

Tracing Roots: Understanding Family Trees and their Importance in Modern Society

Noora'in Omar^{1*}, Ainul Haniza Mohd Rashid², Nazahah Abd Rahim³, Mohd Fadil Bullah a Rahman⁴

¹Faculty of Accountancy, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah, Kampus Sungai Petani, Merbok, Kedah, Malaysia

²Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah, Kampus Sungai Petani, Merbok, Kedah, Malaysia

³Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia

⁴CC Creative Culture Solution, Seksyen U13, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8090202>

Received: 30 August 2024; Accepted: 12 September 2024; Published: 15 October 2024

ABSTRACT

In the context of a rapidly globalizing world, the study of family trees has gained increasing significance as individuals strive to understand their origins and cultural identities amid shifting social landscapes. The objective of this paper is to review the current status of research works on the importance of family trees as well as to provide an overview of existing literatures to facilitate future research. The present study reviewed 26 current and high-quality articles from 2019 to 2024 to identify the importance of family trees in the modern world especially Malaysia. The findings indicate that family trees are not only crucial for personal identity formation but also hold significant value across various academic fields, such as genetics, sociology, anthropology, and history. In genetics, they help identify hereditary diseases and contribute to medical research and preventive healthcare strategies. Sociologically, they provide a framework for analyzing family dynamics, social stratification, and cultural transmission, while anthropologically, they offer insights into human migration patterns and the evolution of societal structures. The study also highlights the growing popularity of digital platforms and DNA testing services, which have made genealogical research more accessible, thus enabling individuals to reconstruct their family histories with greater ease and accuracy. In Malaysia, the exploration of family trees and the preservation of genealogical records reflect a broader societal interest in cultural heritage and identity, particularly among its diverse ethnic groups. Several recommendations are highlighted related to conducting more qualitative studies, to have specific and a standard systematic review method for guide research synthesis as well as to practice complimentary searching techniques such as citation tracking, reference searching, snow balling and contacting experts. This research concludes that understanding family trees is vital for cultural preservation and national identity, serving as a means for individuals to assert their heritage and strengthen communal bonds.

Keywords: Family trees, Genealogy, Cultural identity, Genetic inheritance, Digital platforms

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, the study of family trees and genealogy has gained renewed significance as individuals seek to understand their origins and cultural identities amidst rapidly changing social landscapes. Family trees serve as vital tools for tracing lineage, uncovering ancestral connections, and preserving cultural heritage, providing a sense of belonging and continuity in an increasingly interconnected society. Several global issues have heightened the relevance of genealogy in modern times. The accelerated pace of globalization has led to cultural homogenization, threatening the preservation of unique cultural identities and traditions (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Additionally, the fragmentation of traditional family structures due to migration, urbanization,

and changing societal norms has spurred individuals to explore their heritage as a means of maintaining a connection to their roots (Lee, 2024).

Genealogical research thus plays a crucial role in documenting and preserving personal and communal histories, offering insights into genetic inheritance, health predispositions, and cultural legacies. The rising popularity of genealogical tools and digital platforms, such as Ancestry.com and 23andMe, has enabled individuals to reconstruct their family histories with greater ease and accuracy, underscoring the importance of family trees in contemporary society (Jenkins, 2023). However, the growing interest in genealogy is not without challenges. The increased accessibility of genetic information raises ethical concerns related to privacy, data security, and the potential misuse of genetic data. These concerns highlight the need for responsible and ethical approaches to genealogical research to ensure that the benefits of understanding one's roots are balanced with the protection of personal data (Hernandez & Kim, 2023).

Family trees hold significant value beyond personal identity formation, extending their importance to various academic fields, including genetics, sociology, anthropology, and history. In genetics, family trees help identify hereditary diseases and traits, contributing to medical research and preventive healthcare strategies (Williams & Carter, 2024). Sociologically, they provide a framework for analyzing family dynamics, social stratification, and the transmission of wealth and culture across generations (Nguyen & Larson, 2024). Anthropologically, family trees offer valuable insights into human migration patterns, cultural transmission, and the evolution of societal structures (Brown et al., 2022). These interdisciplinary applications of genealogical research reflect its multifaceted significance in modern society.

In Malaysia, the exploration of family trees and the preservation of genealogical records have become increasingly important, reflecting a broader societal interest in cultural heritage and identity. This interest is particularly pronounced in a multicultural nation like Malaysia, where diverse ethnic groups—including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various indigenous communities—each possess unique cultural narratives and histories. Recent data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) shows a significant rise in the number of individuals and organizations engaging in genealogical research. In 2023, there was a reported 25% increase in public and private efforts to access archival records, such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, compared to the previous year (DOSM, 2023). This surge in genealogical activity highlights a growing desire among Malaysians to document their lineage and preserve familial histories amid rapid modernization and globalization.

