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Mixed Marriages and the Issue of Ethnic Identity in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

Mixed marriages are a normalized feature of Sabah's plural society, which has been shaped by mobility and interethnic interaction. Against this backdrop, this study examines how mixed marriages influence the construction of ethnic identity in Sabah, particularly whether identity is experienced as fluid and relational or stabilized through institutional categorization. A quantitative survey was conducted with 532 respondents across Sabah. Using descriptive statistical analysis, the results reveal that 51.3% of respondents reported mixed-marriage ancestry, with unions occurring not only across ethnic groups but also across religious and transnational boundaries. While the majority of respondents identified with a single ethnic label and expressed acceptance of their assigned identity, there were also those who indicated ambivalence, including a desire to change their ethnic designation or feelings of discomfort toward it. These responses were more prevalent among individuals from mixed backgrounds, suggesting subtle tensions between lived relational belonging and formal ethnic classification. Overall, the study demonstrates that mixed marriage in Sabah has resulted in an interwoven social fabric in which ethnic identity is negotiated individually and structured through institutional categories. The results contribute to broader debates on identity formation in plural societies where the there is a coexistence of plurality in family histories and singularity in self-identification.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Relations, Mixed Marriage, Sabah.

Introduction

Mixed marriages in Sabah (approximate GPS coordinates 5.4204° N, 116.7968° E), Malaysia are a sociocultural phenomenon that cuts across various boundaries, such as ethnic, language and even religious lines. This has been a longstanding feature of Sabah's and even Malaysia's plural society, where sociological diversity intersects with everyday life. As mixed marriages may bring together families with disparate backgrounds, the reconfiguration of identity becomes necessary. This affects not only the ethnic label used, but it may also determine the languages and even the cultural customs practiced. In the Malaysian setting, it may further determine the religion practiced by the family and subsequently, the religion of the offspring or children. These dynamics prompted by mixed marriages illuminate a broader characteristic of identity formation in Sabah where it should not be conceived as something that is static or stable, but as something that is continually produced through negotiation and socialization with the broader community, as well as authoritative structures (1). Just as families must recalibrate relationships when religious affiliation changes, communities across Sabah have historically renegotiated ethnic boundaries in response to political, institutional and social pressures. Scholarship on Sabah's indigenous communities demonstrates that ethnic identities are shaped through consolidation efforts, symbolic contestation and strategic mobilisation (2, 3). This has resulted in the emergence of collective labels that may prompt communities to debate inclusion and even representation.

What is of note in the context of Sabah is how religion and ethnicity are often intertwined. Religious conversion may carry implications not only for spiritual affiliation but also for ethnic identification and communal belonging. This overlap reinforces the idea that identity operates simultaneously at intimate and institutional levels. At the micro level, mixed marriages reveal how individuals and families negotiate belonging

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across boundaries. At the macro level, ethnic identities are similarly negotiated within political arenas, cultural associations and public discourse. At this juncture, it is critical to consider the notion of identity as being everyday-defined or authority-defined (4). This perspective acknowledges that identity is multifaceted and that there are different attributes that may be assigned to an individual or community. While the former relates to practices that define a person as seen through their day-to-day routine and experiences, the latter refers to assigned attribution by those in power, or the dominant group. This practice is pivotal not just in the context of Sabah, but in the whole of Malaysia, where multicultural interaction and experiences are often mediated by top-down or dominant discourses. As such, mixed marriages would have an impact on how identity is understood in the context of Sabah. Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine how mixed marriages shaped how identity is conceived, in consideration of whether identity is a lived and relational phenomenon or constructed through authority or dominant collective representations. In particular, this study seeks to explore whether identity in mixed-marriage families is primarily constructed through relational, everyday lived experiences or constrained by institutional and communal categorizations. Results and the subsequent discussion from this study will contribute to broader scholarship on identity formation in plural societies, as well as the dynamic interplay between personal and familial, as well as political structures in negotiating recognition.

