

Malaysian English: A Mechanism for Social Connectedness among Malaysian Third Culture Kids

Nur Fatima Wahida Mohd Nasir

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Perak, Kampus Seri Iskandar, 32610 Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

*corresponding author: nurfa269@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

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In the sociolinguistic study of Third Culture Kids (TCKs), social connectedness is frequently cited as one of the primary goals and challenges upon adaptation to new environments. However, literature in the field shows that there is a lack of research focusing specifically on Malaysian Third Culture Kids (MTCKs), especially in regards to language. To address this gap, the current study aimed at exploring respondents' perspectives of the Malaysian English (ME) mesolectal variety and gain insights on the role of ME as a mechanism for them to achieve a sense of social connectedness with the Malaysian speech community. Based on a semi-structured interview method among 10 respondents in their youth, results of the study revealed that not only MTCKs view ME as an extremely significant mechanism for social connectedness, but it is also an important marker for social identity, suggesting the intricate association between language varieties and social connectedness. As ME clearly presents to be a living and powerful non-native English variety that enables unique individuals like MTCKs to adapt better, it is recommended that future research delve deeper in exploring MTCKs' linguistic abilities of ME through the lens of applied linguistics, cognitive linguistics and corpus linguistics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, advances in technology and transportation have led to a new world of global connections. With increasing offers of international trade and affairs, there is also an increasing need for some families to transition to other countries, exposing them to learn new cultures and languages. When the children of these expatriate families spend substantial parts of their life away from their parent's native language and culture, they are called as Third Culture Kids (TCKs) (Melles & Schwartz, 2013). TCKs therefore, are "individuals who are or were as children, raised in a culture other than their parents' or the culture of their nationality, and living in different environments for a significantly large part of their child development years" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009: 13). Findings from various research reveals that the process of growing up within multiple environments often affects TCKs' developmental growth in terms of personal identity, cultural values, questions of belonging, dealings of grief upon change, characteristics, language practices, mental state, emotional state, self-esteem, as well as their relationships and social connectedness within a community (Cottrell & Useem, 1994; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; 2009; Hoersting, 2010; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Moore & Barker, 2011; Lyttle, Barker & Cornwell, 2011; Adams, 2014; Lily, 2014; Selmer & Lauring, 2014; Hisano, 2015; Long, 2016; Jungmin, 2019; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023; Ra, Ko, Cha, & Kim, 2024).

According to Straffon (2003) current literature shows that not much linguistic research on TCKs has been done, especially among Asian TCKs as past studies in the area lean more towards American and Caucasian American TCKs. Studies on Asian TCKs include several from Japan (Pang, 2000; Podolsky, 2004; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Fry 2009; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001) and from Long (2016) who focused on Chinese TCKs returnees and their experiences in adapting within their native community. In Long's research, participants' comments included problems with linguistic competence as one of the main reasons for emotional distress. For example, one of them expressed feelings of frustration whenever he was reminded of his true local heritage and language in order to be "more Chinese" (Long, 2016: 68). Another participant also admitted that there were certain terminologies or local slangs that she was not familiar with and that it was something she "truly felt disappointed about" as her lack of lexical competence of the local Chinese variety caused her to feel more distant from her community (Long, 2016: 69). These findings clearly show that language function more than just a medium of communication, but a medium for social connectedness as well, especially for TCKs who often experience cultural homelessness, which is described as feelings of exclusion and not being belonged to a racial, ethnic or specific cultural group.

Holmes and O'Neill (2012), states that difficulties in adapting to TCKs' own home communities is also due to their insufficient knowledge and incompetence of local languages and varieties. Moore and Barker (2011) states that TCKs who come from Asian countries face far more complex experiences and greater challenges, including aspects of language use when coming back to their home countries. This is because Asians put great value upon conformity towards cultural norms and local language trends, causing Asian TCKs to constantly feel left out, excluded, and disconnected from social groups of the local community. Apart from the need to learn local languages, Asian TCKs must also learn underlying meanings of certain phrases or words that are often used within the colloquial varieties (Long, 2016). On this basis, the study forms the theory that Malaysian TCKs (MTCKs) also face similar situations since the country is known for its diverse cultural beliefs, language practices, and traditions rooted into their social matrix for generations (Azura & Normi, 2014).