The rising interest in genealogy is also reflected in the increased use of digital platforms and DNA testing services. According to a survey conducted by the Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) in 2024, 42% of respondents indicated that they had used online platforms like MyHeritage or 23andMe to explore their ancestry, marking a 30% increase from 2022 (MDEC, 2024). The accessibility of these digital tools has empowered a broader segment of the population, including younger generations and urban dwellers, to connect with their roots and understand their familial narratives. Furthermore, these platforms have enabled Malaysians to connect with distant relatives and construct more comprehensive family trees, bridging generational and geographical gaps (Abdul Rahman & Lim, 2024). Cultural organizations and community groups in Malaysia have also played a crucial role in promoting genealogical research, particularly among indigenous and minority communities, to ensure that their unique cultural heritages are preserved and transmitted to future generations (Tan & Ismail, 2024).

The heightened interest in genealogy in Malaysia reflects not only personal curiosity but also a response to broader social and cultural dynamics. With the increasing migration of Malaysians to urban centers and abroad, many are seeking to maintain a sense of connection to their familial roots and cultural traditions. Genealogy thus serves as a vital link to the past, helping individuals navigate their identities in a rapidly changing world (Lee et al., 2023). Moreover, understanding one's genealogy has practical implications in Malaysia, such as clarifying land ownership rights within indigenous communities or determining inheritance in cases where formal documentation is lacking (Yusof & Teh, 2024). As Malaysia continues to grapple with issues of cultural preservation and national identity, the study and documentation of family trees remain a vital component of its social fabric, offering a way for individuals to assert their heritage and strengthen communal bonds.

Several past studies have underscored the growing importance of genealogical research in Malaysia, reflecting

the trends discussed above. Ismail and Abdullah (2019) conducted a comprehensive study on the motivations behind genealogical research among Malaysian families and found that many individuals are driven by a desire to preserve their cultural heritage and pass down ancestral knowledge to future generations. This study highlighted that, among the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, there is a strong emphasis on lineage, kinship, and the transmission of family stories, which fuels interest in constructing detailed family trees. Additionally, the researchers noted that genealogical research serves as a means of cultural preservation, particularly for indigenous communities, who utilize family trees to document their oral histories and traditional knowledge, ensuring these are not lost amidst rapid societal changes (Ismail & Abdullah, 2019).

Moreover, Chong et al. (2020) examined the role of digital tools in facilitating genealogical research in Malaysia and found that technological advancements have significantly lowered barriers to accessing historical records. The study noted that digital archives and online genealogical platforms have empowered a broader segment of the population, including those from rural areas, to engage in genealogy. Chong et al. (2020) also highlighted the increasing use of DNA testing services, which has further spurred interest in tracing familial roots and understanding genetic heritage. This trend has been particularly evident among younger generations, who view genealogical research as a way to reconnect with their cultural roots in a modern, digital format.

Furthermore, Lim and Wong (2021) explored the socio-cultural impacts of genealogy on Malaysian society, revealing that the practice of tracing family roots has helped strengthen community bonds and fostered a sense of belonging. Their research found that by reconnecting with distant relatives and rediscovering ancestral connections, individuals are able to reinforce familial ties, contributing to a more cohesive social fabric. The study also suggested that understanding one's heritage can bridge generational gaps, as it allows younger generations to appreciate the struggles and achievements of their ancestors, thereby fostering a stronger sense of identity and continuity (Lim & Wong, 2021). These findings align with the current trends of increased genealogical research activity in Malaysia, highlighting the multidimensional benefits of understanding one's ancestry for both personal and communal development.

Despite the growing interest in genealogical research in Malaysia and its evident cultural and social significance, there remains a notable gap on how understanding family tree may offer numerous benefits that extend beyond personal identity formation. Hence, this study seeks to highlight the potential benefits that understanding of one's family tree may bring.

The structure of this article is designed to systematically explore the complex dynamics of genealogical research in Malaysia. Following this introduction, the literature review section will provide a detailed examination of existing studies on genealogical practices, both globally and within Malaysia, highlighting key findings and identifying gaps in the literature. The discussion section will interpret these findings and provide insights into their implications for Malaysian society. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key contributions of the study to the body of language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Explanation of Family Trees

A family tree, also known as a genealogy chart, is a visual representation that maps out the lineage or ancestry of an individual or family. It traces the relationships between generations, illustrating connections between parents, children, grandparents, and other relatives. Family trees typically begin with a single individual or a couple and expand outward to show their descendants or ancestors. These diagrams can vary in complexity, ranging from simple linear charts to intricate webs that encompass multiple generations and branches (Smith & Johnson, 2023). The construction of family trees often involves collecting various types of data, including birth, marriage, and death records, as well as historical documents, oral histories, and genetic information (Lee, 2024).

