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A Qualitative Study of Xiaohongshu's Impact on Malaysian Chinese Secondary Students' Perceptions of Their National and Cultural Identities

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Abstract: This study explores how Xiaohong Shu, a widely popular social media platform, influences the cultural and national identity formation of Malaysian Chinese secondary school students. Although these students share ethnic heritage with Chinese people in mainland China, their cultural experiences are shaped by distinct geographical, historical, and social contexts. The research focuses on how Xiaohong Shu's portrayal of Chinese films, narratives, and national imagery subtly shapes students' perceptions of identity. Utilizing purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews, the study engages a group of active Xiaohong Shu users to examine the relationship between media exposure and identity negotiation. The findings reveal that while most participants maintain a strong sense of Malaysian identity despite frequent exposure to Chinese cultural content, a minority show growing affinity toward China. This study contributes to the broader understanding of identity construction among youth in multicultural societies and offers valuable insights for future media literacy initiatives and cross-cultural communication research.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese secondary students; National identity; Cultural identity; Xiaohong Shu; Media effect theory; Cognitive effect

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标题：一项关于小红书对马来西亚华裔中学生国家和文化认同感影响的定性研究

摘要：本研究探讨了小红书这一广受欢迎的社交媒体平台如何影响马来西亚华裔中学生文化与民族身份的形成。尽管这些学生与中国大陆的中国人有着共同的民族血统，但他们的文化体验受到独特的地理、历史和社会环境的影响。研究重点关注小红书对中国电影、叙事和国家形象的呈现如何微妙地塑造学生的身份认知。通过目的抽样和半结构化访谈，本研究选取了一群活跃的小红书用户，以考察媒体接触与身份协商之间的关系。研究结果表明，尽管大多数参与者在频繁接触中国文化内容的情况下仍保持着强烈的马来西亚身份认同，但少数人对中国表现出日益增长的亲近感。本研究为多元文化社会中青少年身份构建的更广泛理解做出了贡献，并为未来的媒体素养倡议和跨文化沟通研究提供了宝贵的见解。

关键词：马来西亚华裔中学生；国家认同；文化认同；小红书；媒体效果理论；认知效果

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the media consumption patterns of Malaysian Chinese youth have undergone a sea change. From the pre-millennium era of print media to today's digital era of social e-commerce, their media experience has evolved significantly. Beginning in the 1990s, the Internet was rolled out in Malaysia, and in 1996, when Telekom Malaysia Berhad (TMB) joined, computer usage and ownership increased significantly. In 2016, Malaysia's Internet connection rate reached 77.6%, with people preferring to use Twitter and Facebook for social networking (Rosmani et al., 2020).

The evolution of social media has revolutionized the way billions of people communicate, due to the advancement of Internet information technology. Social media, through the internet and mobile technology, meets the need for more contact between organizations, businesses, and individuals (Zhou & Wang, 2014). Social media is ideal because it reflects the attributes of engagement, interaction, openness, and transparency (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

With the development of China's financial and network technology, social media exploded in China and several influential social media were born, such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, Xiaohongshu (Yu & Alizadeh,

2023). Since the late 2021s, the number of overseas users of Chinese social media (CSM) such as Douban, Xiaohongshu and Weibo has increased significantly (Hu et al., 2020). A plethora of social media platforms have emerged, with Xiaohongshu being one of the most influential. Xiaohongshu, an online shopping and social networking platform founded in China in June 2013 and the site claims to have 200 million users as of January 2019 (Xiaohongshu, n.d.).

The Xiaohongshu community features both desktop and mobile terminals, as well as video and live-streaming functions. Users can also share product reviews and text introductions of tourist destinations, and it is regarded as China's improved version of Instagram (Tang, 2022). As of 2019, Xiaohongshu has more than 300 million registered users and more than 85 million monthly active users (Xiaohongshu, n.d.). 70% of the users of the platform are the post-90s generation, and nearly 70% of them are females (Ipsos, 2020). The app allows users and influencers to post, discover, and share product reviews, most related to beauty and health (Chen, 2021). Travel bloggers also regularly post content about travel and leisure destinations on the platform (Digipanda, 2020). Xiaohongshu also operates RED Mall, which sells international products to global users.