However, these assumptions can only be clear with more studies focusing on MTCKs and investigations on their sense of social connectedness through different mediums, such as Malaysian English (ME). Although there are various other local languages and varieties practiced by the Malaysian speech community, profound literatures in the past have emphasized the uniqueness of ME which distinguishes it from other New Englishes and that it is also the most frequently used colloquial language practiced among Malaysian speakers, marking it as a symbol of social identity (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Mavić & Abram, 2013). The current study therefore, aimed at exploring MTCKs' perspectives of the Malaysian English (ME) mesolectal variety and gain insights on the role of ME as a mechanism that could help them to achieve a sense of social connectedness within the Malaysian speech community.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Problems of adaptation in new environments are commonly identified among TCKs all over the world. Past studies however, have stressed the intensity of TCK's adjustment in adapting and achieving social connectedness with their own native countries upon returning home (Hoersting, 2010; Moore & Barker, 2012; Adams, 2014; Melles & Schwartz, 2013; Long, 2016; Jungmin, 2019; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023; Ra et. al., 2024). This is due to the lack of exposure and knowledge of their own home nations' cultures and language practices (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). In addition, when TCKs gain more proficiency in the English language due to their enrolment in English-based schools, they often lose fluency and depth of knowledge in their own native language and varieties (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Thus, local people would often view them as foreigners, especially when English is a second or third language in that country (Aitken, 2008). According to Long (2016) these are the reasons that have caused many Asian TCKs to experience difficulties in adaptation and establishment with their own local communities.

Aitken (2008) explains that because of this complicated situation, many TCKs feel they adapt better when moving to other foreign countries as compared to returning to their own home countries. According to a study by Washington and Gadikar (2013), some TCKs are not able to accept and readjust to their own home countries even as they grow older because of the cultural expectations and difficulties in achieving social connectedness. This situation of rootlessness has often led TCKs to isolate even further from their local communities and some even decide to move away and settle in other countries where they feel more accepted (Moore & Barker, 2011). Based on these logical grounds, the study stipulates that issues of social connectedness also occur among MTCKs and can be a factor that increases the number of Malaysian emigrations, which is perceived as an enormous loss to the government of Malaysia. Hence, in order to obtain a clearer picture of the studied phenomena, extensive research on MTCKs and their ability to socially connect with the Malaysian speech community must be carried out.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Third Culture Kids and Social Connectedness

According to Dashwood and Son (2011), connectedness includes both formal and informal relationships that affect individual and societal levels. Social connectedness therefore, describes the level of engagement and trust an individual has with others in their community and the role they take on, in terms of friendship and participation in various societal activities. The term can also be defined as the degree to which an individual or a group of people are socially close, interrelated, or share common resources (Foster, Horwitz, Thomas, Opperman, Gipson,

Burnside, Stone & King, 2017). This is why, people who usually feel socially connected tend to provide positive contributions towards building communities and society which helps to create social capital as networks that promote effective social functions (Dashwood & Son, 2011). The significance of social connectedness has been proven in many studies in the field including one by Bell-Villada, Sichel, Eidse and Orr (2011) who stated that social belonging, recognition, and connection with people are three most vital needs for the developmental processes of every human being.

Maslow's (1943) theory of human needs includes love and belongingness as the third most vital state. Attachment theory, as explained by Bowlby (1979) emphasizes the necessity for social connectedness, especially at early ages because of the imperativeness in understanding human development. Guerra and Bradshaw (2008), explains the significance of social connectedness in relation to the well-being and health of an individual as their study showed how youth dissatisfaction with social support and connection associated with depression, anxiety, stress, and poor sleep. Other studies have also found inflammation, accelerated aging, cardiovascular health risk, suicide, and mortality as some of the effects of poor social connectedness (Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2010; Dashwood & Son, 2011).

Social connectedness is also closely related to adaptive behavioural patterns, resilience, self-esteem, social competence and other positive psychological behaviours (Youngblade, Theokas, Schulenberg, Curry, Huang, & Novak, 2007). It is understood as a core human need and is essential to nearly every aspect of health, well-being and development, whether it is within the interpersonal level, or a larger community level (Berkman, Kawachi, & Glymour, 2014). This is why in relation to the growth of an individual, social connectedness is often proposed as a primary determinant for youth adjustment (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). However, TCKs who are forced to experience cultural adjustments during their youth usually causes them to lose connections and attachments with people of certain communities, especially with their own home communities (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Since social connectedness within a community level is shown to have profound benefits for both individuals and society as a whole, the issue is regarded as a critical concern for TCKs.