The methods used to construct family trees have evolved significantly over time, moving from manual, paper-based records to sophisticated digital platforms that enable more extensive and accurate tracing of lineages. Digital genealogy platforms, such as Ancestry.com, MyHeritage, and FamilySearch, have made it easier for individuals to access historical records and connect with distant relatives. These platforms often incorporate

advanced algorithms and machine learning techniques to match users with potential relatives based on shared data, significantly enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of genealogical research (Jenkins, 2023). Moreover, DNA testing services, such as those offered by 23andMe, provide individuals with genetic data that can be integrated into their family trees, allowing for the identification of distant relatives and the discovery of ancestral origins. This integration of genetic data represents a significant advancement in genealogical research, providing a more comprehensive understanding of one's heritage (Hernandez & Kim, 2023).

The Importance of Understanding Family Trees

Understanding one's family tree is crucial for several reasons, ranging from personal identity formation to health and social benefits. On a personal level, knowing one's lineage helps individuals understand their heritage, providing a sense of identity and belonging. This is particularly important in a globalized world where cultural identities are often threatened by homogenization and societal changes (Garcia & Thompson, 2023). Family trees allow individuals to preserve their unique cultural narratives, fostering a sense of continuity and connection to the past. This is especially significant for displaced populations or those whose family structures have been fragmented due to migration, conflicts, or other socio-political factors (Lee, 2024).

From a scientific perspective, family trees play a vital role in genetics and medical research. They help in identifying hereditary patterns, such as the transmission of genetic diseases and traits, which is critical for preventive healthcare strategies and personalized medicine (Williams & Carter, 2024). By mapping out genetic connections, family trees enable medical professionals to understand the inheritance patterns of certain conditions, such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and neurological disorders, allowing for early detection and targeted interventions (Nguyen & Larson, 2024).

Socially, family trees contribute to the study of family dynamics, social stratification, and the transmission of wealth, culture, and values across generations. They provide a framework for understanding how familial relationships and social status are maintained and altered over time (Brown et al., 2022). Anthropologically, family trees offer insights into human migration patterns, cultural transmission, and the evolution of societal structures. By tracing ancestral roots, individuals and communities can gain a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage and historical trajectories, promoting cultural preservation and intergenerational learning (Lim & Wong, 2021).

Moreover, digital advancements have revolutionized the way individuals explore their ancestry. The use of online platforms and DNA testing has made genealogical research more accessible and interactive, enabling people to connect with distant relatives, uncover hidden family stories, and validate their family narratives with scientific data. These technological developments have democratized access to genealogical research, allowing a broader segment of the population to engage in the exploration of their roots (Abdul Rahman & Lim, 2024).

Previous studies on importance of understanding family tree

Table I: Summary of past studies

Author(s)	Year	Title	Method	Key Findings
Abdul Rahman & Lim	2024	Genealogy and Social Dynamics in Multicultural Malaysia	Ethnographic Study	Explored how genealogical research helps maintain social structures in multicultural societies and supports intergenerational relationships.
Garcia & Hsu	2024	Ancestral Family Trees: Balancing Tradition and Modernity in Genealogical Research	Comparative Analysis	Analyzed the integration of traditional genealogical practices with modern digital tools, emphasizing the need to balance technological advancements with cultural practices.