Although Malaysian Chinese may share similar cultural references and historical ties with those present in China, the identity and culture of Malaysian Chinese have evolved over time, shaped by their unique social, political, and geographical context (Yow, 2016). When Malaysian Chinese youths engage with social platforms that predominantly feature values from mainland China, they are exposed to a range of perspectives and cultural narratives that may influence their perceptions of national and cultural identity.

As adolescents are in a critical stage of identity exploration, this study aims to examine the potential impact of Xiaohongshu on the perception of national and cultural identity among Malaysian Chinese secondary school students. Given that adolescence is a formative period for constructing self-identity, including national and cultural affiliations, social media platforms like Xiaohongshu may play a role in shaping their perceptions. This study seeks to understand how exposure to content on Xiaohongshu influences their identity formation within the multicultural context of Malaysia.

The construction of cultural and national identities in Malaysia is particularly complex and multi-layered. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) emphasizes the role of group dynamics in shaping identity. In Malaysia's multicultural context, these overlapping influences make identity formation an intricate process given Malaysian Chinese students' language proficiency, their cultural connections with China, and their engagement with Chinese-developed social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, it is worth exploring how Xiaohongshu, as a powerful social platform, may influence their national and cultural identity through its content and media effects. When it comes to the connection between Malaysian Chinese and those present in China, it is not only about cultural inheritance but also about deep historical and bloodline ties. They created a new mixed culture through the interaction between the internal tension arising from transnational identity and the external Sinicization. (Ang, 2005).

As of 2017, nearly 90% of internet users in Malaysia have registered social media accounts (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). Based on the report "Use of Social Media by Children and Adolescents in East Asia, Malaysia Edition", in 2018, 92% of children were able to access the Internet, and out of these, 91.8% accessed

the Internet through a smartphone (UNICEF, 2020). Based on the situation, some Chinese social media from China is also becoming popular in Malaysia. When it comes to the use of Xiaohongshu in Malaysia, especially among Chinese secondary school students, although there is a lack of direct literature and data, research in related fields still provides some insights. As of 2022, the percentage of Xiaohongshu users under the age of 18 has reached 13.4% (qian-gua.com, 2023). Take WeChat, an app for smartphone and tablet users that is also tailored for social media platforms. The mobile social app WeChat has 549 million monthly active users worldwide. In Malaysia, WeChat and others have a 95% smartphone penetration rate (Abu Bakar, 2016). It can be seen that Chinese social media is being widely used by Malaysians.

At the same time, the rise of social media platforms has led to a new focus on young people's cultural identity (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Xiaohongshu, as a social shopping platform, may influence user identity and behavior by promoting products with specific culture and values and user-generated content. Thus, two research questions of this study are formulated to explore Malaysian Chinese secondary students' perceptions of their cultural and national identities.

1.1 How Malaysian Chinese students perceive their national and cultural identities. The question relates to individuals' perceptions and feelings about their own identity, as well as their understanding of Malaysia's cultural traditions and multi-ethnic background.

1.2 How Malaysian Chinese secondary school students construct, express and share their national and cultural identities on the Xiaohongshu. The question involves how digital media a creative space for students to present and share their unique understanding of peoples and cultures in the form of words, pictures, and videos.

2. Literature Review

2.1 National and Cultural Identities

National and cultural identities are seen as core components of individual identity, although national and cultural identities are hotly debated topics in almost all countries today. Many scholars have different opinions about these controversies. A "nation" is a named human population, sharing a historical territory, a common mythology and historical memory, and laws and obligations shared by all its members (Wodak, 2009). National identity is the quality of any collective that causes its members to identify with it. What causes members to identify with the group includes two broad aspects: first, the characteristics of the individual components of the group, such as a common language, culture, or ethnicity, that cause them to identify with each other; second, the characteristics of the group itself, such as its establishment, narrative history, and role in the international community, lead to a sense of shared interest in the destiny of the whole (Dittmer, 2004).

Culture is an important part of the social fabric and can be defined as the way of life of that society, including every moment and relationship and connection of an individual from birth to death. Culture is also a social product that everyone develops after learning, and this product is usually full of emotion (Altugan, 2015).