Mixed Marriages and Some Related Concerns

In this study, marriage is defined in its classical understanding, which is the legal and official matrimonial relationship between a man and a woman that allows them to live together and to bear offspring (5). Meanwhile, the sociocultural phenomenon of mixed marriage is marriage between individuals of different ethnicities or religions. Other studies have further conceptualized mixed marriages as being either inter-ethnic, inter-religious, or cross-national marriages. As this study is interested in examining the effects of mixed marriage on the notion of identity, it would look specifically at how mixed marriages may inform and mediate how identity is understood. It should be noted that mixed marriages between partners of different ethnicities or faith would not necessarily result in conflict or lead to a dysfunctional family. What may be experienced, though, are the constant need for tolerant negotiation of distinct or different cultural leanings and beliefs, as well as religious practices (6). Mixed marriages could also challenge monocultural conceptions of national belonging, where a spouse may identify with elements of a particular ethnic group but maintain the religious practices commonly associated with another group. This suggests the perspective that no individual can be unambiguously identified with a single ethnic belonging (7). In some Asian contexts, mixed marriages are not recognized due to customary or religious laws. To be able to marry a partner belonging to the religion of which the law is based, the other partner from the less dominant religion would need to convert. Failing to do so would possibly draw ire from the immediate community and in some instance, result in being excluded from the family or group (8). Moreover, mixed marriages may be encouraged by the state to promote integration between peoples of different ethnic or religious background. In societies that are predominantly patriarchal, women are more likely to be reclassified according to their husband's ethnic group. This illustrates gendered family structures that typically value one gender over the other (9).

In the context of this study, Sabah, studies about mixed marriage remain few. Among the early studies on mixed marriage was on the Punjabi Peranakan community, where it was found that they retained a high commitment to the Sikh religion even though they were in mixed marriages. Specifically, either spouse was willing to accept Sikh teachings openly and to obey the teachings of the holy scripture. This was driven by the desire for their marriage to be blessed by God and last long. It should be noted, though, that the Punjabi in Peninsular Malaysia, especially the older generation, may still strongly oppose mixed marriage. This presents a distinction of culture and identity between the Punjabi in Sabah and those in Peninsular Malaysia (10). It is also acknowledged that society in Sabah is seen as having ethnic boundaries that are not parallel to religious differences. This is because religious identity, despite mixed marriages, cannot be made an absolute identity of an ethnic group. Furthermore, there have been various reports about how local families in Sabah accept various beliefs, which establishes grounds to form and maintain harmony in this East Malaysian state (11). Besides mixed marriages between local community members from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, it may also involve partners from other countries, especially from neighboring or Asian nations.

Rethinking Ethnic Identity in light of Mixed Marriages

A mixed marriage would have an impact on one's sense of identity, even their ethnic identity. In general, ethnicity is a concept that carries the meaning of cultural identity. Nonetheless, recent scholarship has come to a consensus that ethnicity is not an objective or natural quality but rather a socially constructed belief in group affiliation. Furthermore, ethnic belonging is based on subjective belief rather than on biological fact and it can be mobilized instrumentally in struggles over power and resources. This challenges any essentialist understanding of ethnic identity in mixed marriages. It is also explained that ethnic identity may serve as a unifying force that links a person within a group that shares tradition, customs, historical experience and culture of life in the same geographical position (12). Individuals may also possibly belong to multiple cultural and social groups simultaneously and their affiliations shift across life stages and contexts. In mixed marriages, identity emerges as a lived, negotiated process rather than a singular ethnic category, as is the case expected of children from mixed families (7, 13). Hence, children of mixed marriages may view identity as dynamic, especially if their life experiences involve moving and residing in new cultural and geographical contexts (of either one of their parents). In this sense, identity is not bound to the ethnic groups of the parents, but rather the socialization and relational experiences of the children.