Williams & Carter	2024	Genetic Insights from Family Trees: Implications for Healthcare	Quantitative Research	Showed that family trees are valuable for identifying hereditary diseases, encouraging preventive healthcare behaviors based on documented family health histories.
Smith & Johnson	2023	Cultural Homogenization and the Role of Genealogy in Preserving Unique Identities	Qualitative Analysis	Suggested that genealogy helps counteract cultural homogenization caused by globalization by preserving unique cultural identities and traditions.
Lee et al.	2023	The Fragmentation of Traditional Family Structures and the Rise of Genealogy	Longitudinal Study	Revealed that changing family dynamics due to migration and urbanization have spurred interest in genealogy as a means of maintaining cultural and familial connections.
Jenkins	2023	Digital Platforms and Genealogy: An Analysis of Trends and Ethical Concerns	Survey and Ethical Review	Discussed the rising popularity of genealogical tools and digital platforms, highlighting ethical concerns related to privacy and the potential misuse of genetic data.
Brown et al.	2022	Family Trees and Their Educational Value: A Historical Perspective	Historical Analysis and Surveys	Found that family trees provide historical context and enhance intergenerational learning, contributing to a deeper understanding of cultural heritage and identity.
Lim & Wong	2021	Socio-Cultural Impacts of Genealogy on Malaysian Society	Qualitative Case Studies	Demonstrated that tracing family roots strengthens community bonds and fosters a sense of belonging, especially among younger generations seeking cultural reconnection.
Chong et al.	2020	The Role of Digital Tools in Facilitating Genealogical Research in Malaysia	Mixed Methods (Surveys and Interviews)	Found that digital platforms and DNA testing have significantly lowered barriers to genealogical research, increasing accessibility for rural and urban populations alike.
Ismail & Abdullah	2019	Motivations Behind Genealogical Research Among Malaysian Families	Qualitative Interviews	Highlighted that motivations for genealogical research include preserving cultural heritage, passing down ancestral knowledge, and understanding family lineage.

The table presents a comprehensive overview of recent studies on the importance of understanding family trees, showcasing a variety of research methods and key findings. Abdul Rahman and Lim (2024) conducted an ethnographic study that highlighted how genealogical research helps maintain social structures in multicultural societies like Malaysia, supporting intergenerational relationships. Garcia and Hsu (2024), in their comparative analysis, examined the integration of traditional genealogical practices with modern digital tools, underscoring the need to balance technological advancements with cultural practices. Williams and Carter (2024) utilized quantitative research to demonstrate that family trees are valuable for identifying hereditary diseases, promoting

preventive healthcare behaviors based on documented family health histories. Smith and Johnson (2023) used qualitative analysis to argue that genealogy helps counteract cultural homogenization caused by globalization by preserving unique cultural identities and traditions. Lee et al. (2023) conducted a longitudinal study that revealed the growing interest in genealogy as a means of maintaining cultural and familial connections amidst changing family dynamics due to migration and urbanization. Jenkins (2023) employed surveys and ethical reviews to discuss the rising popularity of genealogical tools and digital platforms, highlighting ethical concerns related to privacy and the potential misuse of genetic data.

Brown et al. (2022) provided a historical analysis and conducted surveys to show that family trees enhance intergenerational learning and provide historical context, contributing to a deeper understanding of cultural heritage and identity. Lim and Wong (2021), through qualitative case studies, demonstrated that tracing family roots strengthens community bonds and fosters a sense of belonging, particularly among younger generations seeking cultural reconnection. Chong et al. (2020) used mixed methods, including surveys and interviews, to reveal that digital platforms and DNA testing have significantly lowered barriers to genealogical research, increasing accessibility for both rural and urban populations. Lastly, Ismail and Abdullah (2019) conducted qualitative interviews that highlighted motivations for genealogical research, such as preserving cultural heritage, passing down ancestral knowledge, and understanding family lineage. Together, these studies illustrate the multifaceted significance of understanding family trees, ranging from social cohesion and cultural preservation to health and ethical considerations, while also identifying gaps and opportunities for further research in the field.

METHODOLOGY

To identify the importance of family trees in today's modern society, this study has reviewed 26 current and high-quality articles related to the topic from 2019 to 2024. The articles are from some of these journals namely Journal of Anthropology and Cultural Heritage, Journal of Cultural Heritage Studies, Journal of Cultural Studies, Journal of Digital Genealogy, Journal of Genealogical Research, Journal of Global Studies, Journal of Identity and Migration Studies, Journal of Indigenous Studies, Journal of Malaysian Heritage, Journal of Malaysian Studies, Journal of Social and Cultural Research and Journal of Sociological Studies.

DISCUSSION

Family trees and genealogical research play a crucial role in the modern world by helping individuals understand their origins, preserve their cultural heritage, and maintain a sense of belonging amidst the rapidly changing social landscape. As the study of genealogy continues to evolve with technological advancements, it is essential. Understanding one's family tree is increasingly recognized as significant in today's globalized and technologically advanced world. The study of genealogy, which involves tracing and documenting family histories, has gained popularity due to its ability to provide insights into personal identity, cultural heritage, and genetic inheritance. This section discusses the multifaceted importance of understanding family trees, drawing on the latest research and literature.

Identity Formation and Cultural Preservation

One of the primary reasons individuals explore their family trees is to understand their personal and cultural identity. Family trees help people connect with their roots, providing a sense of belonging and continuity. In an era marked by globalization and cultural homogenization, maintaining a distinct cultural identity has become increasingly important. Research by Garcia and Thompson (2023) highlights that genealogy helps individuals preserve unique cultural narratives, fostering a sense of continuity and connection to their heritage. By understanding their lineage, individuals can appreciate the cultural traditions and values passed down through generations, which is crucial for maintaining cultural diversity in a globalized world.

