the findings revealed two polarised views.

Some participants reported low self-efficacy regarding their ethnic identity, as expressed by P8 (aged 30 from Johor Bahru):

I don’t really engage in anything Tamil. I attend relatives’ functions because I’ve to bring my family there. Even then, I don’t really speak to anyone. I don’t know. It’s just not a big deal for me. I know I’m not good enough in Tamil, will never be good. So, why force myself? I just enjoy who I am now.

P14 (aged 28 from Kuching) articulated a parallel viewpoint:

What can I say about that? It’s okay if people say I’m not Tamil. It happened. I can’t stop it. I can’t go and learn the language now to make others happy. If it is difficult, I just stay away. What group I belong to doesn’t matter as long as I’m okay with it.

These participants reiterated identity withdrawal as a coping mechanism, where they “(didn’t) really engage in anything Tamil” (P8) and “just stay(ed) away” (P14), to manage their perceived deficiency as community members lacking a key identity marker. Their preference to disengage from the ethnic group demonstrates how they passively accepted the erosion of their identity, as highlighted in P8’s statement, “will never be good”, and P14’s acknowledgement, “It happened. I can’t stop it”. These extracts indicate low self-efficacy, and identity withdrawal was deliberately chosen by the participants to minimise their failure to conform to Tamil’s primacy as an ethnic identity marker.

The participants’ identity withdrawal as a coping strategy demonstrates their perceived defeat in trying to belong to the Tamil community without the language. Their nonchalant declaration that “it (was) just not a big deal” (P8) if they could not belong to the Tamil community, and their flexibility to accept any group as their identity “as long as (they were) okay with it” (P14) emphasised how they negotiated their position as individuals without a definitive ethnic identity.

Conversely, some participants showed high self-efficacy, as P2 (aged 29 from Petaling Jaya) stated:

I’m a Tamil. I don’t speak Tamil but I’m one. I’m even a member of the Tamil club here. We always conduct activities. We promote anything about Malaysian Indians. Just recently we had Bharathanatyam competition. Even those who speak the language don’t do these things. So, I don’t let others tell me who I am.

P18 (aged 23 from Malacca) echoed, saying:

I don't know Tamil but I still watch Tamil movies, with subtitles though. I even do movie reviews. If you've time you can check out my Facebook and YouTube. I write for the uni newsletter about my community. Just recently wrote a book review. You know, *Ponniyin Selvan*? I read the translated version but the content is there and I wrote a review on the series. Later want to write a comparison between the movies and the books. I'm not bragging but just trying to say that I'm doing everything Tamil. I just don't know the language, but I've my Tamil way of life.

Participants with high self-efficacy did not let the lack of heritage language affect their ethnic identity as Malaysian Tamils. Rather than dissociating from the ethnic group, they enhanced their ethnic identity by immersing in Tamil culture, such as “promot(ing) anything about Malaysian Indians” (P2) and “doing everything Tamil” (P18).

The participants became the ambassadors for Tamil culture. Their autonomy in defining their Tamil identity—expressed through their firm stand about “not let(ing) others tell (them) who they were” (P2) and following the “Tamil way of life” (P18) despite not knowing the language—enabled them to bypass language as a prerequisite for ethnic identity. This demonstrates their strategy for negotiating their identity.

Distinctiveness

The need to be different from others and to feel unique in relation to social or group identities is central to Breakwell's ([1986] 2015) theory of distinctiveness. In this investigation, heritage-language-disconnected urban Malaysian Tamil youths were asked how they perceived distinctiveness as Malaysian Tamils despite not speaking the language, a key marker of their ethnicity. The data analysis revealed two contrasting themes.

First, some participants shared their adoption of a more general identity rather than ascribing to the Tamil identity to create distinctiveness, as P11 (aged 27 from Shah Alam) remarked:

I think I'm more comfortable in just being a Malaysian. If anybody asks, I just say I'm a Malaysian. I feel special belonging to a country. Setting myself apart with language, I can't do that. I don't identify myself as a Tamil. As I said, Malaysian is good.