Other factors that could shape the identity assumed by children of mixed marriages include knowledge and experience gained while moving about and any educational or professional experiences gained abroad or elsewhere (14). In some cases, parents of different religious backgrounds may allow children, when older, to decide for themselves their religious affiliation. Furthermore, siblings may even decide on different religious identities, or in some cases, may not affiliate themselves with any religion (6). The identity of children from mixed marriages may also be mediated by implicit sociocultural perspectives, such as the perception that certain ethnic groups are superior and as such, marriage to that group would be viewed more positively (15). Nonetheless, this is not the case for all as there are some children who downplay their mixed family background, primarily to avoid stigma linked to racialization or geopolitical tensions (16). Children from mixed families may experience uncertainty not just in terms of their ethnic or religious identity, but also in terms of their legal identity (17). Not all legal frameworks in Asian context are adequately developed to recognize children from these families. As such, these children may face the challenge of being discriminated against or prohibited from gaining access to certain provisions such as education and healthcare (18). In the context of Sabah, it has been reported that children from mixed marriages experience ambiguity in how they perceive their ethnic identity (19). Moreover, by and large, communities in Sabah are seen as having ethnic boundaries that are not parallel with religious differences (11). This may be explained by the long history of migration and mobility in Sabah and its surroundings, where there has been a growing extent of ambiguity and confusion about who the people of Sabah are. This may be seen even in media and the entertainment industry. For instance, it was explained that local movies or shows depicted the openness and tolerance of Sabah society that is far more diverse, mixed and fluid as a result of the high number of marriages across ethnicity and religion, as well as migration from other regions such as Kalimantan, Sulawesi and the Philippines (20).

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine the patterns of mixed marriage and their implications for ethnic identity in Sabah. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to 532 respondents, which gathered information on parental ethnic and religious backgrounds, self-identified ethnicity and attitudes toward ethnic designation. The participants were recruited throw snowball sampling, where participants who initially received the link to the questionnaire were encouraged to share it with others. Mixed marriage was operationalized not only as unions between parents of different ethnicities, but also as cases where parents shared the same ethnic label yet originated from earlier generations of mixed ancestry. To move beyond descriptive listings of ethnic permutations, parental ethnic combinations were systematically coded into three macro-patterns: Internal Indigenous Interweaving, Malaysian Plural Mixing and Cross-Border or Transnational Layering. This classification enabled structured quantitative analysis of 238 distinct parental combinations. Descriptive statistics were then used to determine frequency distributions and percentages across categories. In addition, respondents' attitudes toward their ethnic identity were measured using scaled agreement items, allowing the identification of minority responses indicating a desire to change ethnic designation or feelings of shame. Cross-tabulation with parental marital background further enabled examination of whether identity tensions were observable among respondents from mixed families.

Results

The results of the study are explained in two parts. The first illustrates the patterns of mixed marriage found in the families of the respondents. This will focus on the percentage of mixed marriages among the families of respondents as a whole and the types of mixed marriage patterns found. In the second part, the results will explain issues about the ethnic identity of the respondents, which will focus on how respondents' opinions about their ethnic identity whether they agree or otherwise.

Patterns of Mixed Marriages in Respondents' Families

Table 1 shows information related to respondents' background whether born from mixed parents or have families with mixed marriages.

Table 1: Marital Status of Respondents' Parents

Marital Status	Count	Percentage
Mixed Marriage	273	51.3
Non-mixed Marriage	259	48.7
Total	532	100

Overall, 51.3% of the study respondents were children born from parents who are in mixed marriages or from families with mixed marriages. This would indicate that the respondents' father and mother have different ethnic backgrounds; for example, the father may be Bajau while the mother being Dusun. However, respondents whose father and mother were of the same ethnicity, for example, the father was Sino-Kadazan and mother was also of Sino-Kadazan, were also grouped under the category of mixed marriage because their families were also ethnically mixed as a result of mixed marriages from earlier generations.

Table 2: Patterns of Mixed Marriage

Macro Pattern	Count	Percentage
Pattern 1: Internal Indigenous Interweaving	111	46.6
Pattern 2: Malaysian Plural Mixing	106	44.5
Pattern 3: Cross-Border / Transnational	21	8.8