In the study of TCKs, social connectedness is frequently cited as the core challenge upon adaptation to new environments because of their constant mobile and transcultural upbringing. For instance, Post's (2017) study explores the impact of a ten-week manualized psychoeducational and process-oriented group therapy program on the psychological well-being and adjustment of college-aged TCKs. Participants included 29 emerging TCK adults in which 15 participated in the program while the remaining 14 were included in the no-treatment control group. The results of the study revealed that no statistical significance was found between the two groups and that the program was unsuccessful as participants' levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were still found to be high. However, deeper insights through participants' narrative responses found social connectedness and relational support as some of their main drive to reduce levels of depression, anxiety, and stress upon adaptation in new environments.

Post's (2017) study clearly shows the significance of social connectedness for the well-being of an individual, especially for TCKs in their youth in order for them to quickly adapt within their community. In a study by Hoersting (2010), the researcher examined a number of 475 TCKs who spent at least two years before the age of 18 in a host country on their cross-cultural experiences as a child. Using measures of the Cultural Homelessness Criteria and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, results confirmed that cultural homelessness had correlations to scores on

self-esteem where higher affirmation, belonging, and commitment to any cross-cultural identity showed higher rates of self-esteem but lower cultural homelessness. He concludes that due to the frequent transitional processes, TCKs usually find themselves lost in the sense of “home” which comes with the loss of sense of belonging, commitment and attachment to a culture. According to Pollock and Van Reken (2009), this condition is referred as “cultural homelessness” or “culturally rootless”. As a result of this psychological state, studies have found that TCKs often lose connections with people of certain communities, especially with their own home communities.

Similar results are also found in a study by Lijadi (2015). The study focuses on exploring how TCKs construct meaning of their high mobility lifestyle and how their sense of place influenced their identity construction. Using qualitative inquiries, the study used a semi-structured interview approach that employed 27 TCKs aged 7 to 17 years old as well as an asynchronous Facebook online focus group with 33 adult TCKs aged 19 and above. Findings indicated that to TCKs, ‘home’ referred to family, familiar traditions and rituals. However, in order for a new place to feel like ‘home’, they would often need to expand their social network and learn to deal with losses from the previous ‘home’. In addition, the process greatly affected their identity construction in the sense of belonging, sense of community, sense of stability, sense of direction, and sense of connectedness. Clearly, research on TCKs and their sense of belonging have long been studied in the field. However, as mentioned above most of these studies relate social connectedness with psychological and emotional aspects and little research on the perspective of language.

3.2 Malaysian English (ME)

According to Platt, Weber, and Ho (1984), Malaysian English (ME) is defined as a continuum that ranges from the basilect to the highest acrolect variety. Nair (2017) explains that although the variety is still very close to the parent language, which is Bahasa Malaysia (BM), it also has many new characteristics that make it distinct from other New Englishes as ME includes components of British English (BrE), American English (AmE), Malay, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and other languages as well (Yamaguchi & Deterding, 2016). By 1957, because the variety was largely and commonly used by the Malaysian speech community, ME reached the phase of nativisation and achieved sociolinguistic status and domains of usage in Malaysia (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012).

In the literature of ME, studies have shown that the variety differentiates from other New Englishes through its linguistic features, including differences in its grammar, pronunciation, and lexical usage (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Pillai, 2013; Nair, 2017; Fatima, 2021). According to Thirusanku and Melor (2012), lexical features of ME are especially seen through the process of lexical borrowings where indigenous languages in the country are slowly being incorporated. For example, lexical borrowings such as ‘*azan*’, ‘*jaga*’, ‘*ang-pao*’ and ‘*dhoti*’ are all native words but are also recognized as English words in Malaysian Standard English (Hajar, 2014). ME lexis is also found to have gone through processes of semantic shift where new meanings are creatively developed and expanded over time such as ‘*potong stim*’, ‘*tapau*’, ‘*tackle*’, and ‘*pattern*’ (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Fatima, 2021).

Over time, the variety has been known as a popular and preferable vernacular language for various functions of communication in Malaysia (Mavić & Abram, 2013). In a comprehensive investigation that looks into various issues surrounding the sociolinguistics of English in Singapore, Lim, Pakir, and Wee (2010) explains that language and English varieties typically

change in order to adapt to a community's social cultural environment. Literature therefore, shows that in many domains, New Englishes have developed to become extremely significant as it is reflected through extended functions including for social, educational, administrative, and literary practices (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012). However, many scholars have also viewed this phenomenon as unacceptable and derogating, specifically for native languages. According to some linguists, the process is even regarded as heretical because of its deviations upon language change (Nair, 2017).