In the context of this discussion, some scholars have already had a discussion on national and cultural

identities. Parekh challenges these related assumptions by arguing that national identity is not a substance, but rather a set of tendencies and values that are neither fixed nor arbitrarily changing, requiring periodic redefinition throughout history (Parekh, 1995). However, this identity is defined not only from the inside, that is, from the characteristics shared by the compatriots of the nation, but also from the outside, that is, by distinguishing and differentiating the nation from other nations or ethnic groups. National identity is meaningful only through comparison with others (Triandafyllidou, 1998).

In addition, other scholars have suggested that cultural identity, often thought of as a fixed and exclusive entity with an inherently positive moral claim, is particularly problematic (Kim & Kim, 1994). Cultural identity is also considered to be an integral part of an individual's self, which may influence an individual's social and personal functioning (Bhugra, 1999).

2.2 Adolescent Education and Personal Identity

Previous studies have shown consistency in the education of adolescents on national and cultural identity. According to Eid (2015), training young people to be active citizens must be a core value of schools and educational institutions. Therefore, citizenship education is very important because every society needs people who can contribute effectively to the future health of the local, national and global communities. A study covering Europe states that cultural and linguistic diversity in societies is an important resource, and that the goal of education must be to "awaken the young", so establishing national and cultural identities for students is a means of preserving cultural heritage (Faas, 2007).

Based on this, some scholars have pointed out that the cultural and material environment affects the way young people live and think, and it is important to place young people in their country and cultural context under a similar social and cultural background (Donnelly & Evans, 2016). Besides, modern educational institution, as a social and educational setting, creates actual conditions for students to build their national and cultural identities. It is critical to prevent displays of intolerance and support the creation of the personality's national-cultural identity during the maturation process (Matvienko, 2020).

2.3 Malaysian Chinese Community Status

As of the fourth quarter of 2024, the Chinese comprised 22.4% of Malaysia's total population, representing the second-largest ethnic group; in comparison, Malays accounted for 58.1% and Indians 6.5%, while the remaining 13.0% were classified as "others," encompassing indigenous and smaller ethnic communities (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2025). Malaysia's multicultural background is a unique historical and cultural environment for the Chinese community.

According to Clarke (2000), ancestor worship, like many other elements of Malaysian Chinese culture, while in many ways strongly similar to the original Chinese cultural system from which it has historically originated, is in fact very different from this cultural system: it is an expression of the unique Malaysian Chinese culture and an integral part of the rich multi-ethnic fabric of modern Malaysian society. Some scholars have suggested that after the arrival of Chinese ancestors in Malaysia, some Chinese Muslims found themselves overwhelmed between the predominantly non-Chinese Muslim community and the predominantly non-Muslim Chinese community, and for survival purposes or political designs, they quickly integrated into

one of the groups (Ma, 2005), which also became one of the religious backgrounds of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

Using the lens of multicultural citizenship can help to understand Malaysian Chinese as well as the country at large. In recent years, Chinese Malaysians have expressed their political aspirations and demands to rid themselves of the stigma of racial restrictions and envision a more inclusive multicultural citizenship for Malaysia as a nation state (Yow, 2017). Under these circumstances, the political strategy of the Chinese political parties changed to the politics of “service” and “fear” (Chin, 2001).

Certainly, there exist scholars who hold a favorable stance towards Malaysian politics and policies. Due to Malaysia’s ethnic politics, ethnic preference policies affect most areas of the country, including social, political and economic fields, especially the Chinese language education in Malaysia (Xia et al., 2018). Conversely, In addition, previous studies also pointed out that the development of Chinese education in Malaysia faces many problems and challenges. Chinese primary schools are clearly not being treated fairly and equally by the government, as shown by the inadequate distribution of development funds and the acute shortage of trained teachers, for which Chinese primary schools have to rely heavily on charitable donations from the Chinese community (Raman et al., 2015).

2.4 The Impact of Social Media on Education

Social media helps promote active learning by exposing students to their own learning process and requires them to engage in a higher level of thinking for critical evaluation of content, connection with previous knowledge, control and reflection on metacognitive strategies (Bransford et al., 2000). Active participation in social media can also increase student motivation and engagement in various content areas (Schwarz & Caduri, 2016). More than that, social media “provides people with the opportunity to act as agents in their own learning” (Moje, 2016).

Nevertheless, one of the biggest drawbacks of social media in education is privacy issues, such as the disclosure of personal information on the site. Since social media is based on online communication, students may lose the ability to communicate in person; Many bloggers and authors post wrong information on social networking sites, which can also mislead students (Siddiqui, 2016). Social media can also lead to false self-diagnosis (Akram & Kumar, 2017).