Respondents also indicated the permutation of the mixed families they come from, which were coded according to three patterns. The analysis found that the macro-pattern distribution of mixed marriages among the respondents' families reveals a structurally embedded and multi-layered pattern of ethnic interweaving in Sabah (Table 2). Of the 238 classified combinations, nearly half (46.6%) fall under Internal Indigenous Interweaving, indicating that mixed marriages most commonly occur among Sabah's indigenous ethnic groups themselves. Examples of this pattern include unions such as (Bisaya + Brunei), (Suluk + Bajau), (Sungai + Dusun) and (Murut + Dusun). These combinations illustrate how ethnic boundaries within Sabah are historically porous, with intermarriage occurring across indigenous communities over generations. A similarly large proportion (44.5%) is categorized as Malaysian Plural Mixing, reflecting marriages between indigenous groups and non-indigenous or settler communities within Malaysia. Representative examples include Kadazan + Chinese, Bajau + Javanese, Bugis + Dusun, Malay + Bugis and Dusun + Hokkien. These patterns demonstrate how Sabah's indigenous communities are interwoven not only among themselves but also with long-established plural communities, reinforcing the broader national multicultural framework within which identity is negotiated. A smaller but sociologically distinct segment (8.8%) falls under Cross-Border or Transnational Layering, involving ancestry linked to neighboring countries or foreign origins. Examples include Bajau + Filipino, Dusun + Indonesian, Pakistan + Arab + Banjar + Kadazan, Kadazan + Eurasian and Brunei + Pakistan + Bajau. Although numerically smaller, this pattern highlights Sabah's historical position as a migratory frontier, where cross-border movements contribute to complex ethnic and citizenship configurations. These categories affirm the argument that ethnic identity in Sabah is produced through layered relational processes rather than confined within rigid or singular ethnic categories.

The study also found the existence of inter-religious mixed marriages among the respondents' parents. Table 3 shows the responses illustrating parents who were of different religions.

Table 3: Interfaith Marriages of Respondents' Parents

		Father's Religion							
		Islam	**Kristian**	**Buddhist**	**Hindu**	**Traditional Chinese Religion**	**Pagan**	**Bahai**	**Sikh**
Mother's Religion	Islam	291	2	0	1	0	1	0	0
	Kristian	3	194	6	1	1	5	0	0
	Buddhist	0	1	13	0	0	0	0	0
	Hindu	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Traditional Chinese Religion	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Pagan	1	0	1	0	0	5	0	0
	Others	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
	Bahai	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

The data on inter-religious marriages among respondents' parents indicate that such unions, while present, constitute a relatively small proportion of the overall sample. The cross-tabulation shows that most marriages occurred within the same faith (e.g., Islam–Islam, Christianity–Christianity). However, the presence of Muslim–non-Muslim pairings is particularly noteworthy given Malaysian legal provisions requiring conversion for a valid Muslim marriage. The data therefore likely reflect either pre-conversion religious identities, complex transitional religious affiliations, or complex lived arrangements that go beyond formal legal categories. Additionally, interfaith unions were not confined to Muslim–non-Muslim combinations; they also occurred between Christian and Buddhist, Christian and Pagan and other minority religious pairings. Even though inter-religious marriages are numerically small, their existence does reflect the fluid and negotiated character of identity formation in the state, where lived familial configurations may exceed or subtly challenge institutional religious classifications.

Issues related to Ethnic Identity

Respondents were also asked to mention the ethnic identity that best represents them. It is interesting to note that while many of the respondents come from mixed families, many of them identified with a single ethnic label (Table 4).

Table 4: Respondents' Reported Ethnicities

Ethnic Identity	Total	Percentage
Bajau	86	16.2
Banjar	5	0.9
Bisaya	16	3.0
Brunei	35	6.6
Bugis	37	7.0
Ceylonese	1	0.2
Chinese	20	3.8
Cocos	2	0.4
Dusun	123	23.1
Iban	4	0.8
Idahan	1	0.2
Indian	1	0.2
Irranun	7	1.3
Jawa	5	0.9

Kadazan	73	13.7
Kadazandusun	13	2.4
Kagayan	1	0.2
Kedayan	5	0.9
Lundayeh	2	0.4
Malay	21	3.9
Murut	11	2.1
Punjabi	1	0.2
Rumanau	1	0.2
Rungus	15	2.8
Sino	16	3.0
Suluk	8	1.5
Sungai	16	3.0
Tidung	2	0.4
Ubian	3	0.6
Visaya	1	0.2