P6 (aged 29 from Pulau Pinang) echoed:

If anyone asks, I tell them I'm an Indian. I don't have to be a Tamil, right? I don't say the word Tamil when I introduce myself anywhere. Then straight away someone will speak to me in the language, and I've to explain why I don't speak it. Normally, when I say an Indian, and I say it in English, people just assume I'm a different “type” of Indian.

These participants preferred being recognised by broad terms such as “Malaysian” (P11) or “Indian” (P6) rather than being solely associated with the Malaysian Tamil identity. They took refuge in superordinate identities, resolving non-belonging to the Malaysian Tamil community and circumventing Tamil language deficiency, while still carving a unique identity. Their lack of linguistic capital—a key marker of the Malaysian Tamil community—made them hesitant to identify distinctly as Malaysian Tamils. They were expected to be proficient in their heritage language and had to “explain why (they didn't) speak (Tamil)” (P6) when questioned. They viewed their ethnic identity as a threat and responded by adopting a broader identity. Adopting a general identity enabled them to be seen as distinct—if not ethnically, then at least nationally or racially.

Second, some participants created distinctiveness through alternative identity markers rather than depending on the linguistic capital, as P5 (aged 26 from Pulau Pinang) emphasised:

Of course I'm different from others. I wear my *pottu*, I love wearing my *jimiki* (a type of earrings), I prefer salwar kameez (a long tunic worn with loose trousers tied at the ankles) to jeans and t-shirt, I'm the secretary of Kolattam Club, I love cooking Indian cuisine and eating it. I am Tamil although I don't speak it.

P17 (aged 23 from Kota Kinabalu) similarly recounted:

Nah, speaking English only doesn't make me someone else. One look at me people will know I'm Tamil. I'm one guy who can't be happy with chicken chop. I have to eat my curry. I wear my *vibhuti* (sacred ash symbolising spiritual significance worn on the forehead) every day. I'm Tamil and everyone knows it.

In contrast to participants who adopted broader identities, these participants expressed their Tamil identity through other means despite language disconnection, such as “wearing (their) *jimiki* (and) ... salwar kameez” (P5). Additionally, preferring “Indian cuisine” (P5) over “chicken chop” (P17) was a Tamil identity. Ritual emblems, like *pottu* (P5) and *vibhuti* (P17), were also part of their ethnic identity markers. The participants negotiated their ethnic identity by excluding the Tamil language from their ethnic identity markers and embracing more concrete, visible markers such as food, clothing, and ritual emblems, thereby creating a distinct identity. Moreover, their community involvement—e.g., as the secretary of Kolattam Club (P5)—demonstrates their shift from personal engagement to stewardship. This highlights their ability to be prominent members of the ethnic group even without the heritage language.

DISCUSSION

Guided by Identity Process Theory, the analysis revealed that participants—Malaysian urban Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language—held polarised views of their ethnic identity. At one end of the spectrum, the lack of heritage language threatened the participants' ethnic identity, making them apathetic towards maintaining ethnic identity continuity. Instead, they sought solace in legal documents that ascribed ethnic identity at birth. They faced social sanctioning that led to low self-esteem and identity withdrawal. They exhibited low self-efficacy by surrendering to their failure to meet community standards, disengaging from their identity, and establishing distinctiveness through broader identities like “Malaysian” or “Indian”, compensating for their perceived lack of “Tamilness”.

At the other end, heritage-language disconnected participants took the initiative to be Tamils without the language. They demonstrated confidence that Tamil language continuity would be sustained by other community members strongly attached to the heritage language and outnumbering those disconnected from it. They exhibited high self-esteem by restructuring their definition of ethnic identity. They embraced cultural rituals, dietary routines, and ethnic adornments, filtering out heritage language as a required marker. They demonstrated similar high self-efficacy traits by exercising autonomy in defining themselves as Malaysian Tamils without language, circumventing community criteria that included heritage language. They forged their distinctiveness as Malaysian Tamils by displacing the heritage language with other tangible markers—food, clothing, and ritual emblems—that placed them incontestably as members of the community.