Until today scholars debate whether language change causes the corruption and degradation in the quality of a language. For example, Donald Mackinnon, a theologian who believes in the theory of prescriptivism, criticizes that for any language, there should be a correct way of saying things which must be reinforced (Bowyer, 2019). Another previous scholar who strongly debated on the rise of New Englishes is theorist Jean Aitcheson (1991), stating it as 'an infectious disease'. As with other New English varieties, ME has also developed through processes of language change and is continuously debated by scholars. Literature shows that matters arising the growth of ME is mainly due to the fear of which the variety could harm Standard English language developments and the decline in the usage of Bahasa Malaysia (Lin, Choo, Kasuma, & Ganapathy, 2018).

In a study conducted by Lin et al., (2018), a 26-item questionnaire was developed to obtain data of 253 Malaysian undergraduates from a public university in Malaysia on their perceptions and attitudes of the ME variety. Their findings revealed that although participants indicated that they are frequent users of the ME variety and valued their local-accented English and the functionality of ME, many of them believe that it is more vital to achieve native-like English for the attainment of better educational and economic prospects since ME is only limited for casual communications. A study by Lee and Gir (2015) on the impact of English towards identity construction in Malaysia found that there was resentment in certain localised contexts among the Malays towards English as their participants perceived the use of English as an attempt to show off and as a betrayal of the Malay cultural identity. The issues provided here therefore, further invite questions on the purpose and significance of ME in Malaysia.

4. METHODOLOGY

The target population of the study involved a distinctive group of individuals known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs) from Malaysia who are currently in their youth as this is the age group where most TCKs encounter problems of social connectedness. In Malaysia, youth was originally defined as individuals aged between 15 to 40 years old. However, an amendment was made to the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act, 2019 in reducing the generation gap which declared that youth in Malaysia is now reduced to those within the age of 18 to 35 years old (Razak, Abidin, Yusof, Sakarji, & Nor, 2014; Zaremohzzabieh, Samah, Samah, & Shaffril, 2019).

The study included a number of 10 respondents within the age of 18 to 35 years old who had spent a minimum length of one year time or more, living in other foreign countries. In order to meet the inclusion criteria of a TCK, a snowball sampling technique was applied as it allowed recommendations from people who could help identify potential participants with the characteristics of a TCK. Demographic profiles of the respondents in the study showed that 8 of them were females and only 2 were males. In terms of ethnicity, 9 of the respondents were Malays and 1 had a Multiracial background. Interestingly, most of the respondents came from

two main categories of the TCK variety which is the education sector and the ambassadorial sector with only 1 individual coming from the Military sector. In addition, all ten of them claimed that English was their first language due to their enrolment in international schools as children and that Bahasa Malaysia was either their second or third language acquisition.

In terms of sample size, past studies have shown similar ranges from 5 to 15 respondents for qualitative research methods as it is common to find difficulties in identifying and reaching out to these unique group of people (Dewaele & Oudenhoven, 2009; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Adams, 2014; Lijadi, 2015; Long, 2016; Post, 2017; Jungmin, 2019; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023; Ra et al., 2024). Data collection in the study applied a semi-structured interview method to ensure that respondents would feel comfortable and avoid feelings of anxiety when sharing about their experiences as studies of TCKs have highlighted how some may feel embarrassed about growing up indifferently.

Results and findings were analysed using a thematic approach which was developed and grounded based on the common patterns of respondents' answers through the interview sessions. According to Braun and Clark (2006), thematic analysis is known to be a good method of research that allow researchers to explore people's views, opinions, experiences, or values from a set of qualitative data. These developed codes were determined based on a bottom-up approach where data was closely examined to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that appeared repeatedly in the Nvivo 14 software.

5. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

5.1 A Pathway to Fit In

When TCKs return to their home countries, it is common that they would experience another level of difficulty compared to adapting and adjusting to other foreign countries. According to many previous studies, this is mainly due to their desire to try and fit in with their own kind (Hoersting, 2010; Moore & Barker, 2012; Adams, 2014; Melles & Schwartz, 2013; Long, 2016). Participants in this study also showed similar reactions and shared their intense nuances of experiences and challenges upon returning to Malaysia mostly because they appeared to be different in terms of speech. Nevertheless, ME did help them in some way to abate this problem during their adaptation process and was perceived as a golden pathway for them to achieve social connectedness. For example, in the extract below, Participant 1 discussed how hard it was for her to fit in with the Malaysia community during her first few years of returning because of her lack of proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia. However, learning the colloquial language helped her to slowly grasp the country's native language while simultaneously achieving communicative goals with the local community.