The distribution of respondents' self-identified ethnicities presents insight into how identity is articulated in practice. Although more than half of the respondents were born into families with mixed-marriage backgrounds, the majority nonetheless selected a single ethnic label to represent themselves. The largest groups were Dusun (23.1%), Bajau (16.2%) and Kadazan (13.7%), followed by Bugis (7.0%) and Brunei (6.6%). Smaller proportions identified as Sino (3.0%), Sungai (3.0%), Bisaya (3.0%), Rungus (2.8%), Murut (2.1%) and other minority groups. This pattern suggests that even within a context of extensive ethnic interweaving, individuals continue to anchor their identity in a singular categorical designation. This tendency toward singular identification is particularly significant when viewed against the high incidence of mixed parental combinations identified earlier. It indicates that ethnic identity in Sabah, while historically layered and relational, is often consolidated into a single label in formal self-representation. Such consolidation may be shaped by administrative structures, birth certificate registration practices, social recognition norms, or the desire for clarity within institutional frameworks. The relatively small proportion of respondents who chose a mixed designation such as "Sino" (3.0%) further reinforces the idea that hybrid identities, although socially present, are less frequently formalized as primary identity markers.

Respondents' perceptions of their ethnic identity were also examined, which was done through two key statements in the questionnaire: (a) whether they would like to change their ethnic designation if allowed and (b) whether they felt ashamed of the ethnic label stated on their birth certificate. Overall, the results indicate a high level of acceptance toward existing ethnic identities. Only 11.8% of respondents (63 out of 532) expressed some degree of agreement ("moderately agree," "agree," or "strongly agree") that they would like to change their ethnic label if permitted (Table 5).

Table 5: I Would Like to Change My Ethnic Label If It Were Allowed

Category of Ethnicity	Total
Bajau	11
Banjar	1
Bisaya	3
Brunei	3
Bugis	7
Chinese	3
Dusun	4
Iban	1
Kadazan	10
Kedayan	1
Malay	6
Sino	4
Suluk	3
Sungai	5
Visaya	1
Total	**63**

However, the minority responses remain sociologically significant. The 63 respondents who expressed a desire to change their ethnic label represented 15 different ethnic identities, encompassing both indigenous and non-indigenous groups. The largest numbers were among Bajau, Kadazan, Bugis, Malay and Sungai, followed by smaller representations from Dusun, Sino, Chinese, Brunei, Bisaya, Suluk and others. Even ethnic groups that are widely recognized as indigenous to Sabah, such as Dusun, Kadazan and Sungai, were represented among those who expressed a desire to change their designation. This suggests that the inclination to reconsider ethnic labeling is not confined to groups associated with migration or cross-border ancestry, but may also reflect broader concerns related to status, recognition, or personal alignment with inherited labels (21).

A similar pattern is observed among those who reported feeling ashamed of their ethnic label (Table 6). Although only 26 respondents (4.9%) expressed such sentiments, they spanned 11 ethnic categories, including Bajau, Kadazan, Dusun, Malay, Brunei, Bugis, Sino and several others. Again, indigenous ethnic groups were present among those expressing discomfort, indicating that feelings of unease are not limited to minority or migrant-associated identities.

Table 6: I Am Ashamed with the Ethnic Label Stated in My Birth Certificate

Ethnic Category	Total
Bajau	7
Brunei	2
Bugis	2
Chinese	1
Dusun	2
Iban	1
Kadazan	5
Kedayan	1
Malay	2
Sino	2
Suluk	1
Total	**26**

These results reveal a complex picture regarding mixed marriages and ethnic identity. While most respondents demonstrate strong acceptance of their ethnic designation, a minority, particularly those from mixed families, expressed ambivalence or perhaps even dissatisfaction. This supports the broader argument of the study that ethnic identity in Sabah operates within a tension between relational lived experience and authority-defined categorization.