The findings align with previous studies on language shift and ethnic identity among Malaysian communities. Beqiri's (2025) claim that ethnic identity is altered to varying degrees in the absence of one's heritage language was supported by participants' reports of withdrawal and redefinition

of ethnic identity without the language, alongside the enforcement of cultural practices. The reengineered ethnic identity demonstrated by the participants echoed identity negotiation strategies in other Malaysian communities. These include the Malaysian Sindhi community (David et al. 2020), Malaysian Chinese university students (Al-Saggaf and Su 2024), multiracial Malaysian university students (Ting and Abidin 2023), and English-dominant Malaysian Tamils (Mahalingam 2023). Despite minimal attachment to their heritage language, these groups identified strongly with their ethnic identity.

Meanwhile, participants who faced an identity threat exhibited patterns similar to those reported in a study of Malaysian Chinese (Zheng et al. 2025), which found that a lack of heritage language weakened the younger generation's symbolic tie to their ethnic identity. The participants' identity withdrawal strategy resembles Mutty's (2024) findings documenting urbanised Malaysian Tamil youths' detachment from their ethnic identity due to a lack of heritage language. Similarly, Nalliannan et al. (2021) reported that Malaysian Tamil youths had minimal to zero ethnic identity attachment due to limited heritage language proficiency.

Broader Theoretical Spectrums

Despite similarities with past findings, this study revealed a pattern enabling the interpretation of participants' perceptions through two distinct theoretical lenses. Participants who successfully negotiated their Malaysian Tamil identity without the heritage language demonstrated traits interpretable through the post-ethnic theory (Hollinger 2006). The theory foregrounds an individual's voluntary affiliation with an identity rather than being ascribed to them. It challenges the supremacy of traditional ethnic markers that assign a vital role to heritage language. In this study, participants with a positive affinity for their ethnic identity consistently chose to remain Malaysian Tamils through their adherence to cultural practices, thereby challenging the heritage language's significance as a marker of ethnic identity. P2's question, "Why should I let a language identify me?" attests to this challenge. They also indicated that they would grant their future generations the freedom to choose their ethnic identity, as P1 claimed, "They can be whoever they want". This further reinforces the post-ethnic spectrum in their interpretation of ethnic identity.

In contrast, the experiences of participants who faced identity threat due to the lack of a heritage language, and their coping strategies, can be understood through stigma management (Goffman 1963). This theory outlines the techniques used by individuals with "spoiled" identities, listing strategies such as masking an identity and withdrawing from it to manage their traits as devalued members. Participants in this study experienced social sanctioning—verbal punishments from other members for lacking the Tamil language—and scrutiny of the missing identity marker that disqualified them as members of the Tamil community. These experiences prompted them to disassociate from and withdraw from their ethnic identity to recover their value, as demonstrated by P8's statement, "I just don't reveal I'm a Tamil". They bolstered their worth as individuals within a community by adopting broader identities and deliberately rejecting ethnic aspects, including communicating with other community members and sharing social spaces with Malaysian Tamils. This is evident in P14's claim, "I tend to avoid mingling with my relatives".

Hence, Identity Process Theory—which guided the data analysis—revealed participants' perceptions of their ethnic identity and their coping mechanisms during heritage-language disconnection. The analysis revealed two contrasting groups. One group maintained a positive affiliation with their ethnic identity and negotiated it using other identity markers like cultural practices, food, and clothing. The other group, with negative affiliation, chose to disengage from their ethnic identity. The strategies within the polarised groups can be understood through post-ethnic theory (for the positively affiliated group) and stigma management (for the negatively affiliated group).

Adding two additional theories in this discussion highlights how the findings contribute to broader theoretical debates in ethnic identity. These findings question the significance of heritage language as an identity marker and challenge the restricted view of traditional ethnic identity based solely on heritage language. While stigma management helps understand the actions of people with “spoiled” identities, post-ethnic theory explains fluid and hybrid ethnic identities common in globalised multilingual contexts. Furthermore, both theories, juxtaposed with the findings derived from the Identity Process Theory analysis, contribute to the triangulation of this qualitative study.