P1: I think from my experience it definitely gets you the upper hand. Not really upper hand in anything, but just, your point to get through for like me, not being able to speak Malay at all when I first came back, like it was a struggle to get my thoughts and opinions through, like with them understanding properly. And then I started learning a little bit of Malay and 'rojak' (ME), like that was my English and I felt like, at least they got what I wanted them to get, ha 'macam tulah' (like that).

Participant 1's extract identifies the imperativeness of ME in order to resolve problems of communication among MTCKs as well as what she says "a point to get through" the struggling

processes of social and cultural adaptation. Participant 2 below, also discusses ME as a helpful mechanism to achieve the ultimate goal of social connectedness with the Malaysian speech community during her process of adaptation. This can especially be seen in her last sentence where she said that after learning the use of ME words and phrases, it helped her to create a better bond with her local Malay friends. Participant 2's explanation definitely reflects the very concept of social connectedness because as mentioned before, the term is described as the level of engagement and trust an individual has with others in their community including friendships and participation in various societal activities (Dashwood & Son, 2011).

P2: Alright, I get it. Um...I guess I feel, um...by using ME words, it helped me adapt more with my Malay friends. Um...I don't have much of Chinese or Indian friends, but if we're talking about Malay friends, because I noticed they especially use ME words. Um...I think it helped me adapt more with them because it allowed me to understand them, how they were expressing themselves by using these ME words. So, because some of my friends, commonly use these words, so I learnt to understand them explaining different situations and when I do understand them, it, um...I guess it helped me like, create a better bond with them, I guess.

In contrast to Participant 2's statement who perceives ME as a variety that is typically used by the Malay community, Participant 4 describes below her observation of ME as a variety that is also commonly used among the elderly Chinese communities in Malaysia. Based on her explanation, it appears that the process of social and cultural adaptation among MTCKs not only refers to the importance of fitting in with her own racial community but with other races in Malaysia as well. Her perception is clearly in line with the results of previous research such as from Thirusanku and Melor (2012) who stated that ME is found to be a crucial element of unity among the country's multi-racial citizens. The analysis here basically illustrates that MTCKs too, may achieve a sense of unity and connectedness with the multi-racial communities in Malaysia through the use of ME as it helps them to blend in or in other words, adapt better socially and culturally. MTCKs' ability to switch languages or style of relating is definitely in par with Pollock and Van Reken's (2009) view of TCKs who are often pictured as 'chameleons' because of their ability in blending effectively with different communities.

P4: Erm, honestly yes, because even aunties and uncles, because I used to study at USM, and then sometimes I would go out from my college to the 'pasar ke' (market), 'pergi mana-mana just to sembang' (go anywhere out just to have a chat), 'kadang sembang dengan uncle, aunties kat situ' (sometimes I have a chat with the uncles and aunties there). So, if you don't know Malaysian English, it's going to be hard for you to communicate. 'Sebab dia macam' (because it's like), 'diorang pun Chinese and cara diorang cakap pun macam not full English' (they're Chinese and they also don't talk full English). So, if you don't know Malaysian English, you're going to have a hard time. So, I think it's really important.

Across the data set, all ten participants acknowledged the fact that their lack of exposure and knowledge of Bahasa Malaysia was one of the main reasons which made it difficult for them to adapt and find connection with the community. However, it is apparent from the extract above that insufficient knowledge of localised English in Malaysia may also be another crucial factor that can cause MTCKs to feel socially disconnected. Another prominent example can be seen in the extract below where Participant 9 explained how she had to learn to speak English

the Malaysian way in order to avoid from appearing different to her Chinese school mates and so that it may enable her to blend better with them. Overall, these findings revealed that ME can be regarded as a significant mechanism for social adaptation among MTCKs so that they are able to achieve a sense of social connectedness.

P9: So, I suddenly found myself on the debate team because I'm a Malay, and they were like, let us go into the debate team! But basically because...apparently, I couldn't speak and then I made myself to learn to sound like one of them. I learned lah how to talk.

5.2 A Way to Gain Social Acceptance

In the study, ME was found as a helpful mechanism that could engage feelings of social acceptance within a community. It was very clear from the participants' responses that after the process of blending in, social acceptance was an extremely important element for them to move on and survive. For example, in the extract from Participant 2, she described that although her friends acknowledged her different upbringing and way of thinking, they eventually were able to accept her because of her efforts to learn the ME variety, which enabled them to understand more about her and her personality. Participant 2 added that understanding the right choice of ME words to be used with her Malay friends also helped her to bond better with them and allowed her to feel a sense of social connectedness within her social group and the community as a whole. From here, it can be understood that although social acceptance focuses more on the intimate or relational level of social connectedness, it indirectly plays a significant role for the collective level as well.