2.5 Immigration and Cultural Identity

Different approaches to categorizing immigration status may lead to different results of studies conducted on these populations. In the literature, two primary definitions are commonly employed to delineate individuals with a connection to a country distinct from their current residence. The first, “foreign-born,” designates individuals born in a country other than their present abode, offering a static categorization irrespective of the immigration status of their parents or grandparents. This widely utilized definition, however, excludes second and third-generation immigrants. In contrast, the second definition, “foreigner,” pertains to individuals affiliated with or demonstrating allegiance to another country. Notably, this status is subject to change over time, contingent upon the legal requisites of each country. Such legal parameters often hinge on the historical ties between nations (Gimeno-Feliu et al., 2019). According to Joppke (1998), migration opens up new spaces

of mobility and facilitates the normalized exchange of information, resources and population, and migration thus becomes a permanent and structural presence.

Since migration is an international movement (UN Migration, 2019) from one region to another, it often involves cultural conflicts and integration. A key debate in the study of indigenous-migrant relations concerns the barriers to integration posed by ethnic-cultural differences and socioeconomic disadvantage. Specifically, differences between groups in the strength of norms and sanctions that regulate the social interactions of members outside the group. These “closed” norms create a distance between race and culture (McDoom, 2019). Although the process of socialization is usually carried out in the context of adapting to life in a new cultural environment, it must be stressed that it can also happen unintentionally during intercultural meetings and contacts, and whenever there are intercultural contacts and encounters, cultural conflicts of a different nature can arise (Bodziany, 2008).

Cultural integration means that people of one culture absorb the essence of another culture while maintaining their own culture. They not only do not lose their own culture, but also do not completely reject the new culture, but integrate the two (Kessler, 2023). Schools are the first place where all second-generation immigrants come into contact with indigenous and native cultures, and schools are important integration mechanisms. Second, because many adults spend most of their lives in couples (or families), it is of particular interest to observe couples’ behavior, especially to observe different patterns of integration between individuals in conracial couples and partners in mixed marriages, where cultural adaptation and integration are necessary (Kohler, 2012).

2.6 Cognitive effects

To explore the influence of Xiaohongshu on the national and cultural identity of Malaysian Chinese secondary school students, it is necessary to use the cognitive effect in media effect theory to help deeply understand the media’s shaping of individual identity. Cognitive effects refer to the effects of media exposure on individual mental processes or products of mental processes, usually involving the acquisition, processing, and storage of information (Potter, 2012). It emphasizes that media exerts an influence on the cognition of individuals through direct and indirect ways, thus shaping their understanding of the real world, especially in modern society with rich information.

In the context of this research, the cognitive effect involves the influence of Xiaohongshu on information acquisition. User-generated content and community interaction on the platform may provide students with new knowledge and perspectives, and affect their perception of national history and cultural traditions. Individuals seek information in the media and interact with the media to shape their perceptions of the country and culture (Xu & Wu, 2015). Chinese secondary school students in Malaysia may obtain information related to their culture and country through the Xiaohongshu, so as to form a specific identity.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on young social media users in Malaysia, specifically Chinese secondary school students. To address the research questions, a qualitative research approach is adopted. Data is collected through in-

depth interviews, with respondents recruited via Xiaohongshu posts. Purposive sampling was used to find 20 Malaysian Chinese secondary school students who had experience in using Xiaohongshu. Among them, 65% (13 respondents) are from the SMK, 25% (5 respondents) from the SMJK, and 10% (2 respondents) from the Chinese Independent Secondary School. All of them had six years of Chinese primary education before moving on to their respective secondary schools.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study; a call for interviewees was posted on the Xiaohongshu platform, targeting Malaysian Chinese secondary school students. A reward of RM5 was offered as a token of appreciation for their participation. The recruitment post explicitly stated the selection criteria: participants must be Malaysian citizens of Chinese ethnicity with at least three generations of family history residing in Malaysia. They must currently be enrolled in a secondary school. Within ten days of posting, 25 individuals responded. Their identities were verified by submitting student identification documents, and 20 participants were ultimately selected. Further screening was conducted to ensure the quality and relevance of responses—only participants who provided thoughtful, experience-based insights rather than superficial or off-topic remarks were included in the final sample.