CONCLUSION

This investigation used interviews to examine how Malaysian urban Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language perceived their ethnic identity. Twenty participants were interviewed, and the data were analysed using Identity Process Theory (based on its four principles: continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness), revealing polarised views for each core element. Subsequently, the polarised views were explained using post-ethnic theory and stigma management theory.

Participants either relied on their ascribed identity as Malaysian Tamils from birth or depended on other community members’ collective efforts to maintain the identity, rather than addressing it themselves. Stigmatisation due to their lack of heritage language led to low self-esteem and reduced self-efficacy. These members preferred to avoid the Malaysian Tamil identity as a coping strategy. Meanwhile, some participants exhibited high self-esteem correlating with high self-efficacy, motivating them to seek alternative ways to assert their Malaysian Tamil identity, even when they lacked language skills. Finally, some created a distinct identity that diverged from prescribed norms, establishing their uniqueness in the absence of linguistic capital. Others opted for pan-Malaysian identities, removing ethnic identity from their sense of self. Ultimately, this study suggests that ethnic identity is not a static construct to be rigidly adhered to, but a fluid process that derives its meaning from the individuals involved.

Although the results suggest that participants’ perceptions of their ethnic identity—whether positive or negative, in the absence of linguistic capital—mainly influence their identification as Malaysian Tamils, this study highlights the importance of non-linguistic Tamil heritage programmes. Policymakers seeking to promote ethnic vitality in Malaysia should consider such initiatives. Shifting focus from language to other identity markers, such as community programmes and financial support for Tamil digital content creators delivering content in English, could engage Tamil youths disconnected from their heritage language. Policymakers’ and community leaders’ acceptance of redefined ethnic identity could encourage the inclusion of heritage-language disconnected individuals into society. This would reduce the stigma of linguistic capital absence and alter their coping mechanism, shifting from strategic withdrawal to positive actions such as embracing other ethnic identity markers to establish community belonging. Curriculum can be redesigned to shift the focus from traditional Tamil language instruction towards accommodating hybrid identities. Such reforms will reduce students’ fear of embarrassment during lessons due to limited heritage language proficiency and promote flexibility in accepting chosen over prescribed identities.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The use of a homogeneous sample—comprising university students and urban-raised Malaysian Tamil youths—limits the generalisability of the findings. As participants self-reported as heritage-language disconnected, bias may persist despite screening, providing a limited perspective on their ethnic identity perceptions. Therefore, future research could include longitudinal studies with different

participant groups. Comparing youths with the same experiences across different ethnic backgrounds could reveal more definitive shared patterns of ethnic identity perceptions in the absence of a heritage language.

On a final note, this study revealed that ethnic identity is neither an absolute construction bestowed upon an individual at birth nor an element to be developed within rigid ethnic identity policies prescribed by traditional community views. Rather, it is a fluid entity constructed through negotiation. This process necessitates the inclusion of novel criteria—such as circumventing linguistic capital and maximising other ethnic identity markers—to establish one's ethnic identity. Bypassing language as a prerequisite for ethnic identity is consistent with the globalised, modernised world. Acceptance of this shift by policymakers and community stakeholders can grant freedom of identity expression to heritage-language disconnected individuals.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Written consent was obtained from all participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) (reference no: UM. TNC (P & I)/UMREC_4722).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the study was carried out without any financial or commercial ties that might be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX

The semi-structured interview questions used to interview the participants are listed here. These questions are not exhaustive. Participants were prompted with additional questions for more information during the interviews.

1. How do you feel about being a Malaysian Tamil despite not being able to speak Tamil?
2. Have you been uncomfortable in any situation due to your inability to speak Tamil?
3. Do you participate in any activities exclusive to the Tamil community? In what way?
4. Although you don't speak Tamil, do you take part in other Tamil practices (food, celebrations, etc.)?
5. Do you have any plans to learn the Tamil language in future, or ensure your children learn the language?