P2: OH, yes, I definitely feel that when you're competent in using ME words, you will feel more connected and belonged to the community especially your friends. Like, I have a group of friends that embrace who I am because I'm definitely different from them. But because I was able to adapt in the group, they were able to accept me as a friend even though I was completely different because they completely speak in Bahasa Utara (Northern language), and yet because I was able to adapt in the group and speak Utara (Northern) then I used these ME words with them, they were able to understand certain things about me...

P2...So, I think um...by me, myself understanding the choice of words they use when interacting with other people and with me, it allowed me to like, there's no miscommunication. When there's no miscommunication and then I don't feel annoyed when they mistakenly use these English words, so when we embrace each other, we become better friends and we bond with each other and feel connected and belonged. Because I feel more connected and belonged with Malay people especially, and with the Malay community.

In many studies of TCKs, the fear of not being accepted by other individuals or groups within a community is very normal, especially as they reach their youth because it is during this time that the cognitive of human understandings and connection is most developed (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). The evidence of this concern can also be seen from other participants shown from the excerpts below such as from Participant 3 and Participant 6 who expressed how much they wanted to be accepted and liked by other people in their local community, because of the desire to have friends. In fact, according to Participant 9's experience, the constant fear of

rejection had caused her to change the way she spoke because of her thick Liverpool accent which is a very uncommon accent to hear in the Malaysian setting. Due to this, Participant 9 knew very well that she had to somehow tone down her English accent to sound more like the local ME accent in order for others to approach her easily and thus, gain social acceptance. These perceptions reflect how significant ME can be for different and unique groups of people like TCKs.

P3: It can create a better social bubble for you. People will approach you more, more easily.

P6: Yes, it depends like if you feel that, you feel left out with the kids, with the cool kids, right? So, you try to learn it.

P9: Yeah, if I don't change the way I speak, I might not have friends.

5.3 To Feel a Sense of Belonginess

Analysis reveals that after the process of adjusting and gaining social acceptance from close friends, the next challenge would often include a greater fulfilment which is to gain and feel a sense of belonging within the larger community as a way to achieve social connectedness while simultaneously learning about themselves and their identity. For TCKs, personal identity has been reported as one of the most crucial aspects that usually affects their psychological health and developmental growth because of the confusion of cultural values and cultural identities in which they may belong to (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Lyttle et al., 2011; Selmer & Luring, 2014). Although it is normal for TCKs to proudly portray their multiple cultural identity, participants in this study clearly showed how much it meant for them to be part of the Malaysian identity. Since ME has always been known for its uniqueness that symbolizes the cultural identity of Malaysians, learning the variety really helped participants to finally fulfil feelings of belonging within the community. For example, Participant 2 provided her description on the importance of knowing and using ME words in order to avoid feelings of loneliness and isolation.

P2: Um...it's important for someone, if they don't want to use it is fine, but they actually need to know the words, so that, you know you can understand the people. And when you can understand people, they can understand you and who you are also and therefore you don't feel isolated, you don't feel lonely, especially when a TCK comes back to Malaysia. When you don't find a connection with the Malaysian community, you will feel like you don't belong, and it makes you like, go to a dark place, and lonely. So, I think it's important to at least understand these words.

Below, Participant 4 demonstrates the significance of ME in terms of the shared identity among Malaysians. It seems that even for Malaysians who were brought up in different cultures as a child, they agree and accept the very notion that a true Malaysian must have the knowledge and competence of the ME mesolectal variety. This description of 'shared identity' was also captured in Participant 5's extract below. Her repetition of the possessive pronoun 'our' somehow highlights her position and attachment with the community, which indirectly reflects her feelings of social belonging. Participant 5 also talked about the uniqueness of ME and its lexical items which represents the identity of Malaysians. This concept of a shared identity is the primary factor that instils feelings of togetherness, belongingness and connection within a

community because it fulfils one of the most important human needs which is to feel loved and belonged (Maslow, 1943).

P4: If you don't know Malaysian English, you're basically not Malaysian enough la...

P5: It is also a part of our identity and culture of our society because you can never find the words in other part of the world, right? You can only find these words being used in Malaysia itself. So, it's very unique. It reflects our identity as Malaysians. So, if you are competent with the words or expression, you'll be able to, you know, speak and understand the local language and, and you feel more connected, yeah.