The sample consists of Malaysian Chinese students from various states across Malaysia, ranging from Form One to Form Five. The interviews were conducted through online video calls to ensure accessibility and flexibility for participants. The video calls were all recorded and deleted after the study was over, to ensure data is complete, clear, and anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

Interviewees	Sex	Age	Form	School (State)	Xiaohongshu usage
Participant 1	M	15	4	SMK Labuan (Sabah)	1 year
Participant 2	F	16	5	SMJK Heng Ee Cawangan Bayan Baru (Penang)	2 years
Participant 3	M	17	5	SMK Triang (Pahang)	3 months
Participant 4	F	13	2	SMK Munshi Sulaiman (Johor)	1.5 years
Participant 5	M	15	4	SMJK Heng Ee Cawangan Bayan Baru (Penang)	9 months
Participant 6	F	17	5	SMK Telok Panglima Garang (Selangor)	1 year
Participant 7	M	14	3	SMK Telok Panglima Garang (Selangor)	3 years
Participant 8	M	14	3	SMJK Chong Hwa (Kuala Lumpur)	1 year
Participant 9	F	16	4	SMK Merbau (Sarawak)	5 months
Participant 10	M	16	5	SMK Tanjong Sepat (Selangor)	2 years
Participant 11	F	14	2	SMK Munshi Sulaiman (Johor)	11 months
Participant 12	M	15	3	SMJK Krian (Perak)	14 months
Participant 13	F	15	4	Sekolah Menengah Tinggi Chung Hua Seremban	3 years

				(Sembilan)	
Participant 14	M	12	1	SMK Tanjong Sepat (Selangor)	2 years
Participant 15	F	15	3	SMK Labuan (Sabah)	7 months
Participant 16	M	13	2	SMJK Chong Hwa (Kuala Lumpur)	2.5 years
Participant 17	M	17	5	SMK Munshi Sulaiman (Johor)	3 years
Participant 18	F	14	3	SMK Jalan Damai (Penang)	1.5 years
Participant 19	M	16	5	Sekolah Kebangsaan (L) Methodist (ACS) Klang (Selangor)	2 years
Participant 20	F	14	2	SMJK Heng Ee (Penang)	2 years

表 1：访谈参与者的人口统计学特征及小红书使用情况

Table 1: Interview Participants' Demographic Details and Xiaohongshu Usage

Semi-structured in-depth interviews and content analysis effectively explore the emotions, attitudes and opinions of Malaysian Chinese secondary students when using Xiaohongshu. Referring to the research questions of this study, the interview questions cover the aspects: 1. Usage of social media and Xiaohongshu, 2. Perception of cultural and national identities, 3. Influence of Xiaohongshu on cultural and national identities, and 4. Expression of participants' self-cultural and national identities on Xiaohongshu. The collected interview data is transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to induce meaningful themes and present the true voices and perspectives of the participants (Nowell et al., 2017).

It is worth noting that since the sample is secondary school students, they may not have the ability to understand the concept of "national and cultural identity", so the author simplified the definition of this concept under the original framework and explained it to the participants. In addition, when asking interview questions, the interview questions were also based on the life background and experience of the participants, to avoid the technical terms too esoteric for the interviewees to understand.

In addition to conducting interviews, this study applied content analysis to examine participants' ideas, interactions, and content creation on the Xiaohongshu platform. Among the texts analyzed are participant-generated posts and comment threads related to national and cultural identity discussions. The researcher focused on posts with high engagement (such as likes, shares, and comments) and content explicitly discussing identity-related topics. The selected texts were systematically coded and categorized based on emerging themes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how participants express and negotiate their identities in digital spaces.

For instance, in one interview, a respondent expressed: "I think learning Chinese in Malaysia is important, but sometimes I feel like I'm not really Chinese." This highlighted an emerging pattern of cultural identity negotiation, which was marked for further exploration. Similarly, on Xiaohongshu, a post discussing the experience of celebrating Lunar New Year in Malaysia received numerous comments, with some users expressing feelings of connection to Chinese culture while others emphasized their distinct Malaysian identity.