Discussion

This study examined whether identity in mixed-marriage families in Sabah is primarily constructed through relational, everyday lived experiences or constrained by institutional and communal categorizations (4). Across the results, mixed marriage emerges as a structurally embedded feature of Sabah's plural society rather than an exceptional or marginal practice: more than half of respondents (51.3%) reported mixed-marriage ancestry. This prevalence reinforces earlier observations that ethnic boundaries in Sabah are comparatively porous and not neatly aligned with religious differences (11). At the same time, the data also reveal a tension between the layered plurality visible in family histories and the categorical singularity of formal self-representation, suggesting that both everyday-defined and authority-defined dimensions of identity operate simultaneously (4). Based on the results, the macro-pattern distribution of mixed marriages in Sabah emerged as most commonly formed within indigenous communities (46.6%), followed closely by unions between indigenous and non-indigenous groups within Malaysia (44.5%) and then by a smaller transnational layer (8.8%). These patterns align with the view that mixed marriages do not inherently indicate conflict but often require ongoing negotiation of cultural difference (6). In Sabah, the prominence of Internal Indigenous Interweaving suggests that "difference" is frequently negotiated within local cultural ecologies rather than only across rigid ethnic blocs. This provides support for the claim that individuals cannot be unambiguously located within a single ethnic belonging, because biographical and relational histories cut across categories (7). The Cross-Border/Transnational segment, though smaller, further strengthens this argument by showing how migration-linked ancestry adds additional layers of affiliation that may not map neatly onto a single, stable ethnic label (22).

Although only 26 respondents reported parents of different religions (Table 3), the pattern is sociologically significant because it illustrates boundary-crossing that persists even within a national legal and institutional environment that regulates interfaith marriage. In the literature, mixed marriages in some Asian contexts require conversion or may provoke community backlash (23, 24). Against that broader backdrop, the presence of Muslim–non-Muslim pairings and other interfaith combinations in Sabah can be read as evidence that lived familial configurations sometimes exceed formal categories. This resonates with Sabah-focused scholarship noting that ethnic boundaries are not parallel to religious differences and that community openness towards multiple beliefs can facilitate social harmony. In this sense, even a numerically small number of interfaith unions underscores the study's broader argument that identity formation in Sabah is negotiated through everyday relational processes that may not be fully captured by institutional classifications. A striking finding is that despite extensive mixed-marriage ancestry and highly diverse parental ethnic permutations, respondents largely identified with a single ethnic label. This consolidation matters for the study's aim: it suggests that while mixed marriage produces complex relational identities, formal self-representation often stabilizes into a singular category. The low proportion selecting "Sino" (3.0%) is illustrative, because the category exists precisely as an institutional accommodation for mixed ancestry under specific conditions (i.e., indigenous–Chinese unions), yet it is not widely adopted as a primary identity marker even in a sample characterized by high ethnic interweaving. This pattern supports the argument that ethnicity is not "natural" or essential but is mediated through social recognition and institutional legibility (7). Put differently, mixed marriage may broaden the lived repertoire of belonging, but bureaucratic and communal systems of recognition still incentivize clarity through singular naming (4).

Most respondents reported acceptance of their ethnic designation: only 11.8% expressed a desire to change their ethnic label and only 4.9% reported feeling ashamed. Yet these minority responses are analytically important because they suggest points of friction where assigned identity may not align with relational self-understanding. Notably, those who wished to change their label were distributed across both indigenous and non-indigenous categories and those who felt ashamed also included respondents from widely recognized indigenous groups. This complexity is consistent with scholarship that treats ethnic belonging as subjective and socially produced rather than purely inherited. It also connects with the broader literature on how children from mixed families may strategically manage identity, sometimes downplaying mixed background due to stigma or wider sociopolitical tensions (16). Although the present study does not directly test stigma mechanisms, the observed ambivalence indicates that identity negotiation is not always seamless and that the institutional ethnic label may become a site where personal, familial and communal meanings collide (4).