It is evident from Participant 5's perspective that ME plays a significant role when it comes to fulfilling the human basic need of social belongingness. This is also agreed by few other participants in the study such as Participant 8, Participant 9 and Participant 10. Interestingly, analysis of the study found that because the need for social belongingness and connection with a community is so important, most of the participants had to put aside their first impressions of ME as irritating and annoying in order to be able to assimilate into the Malaysian identity. For example, Participant 9's extract vividly captures the notion of ME defining MTCKs' perceptions. As a MTCK whose first language was the native British English, she truthfully stated that although ME is not something she is totally proud of, she still acknowledged that it was part of her identity as a Malaysian citizen and that she does practice using the lexical items despite the confusion and annoyance of the variety having different semantics and context from the native English language.

P8: OH, yeah, absolutely. It's a cultural thing, it's a community thing to connect with people, yeah, for sure.

P9: Yes, without a doubt because it's part of our identity as Malaysians... Em, 'nak kata' (to say that I'm) proud, not really. But I feel like it's part of my identity la...

P10: Yeah, yeah. So, maybe this relates to what you explained to me just now. Maybe it's just in our personality that we want to fit in. So, I...I'm a person who really wants to fit in and really want to understand what the people are saying, and I want to be a part of everyone...want to be part of the community.

All of the participants' reference to the importance of becoming one with the Malaysian identity, clearly shows the intensity for MTCKs to achieve social belongingness as stated by many existing research studies of TCKs. For example, a study by Hervey (2009) found that TCKs' frequent patterns of transitions during childhood and the mix of influences from various cultures during their developmental growth often causes them to become restless and rootless. Hoersting (2010) further explains that because of this, TCKs usually find themselves lost in the sense of belonging, commitment and attachment to a specified culture. Thus, when a TCK finally returns back to their parents' passport country, it is crucial for them to do all they can in order to blend effectively into the community as they realize that it is the only way for them to survive in the long-term. As shown in the extract above, Participant 10 also expressed her personal concern in fitting in with the local community. This was not just because she wanted to be part of it, but so that she would be able to understand what others were articulating as well.

5.4 A Coping Mechanism Against Intimidation

Overall, findings of the study seem to suggest that for many MTCKs in their youth, being able to fit in, be accepted and achieve a sense of belonging within the Malaysian community comes from their instinctive intuition as a human being to survive and move on with life when they come back to their homeland. These findings imitate similar patterns of responses from many other studies of TCKs as well. As stated by Pollock and Ven Reken (2009), the ability to fit in and accomplish a sense of belonging is not only important for TCKs' general well-being and development, but it is also perceived as a determinant instinctive tool for survival. As a result, some TCKs try to find ways to protect themselves from being rejected and develop coping mechanisms against intimidations. In this study, evidence that showed ME as one of the significant coping mechanisms against intimidations can be seen from the excerpts of several participants such as Participant 1.

P1: Yeah, I was a really dark kid. I was really tense. Apparently, that messes up with the brain. Like I guess, at 10, people aren't allowed to speak English, I guess. They're obviously calling me a fake Malay because I obviously look Malay, I just couldn't speak it. So, I got bullied a lot but, bullying is another thing, so I guess being able to speak Malaysian English gets you out of bullying. So, that's an upper hand.

Participant 7 and Participant 8's extract below also highlights the significance of ME as a coping mechanism against intimidation. For example, Participant 7 demonstrates that because of her lack of competency in ME, her early experiences on the use of the variety created problems of miscommunication with other people. Due to this, she explains that in order to avoid causing more problems, talking less was the best option. This, further highlights MTCKs' concern of how others perceive them, making them more distress, intimidated and belittled because of their lack of competency in ME. According to Participant 8's experience, her lack of lexical competence in ME also resulted in her becoming a target for criticism. However, after becoming more familiar with the variety, these negative feelings slowly decreased, proving the vital role of ME in helping MTCKs overcome problems of social disconnection.

P7: OK, at first since I didn't understand Malaysian English, it became...it came out wrong either negative or positive, so maybe, I became very, very careful and tried not to talk too much. But as I understand it, it actually became a positive way to use words, or, like it's actually a fine way to play with words that only Malaysians understand.

P8: Yeah, because then people call you out of it. I mean, although now like...with more ME knowledge, I'm a bit OK now.