Comments such as ‘Chinese New Year feels more festive in China’ and ‘Chinese New Year in Malaysia is more integrated with local culture’ were coded as reflecting cultural hybridity. The following table illustrates an example of how themes were identified from both interview data and Xiaohongshu content:

Data Source	Excerpt	Emerging Theme
Interview	I speak Chinese at home, but English or Malay at school, so my identity feels a bit complex.	Language and Identity Negotiation
Xiaohongshu Post Comment	I learn a lot from Xiaohongshu in China, but some content doesn’t match my life in Malaysia.	Digital Media Influence on Identity

表 2：基于访谈数据与小红书数据的主题提炼示例

Table 2: Example of Theme Identification from Interviews and Xiaohongshu Data

These categorized themes were further refined through iterative analysis, reviewed and named accordingly, ensuring that they accurately captured the complexities of identity perception among participants and that the inherent meaning and implications of the themes were understood.

This study adhered to ethical principles, especially in handling participants’ personal data and experiences. Participants were fully informed about the study’s purpose, process, risks, and benefits, and consented voluntarily with the option to withdraw at any time. Data was anonymized to protect privacy, and no identifiable information was disclosed. Cultural sensitivity was ensured by respecting differences, avoiding stereotypes, and using fair, inclusive research tools. Mental well-being was considered, with support provided for sensitive questions. Transparency was maintained to help build trust and encouraged honest sharing. The study received ethical approval and followed all relevant guidelines, ensuring fairness, non-discrimination, and alignment with societal values.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Self-Viewed Cultural and National Identity Before Xiaohongshu Exposure

School and family education play a crucial role in shaping students’ national and cultural identity. In Malaysia, vernacular Chinese primary schools operate under the national education policy and follow the standardized national curriculum, with Chinese as the medium of instruction. While these schools provide education in subjects aligned with the national syllabus, the use of Chinese as the primary language of teaching naturally exposes students to aspects of Chinese language and culture.

Beyond formal education, cultural elements are embedded in the school environment, shaped by educators, students, and parents who contribute to the preservation of Chinese cultural identity. Traditional values, language use in daily interactions, and community engagement help reinforce a sense of cultural belonging among students. This foundational exposure does not solely focus on cultural heritage but coexists with the broader cultivation of national consciousness and identity, as students simultaneously learn about Malaysia’s multicultural landscape through subjects such as history and civics. This interplay of education and cultural influence fosters both a sense of belonging to the Chinese heritage and an understanding of their Malaysian national identity.

Family education has a profound impact on the formation of children's identity as they imitate their parents' words and deeds. Families usually attach importance to the passing on of traditional culture, instilling cultural values in their children through activities such as daily life, family gatherings and festive celebrations. This kind of home education not only helps children to establish emotional identification with the culture but also deepens their emotional connection and cognition of the country.

Most participants showed a clear perception of their national and cultural identity. This cognition is gradually formed under the joint influence of family and education. The Chinese education and family cultural inheritance they have received since childhood have made them identify themselves as Malaysian Chinese and have a deep understanding and respect for Chinese traditional culture. This steadiness of identity reflects the importance of both informal and formal education in the construction of individual identity.

"The Chinese education has enriched my cultural characteristics. As a Malaysian citizen, I have learned the extensive and profound Chinese culture, which has strengthened my connotation, enhanced my quality of life, and added more color to Malaysia." Participant 20 said so.

However, it is worth noting that about 4 participants showed uncertainty about their national and cultural identity. As participant 12 said, "Sometimes I am not sure whether I am Chinese or Malaysian, because I like China very much and I have been to China many times. When I lived in China, I felt more at home than when I lived in Malaysia."

The uncertainty surrounding their national and cultural identities appears to stem from the complex interplay of individual experiences and external influences. Exposure to digital technology, entertainment, and idealized representations of China through social media and tourism may have contributed to these students' ambivalence. As a result, they find themselves navigating a space where their sense of identity, shaped by family background, personal experiences, and social perceptions, is increasingly influenced by external attractions and broader cultural narratives.