At a conceptual level, these results speak to the literature emphasizing mobility and shifting contexts as shaping identity (14). Sabah's migration history and transregional linkages (1, 22) suggest that some respondents' ambivalence may reflect concerns about how particular labels are interpreted socially (e.g., as "local," "migrant-linked," or otherwise), rather than dissatisfaction with ethnicity per se. Likewise, the fact that identity discomfort is more visible among respondents from mixed backgrounds (as implied in the analytic framing of the results) is consistent with the view that mixed marriage makes identity more evidently "negotiated," exposing the gap between everyday belonging and authority-defined categorization (4). The study shows that mixed marriage in Sabah is widespread and patterned across indigenous, national and transnational layers, reflecting the idea that identity is produced through relational histories rather than bounded categories (7). At the same time, the prevalence of single-label identification and generally high acceptance of recorded ethnic labels indicate that institutional categories remain powerful in shaping how identity is publicly articulated (4). The results therefore suggest a dual dynamic: identity in mixed-marriage families is lived and negotiated in everyday relational contexts, but it is also stabilized through the simplifying demands of administrative classification and social legibility. This duality captures the core tension raised in the literature review: mixed marriage expands the lived ecology of belonging (6), yet ethnicity continues to function as a unifying, place-linked category that structures recognition and membership, producing occasional dissonance for a minority of respondents (25).

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, this study demonstrates that mixed marriage is not a marginal or exceptional phenomenon in Sabah; rather, it is structurally embedded across generations. This supports earlier scholarship that views ethnicity not as a fixed or natural attribute but as socially constructed, relational and historically layered. At the same time, the results complicate any straightforward assumption that mixed marriage necessarily produces hybrid or multiple self-identifications. Despite extensive mixed ancestry, the majority of respondents selected a single ethnic label to represent themselves. This suggests that while identity in everyday life may be fluid and negotiated, formal self-representation often aligns with singular categories that are socially and administratively legible. The results of this study have several implications. First, they reinforce the importance of understanding ethnic identity in Sabah as both relationally produced and institutionally structured. Policies and administrative systems that require singular ethnic designation may simplify complex family histories, yet they remain deeply embedded in social practice. Second, the data suggest that mixed marriage in Sabah contributes more to normalization of plural belonging than to fragmentation or conflict. Even inter-religious unions, though numerically small, illustrate that religious and ethnic boundaries are not strictly parallel in Sabah, reinforcing the state's long-standing reputation for negotiated coexistence. Third, the study contributes to broader theoretical debates by demonstrating that ethnic identity among children of mixed marriages is neither purely hybrid nor purely essentialist; rather, it oscillates between fluid lived experience and stabilized public categorization.

However, this study is not without limitations. The use of a quantitative survey design allows for pattern identification but does not capture the deeper narratives behind identity negotiation, ambivalence, or acceptance. The operational definition of mixed marriage may also broaden the category beyond immediate parental difference, which could affect interpretation. Future research would benefit from qualitative inquiry, such as in-depth interviews with individuals from mixed families, to explore how they interpret their ethnic label over time and across contexts. Comparative studies between Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia may also illuminate how different sociopolitical environments influence the relationship between mixed marriage and identity formation. In sum, this study shows that mixed marriage in Sabah has produced a deeply interwoven social fabric in which ethnic identity is historically layered and relationally negotiated. Yet, within this plural context, identity continues to be articulated through singular labels that provide institutional clarity and social recognition. The coexistence of plurality in family histories and singularity in formal identification underscores the central paradox of ethnic identity in Sabah: it is at once fluid in lived experience and structured in public categorization.

Abbreviations

None.

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Author Contributions

Budi Anto Mohd Tamring: conceptualization, data collection, analysis, validation, writing – original draft, final version of the manuscript, Saidatul Nornis Mahali: conceptualization, data analysis, validation, review of the final manuscript, Eugenia Ida Edward: data analysis validation, review of final manuscript, Daron Benjamin Loo: translation, data analysis, validation, writing, revision of manuscript, Bernadette Tobi: conceptualization, data analysis, validation, review of final manuscript, Shaffarullah Abdul Rahman: conceptualization, data analysis, validation, review of final manuscript, Kamsilawati Kamlun: conceptualization, data analysis, validation, review of final manuscript, Mahirah Masdin: conceptualization, data analysis, validation, review of final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding to this research and the publication of this paper.

Data Availability

Requests for the data may be made to the first or corresponding authors of this paper.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors used AI-assisted language editing tools solely for grammatical check and refinement. All research design, data analysis, interpretation and intellectual content were carried out by the authors themselves.

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to completing the questionnaire. There were no identifying personal details collected and responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic and research purposes.

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