Participant 9's extract below shows that she identifies ME more of a shared cultural value rather than just a colloquial language. It seems that because she views cultural assimilation as an important concept for adaptation purposes, the practice of using ME with other speakers of the Malaysian community is regarded extremely important to her. From the analysis, it is evident that her perception is derived from the fear of appearing to be unlike. Thus, appearing different from others became the reason for rejection, which then led her to become an outcast. The following extract from Participant 10 also illustrates how critical it can be for MTCKs who lack competency in ME to the point of them being victims of bullying, similarly to Participant 1's

experience. Nevertheless, with the practical use of ME, it is understood as a helpful mechanism that enables MTCKs to blend in easier with the Malaysian community and make them appear less odd. This will therefore, help them to avoid any negative experiences of intimidation.

P9: You do have to assimilate with the culture as well, because I think Malaysian English is a cultural thingy, not just a language thing. Yeah, because if you, if everyone is speaking in Manglish right, and I'm the only one speaking in proper Queens English, I would not fit in. I will be you know, yeah, outcasted immediately, right.

P10: Yeah, because at first, I didn't know how to use 'saya' (me), 'awak' (you), 'kita' (us). So, yeah, it was more a negative experience. So, because of that I feel like I got bullied. It wasn't like a very strong case of bullying, but it was more like, 'kene pulau' (being ignored/isolated) like that. That was before I knew how to use ME.

6. CONCLUSION

The core human need of social connectedness has proved to be a primary concern for MTCKs due to their diverse, transcultural upbringing particularly among the youth generation because of the strong relation to growth and human development. It can be understood that MTCKs also have similar nuances of experiences to other TCKs and require similar social needs which all comes down to what they desperately want the most – that is to have and belong to a socially shared identity. It seems that because of their corresponding situation of cultural homelessness, the desire to share a mutual, social and cultural identity with a community is even greater as compared to those who grow up in one cultural setting. The concept of a shared identity wraps up the overall theoretical underpinnings of this study because according to the founder of human's hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943), a shared identity is the primary factor that instills feelings of togetherness, belongingness, and social connectedness within a community.

The results found here are definitely in parr with other previous studies that have highlighted TCKs' desperate need to adapt, feel accepted, feel belonged and feel connected with a community, especially with their own home communities such as Pollock and Van Reken (2009), Hoersting (2010), Moore and Barker (2012), Adams (2014), Melles and Schwartz (2013) and Long (2016). Moreover, based on the establishment of four main themes in the study's data analysis which are; a pathway to fit-in, a way to gain social-acceptance, to feel a sense of belonging, and a coping mechanism against intimidation, the study reflects how ME plays an extremely important role for MTCKs to achieve this goal.

In the perspective of language shift and New English varieties, data of the study is seen parallel with many other research studies such as Anchimbe (2009), Thirusanku and Melor (2012) and Nair (2017) who view New English varieties such as ME as substantially and culturally relevant to its speakers not only because it is used as a medium of communication but more importantly, it is as a way for Malaysians to construct identities and form unity. Buchstaller (2008) explains that the phenomenon of language change in Malaysia or any other country is mainly due to the existence and effects of globalization as the increase of localization is parallel with the increase of global developments. This is agreed by Hajar (2014) who perceives ME as undergoing through a similar process described by Buchstaller. They explained that in Malaysia, while Standard British English is still being emphasized, signs of increased localization through

various studies show that the variety is developing even greater than before because of globalization.

Coulmas (2018), describes the phenomenon as natural and normal because of the inclination of language towards change due to the advancement of technologies, products, and experiences a society is exposed to. Furthermore, Kirkpatrick (2012) explains that although the goal of English language use amongst Asian countries was to primarily achieve the native-like competency, the rise of English varieties in Asia has led to the belief that multilinguals do not have to necessarily sound and talk like native speakers. Instead, while users remain appreciative towards the importance of native English, the process of assimilation or exact imitation of the language is found to be unnecessary. To sum up, the study once again emphasizes that despite debates on the negative effects of New Englishes to societies around the world, ME is viewed as a living and powerful non-native English variety that functions more than just a medium of communication, but a mechanism for social connectedness. The variety serves as a significant mechanism especially for unique groups of people such as the MTCKs, who often strive to find a sense of shared identity within a community in order to feel socially connected.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author, NFWMN confirms sole responsibility for the content of this research paper.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nur Fatima Wahida Mohd Nasir is a lecturer in the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perak Branch, Malaysia. She completed her degree in Applied Linguistics (English for Professional Communication) in 2012 and obtained her Masters Degree in TESL in 2014, both from UiTM Shah Alam. Her areas of research interests include distance learning, semantics, lexis, lexical competence, Third Culture Kids, New Englishes, and Malaysian English.