Four participants claimed they are uncertain about their perception of nationality, and there are among them who even consider themselves to be more Chinese than Malaysian. This diversity in perspective highlights the complexity of individual identity formation, influenced by a variety of social factors. Among others, participant 3's experience sheds light on the roots of this cognitive difference. He shared, "Although I was born and raised in Malaysia, my parents often emphasize our Chinese heritage and culture. Sometimes I feel I am more Chinese than Malaysian, especially after facing unfair treatment. It's confusing when people from other races tell us to go back to the country where our ancestors came from." Participant 3's words illustrate how family education plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's national and cultural identity. However, his experiences with social complexities, such as racial struggles, have created a contrast between his strong Chinese cultural connection and her sense of belonging in Malaysia. This points to the broader social dynamics and challenges that affect participants' perceptions of their national and cultural identity.

This emotional connection is in contrast to the social environment and cultural atmosphere in Malaysia, further deepening the complexity of their national and cultural identity. Participant 2 shared, "Malaysia is home to many different ethnic groups, but from my perspective, things here are often divided along racial

lines. As a member of the Chinese minority, I feel that we often face unfair treatment compared to the Malay majority. Because of this, I long for life in China, where we share the same culture and appearance, and where everyone is treated the same and equally.”

This perspective is extremely important to note, as it reflects the individual teenager’s perception and cognition. Participant 2’s experience highlights how communal differences, particularly along racial lines, can deeply influence one’s sense of belonging and identity. Such perceptions need to be approached with careful thought and sensitivity, as they are shaped by both personal experiences and broader social dynamics. It’s crucial to recognize the complexities of these differences and the impact they have on a young person’s view of their national and cultural identity.

4.2 Xiaohongshu Engagement and Resulting Influence

It can be observed from the research data that Xiaohongshu plays an important role in the construction process of national and cultural identity among participants. Through the use of the Xiaohongshu, they are gradually exposed to information about China’s history, culture, daily life, architectural style and degree of modernization. On the platform, they can browse introductions about Chinese history and traditional culture, learn about aspects of Chinese daily life, and explore China’s unique architectural style and modernization process. Participant 9 stated, “On Xiaohongshu, I can actually see a lot of interesting things about China, such as food and lifestyle, etc. The people in the videos seem to be very happy, which is totally different from the stereotype that China is very repressed and rigid.” The acquisition of such information is not only the accumulation of knowledge, but also the opening up of perspectives on the diversity of China, prompting them to develop a certain degree of interest and curiosity about China.

In addition, up to 50% of participants have made Chinese online friends through Xiaohongshu. Such cross-cultural communication and interaction not only promoted the exchange of language and culture, but also made them have a deeper understanding of China, thus changing some of their views and perceptions of China. “I met a friend from China on Xiaohongshu and we often talked about the differences between Chinese and Malaysian cultures. I was surprised to find that many of my favorite games were launched in China, and my friends often played them with me.” Participant 10 said.

“On this platform, I often watch videos about Chinese history and traditional culture. I like to learn about the daily life of Chinese people and explore the unique architectural style and modernization process of China, because it is different from the living environment I am usually exposed to.” The Participant 4 said. The acquisition of such information is not only the accumulation of knowledge, but also the opening up of perspectives on the diversity of China, prompting them to develop a certain degree of interest and curiosity about China.

Besides, participant 9 said that Xiaohongshu has many wonderful things about China. “I like to see things about my favorite stars on this app, and I usually like Chinese stars the most. I think China’s cultural and entertainment market is very rich, there are a lot of interesting things, very attractive.”

The influence of Xiaohongshu is not only to expand the participants’ understanding of China, but also to

include their yearning and praise for China. Participant 14 said he envied China for its high-tech products and modern cities full of tall buildings, which made his life very convenient.

Although most participants enjoyed using Xiaohongshu and valued its positive representation of China, the analysis indicates their identities were nonetheless deeply rooted in their personal experiences. According to the survey data, 80% of the respondents who firmly identified themselves as Malaysian Chinese firmly identified their nationality as Malaysian despite their deeper understanding of Chinese culture. This recognition reflects their emotional connection and sense of identity with the place where they lived and grew up.

Participant 6 expressed firmness in her nationality: “Despite my interest in Chinese culture, I consider myself Malaysian; this is where I lived and grew up, and I have a deep affection for it.” This view underlines their emotional bond to Malaysia and the value they hold for their home country. They are glad that Malaysia has preserved Chinese education so that they can receive education and influence from their mother culture in Southeast Asian countries far away from China, so as to have a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.

Nevertheless, as reported earlier, four participants showed wavering national identity; participant 1 described his yearning for China: “The China I saw on Xiaohongshu makes me feel very close, and I am more prone to consider myself Chinese, because our Chinese culture and appearance are the same as Chinese people.” “And now China is developing so well, so many tall buildings and high technology, and the cities and towns are very busy, I like that atmosphere.” This may be partly the result of the digital age of big data’s precise monitoring of individual browsing preferences and information push. Big data analytics can accurately capture individual browsing preferences and then push customized information to users, so that they are more exposed to China-related content. This solidification and circulation of information may strengthen respondents’ yearning and sense of identity with China, which in turn affects their national identity.

Generally, the participants shared their insights and perceptions with others, consolidating and expanding their cognition through communication and discussion. In the process of sharing, they also individually integrate into the chosen cultural environment. This kind of sharing is not only an expression of individual cognition but also an important way of cultural exchange and dissemination. Through communication with others, they examined their cognition from different perspectives and angles, which deepened their understanding and experience of Chinese culture and Malaysian society.

This process of refactoring, sharing, and diverging is an evolving and enriching one. Through their own efforts and exploration, the participants have gained a unique and rich understanding of the country and culture and also promoted the dissemination and exchange of culture. Their experience is not only the construction of individual cognition but also the embodiment of cross-cultural understanding and identity. In this process, some problems worth discussing have gradually emerged.

Some of them may have begun to question their own national and cultural identity because of their affection or yearning for Chinese culture. For example, participant 2 expressed her confusion: “I like Chinese culture, but I don’t feel completely Malaysian, sometimes I ask my Chinese friends where I am from.” The information dissemination and personalized push of social media may further aggravate this distress, making

individuals doubt and uneasy about their own identity and culture.

The formation of the national and cultural identity of Malaysian Chinese secondary school students is influenced by a variety of factors.

Overall, those who firmly identified themselves as Malaysian-Chinese, took the initiative to compare the pros and cons of the two countries, and made it clear that their nationality is Malaysian and not Chinese. This recognition comes from school and family education. Schools and families have stressed to them that although China is their ancestral homeland, they should be clear about their nationality and identity as part of their migration to Malaysia. This educational background and emphasis made these respondents more inclined to closely link their identity with Malaysian nationality and also prompted them to have a deeper perception and experience of the advantages of Malaysian society and culture.

On the other hand, undecided participants saw more advantages than disadvantages in China, while perceiving more disadvantages than advantages in Malaysia. This evaluation is often influenced by the network and real-world environment in which they operate. On the Internet, they may have more exposure to China's development and prosperity, see China's high-rise buildings and scientific and technological progress, and thus have a yearning for and identification with China. The perception of Malaysia's shortcomings may be derived from the challenges and problems in real life, such as the uneven socio-economic development and the complexity of the cultural environment.

5. Conclusion

In today's society, education is one of the most important factors in shaping the identity of the young generation. Firstly, the education of identity is crucial for young people's cognition and understanding. In Malaysia, the persistence of Chinese education in schools and communities has provided opportunities for young Chinese people to understand and learn about Chinese culture. By learning the Chinese language, young people learn not only the language but also the history, culture and values of China. This kind of education is not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the shaping and strengthening of identity.

Secondly, the Malaysian Chinese community's insistence on Chinese education enables the younger generation to understand and experience traditional culture more deeply. In this process, young people are exposed to the essence of traditional Chinese culture, learn traditional poetry, literature, and art, and immerse themselves in that atmosphere of culture. This cultural inheritance not only enriches their knowledge but also enhances their sense of identity and pride in Chinese culture.

It is worth noting that the Chinese language education has not shaken the identity of the Chinese youth with Malaysian citizenship. Despite their exposure to the Chinese culture through their schools and communities, they still see Malaysia as their home and country. This reflects the tolerance and understanding of multiculturalism among young Malaysian Chinese, who can find a balance between the two cultures and consciously combine their national identity with their cultural identity.

This phenomenon needs to be taken seriously, and society should be committed to creating an inclusive and diverse environment where every young person can confidently affirm their own identity and cognition.

Cultural inheritance enriches their vision and experience and enhances their sense of identity with Chinese culture. However, injustice and discrimination in society may hurt young people, causing them to have confusion about their identity. Therefore, building an inclusive and diverse social environment that respects and understands each person's identity is key to social and cultural progress.

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