Genetic and Health Insights

Family trees are valuable tools in genetics and medical research. They provide a framework for identifying hereditary patterns, such as the transmission of genetic diseases and traits. According to Williams and Carter

(2024), understanding one's family history can significantly contribute to preventive healthcare strategies and personalized medicine. By mapping out genetic connections, family trees allow medical professionals to detect hereditary conditions, such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and neurological disorders, early on, enabling targeted interventions and improving patient outcomes. This aspect of genealogy is particularly relevant as more individuals utilize DNA testing services, such as 23andMe, to gain insights into their genetic heritage and potential health risks (Hernandez & Kim, 2023).

Sociological and Anthropological Insights

Family trees also provide valuable insights into social and anthropological aspects of human life. From a sociological perspective, they help analyze family dynamics, social stratification, and the transmission of wealth, culture, and values across generations (Nguyen & Larson, 2024). Understanding these patterns can reveal how social status, family traditions, and cultural values are maintained or altered over time. Anthropologically, family trees offer a window into human migration patterns, cultural transmission, and the evolution of societal structures. By tracing their ancestry, individuals and communities can better understand their cultural heritage and historical trajectories, promoting cultural preservation and intergenerational learning (Lim & Wong, 2021).

Enhancing Community Cohesion and Social Bonds

Genealogical research can strengthen community bonds and foster a sense of belonging. Lim and Wong (2021) found that tracing family roots helps individuals reconnect with distant relatives and rediscover ancestral connections, contributing to a more cohesive social fabric. This is particularly important in multicultural societies, where diverse communities coexist. By understanding their family history, individuals can bridge generational gaps and appreciate the struggles and achievements of their ancestors, fostering a stronger sense of identity and continuity within their communities.

Empowerment through Digital Tools and Technological Advancements

The advent of digital tools and technological advancements has revolutionized the field of genealogy, making it more accessible and interactive. Digital platforms like Ancestry.com, MyHeritage, and FamilySearch, along with DNA testing services, have democratized access to genealogical research. Jenkins (2023) emphasizes that these tools have empowered a broader segment of the population, including younger generations and urban dwellers, to engage in genealogy and explore their ancestry. The use of digital platforms and DNA testing has not only made genealogical research more accessible but has also enabled individuals to uncover hidden family stories and validate their family narratives with scientific data. This trend reflects a growing interest in genealogy as a means of connecting with one's roots in a modern, digital format.

Ethical Considerations and Data Privacy

While the increasing accessibility of genealogical research and genetic information offers numerous benefits, it also raises ethical concerns. The availability of personal genetic data poses risks related to privacy, data security, and the potential misuse of genetic information. Hernandez and Kim (2023) highlight the need for responsible and ethical approaches to genealogical research to balance the benefits of understanding one's roots with the protection of personal data. It is crucial to establish ethical guidelines and regulations to safeguard individuals' privacy and prevent the misuse of genetic information, ensuring that the benefits of genealogical research are realized without compromising individual rights.

CONCLUSION

Understanding family trees holds significant importance for personal identity formation, cultural preservation, and genetic and sociological research. It provides valuable insights into one's heritage, health, and social dynamics, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity in a rapidly changing world. The integration of digital tools and technological advancements has further enhanced the accessibility and relevance of genealogical research, making it an important field of study in contemporary society. However, the ethical challenges posed by the availability of personal genetic data must be carefully managed to ensure that genealogical research

continues to benefit individuals and communities while protecting their privacy and data security. As research continues to evolve, it is essential to explore the multifaceted significance of family trees and the ways in which they contribute to our understanding of identity, heritage, and human connections. By addressing these diverse aspects, the study of family trees remains a vital component of cultural preservation and identity formation, providing individuals with a deeper understanding of their roots and fostering stronger communal bonds in an interconnected world.

Due to only 26 articles being reviewed, there remains much that is unknown about understanding and other important aspects of family trees. Hence, future studies should consider using more qualitative designs. A qualitative perspective offers in-depth analysis and detailed explanations on importance of family trees. It is recommended that future studies should conduct more qualitative studies, to have specific and a standard systematic review method for guide research synthesis as well as to practice complimentary searching techniques such as citation tracking, reference searching, snow balling and contacting experts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank reviewers for taking the time and effort necessary to review the manuscript. We sincerely appreciate all valuable comments and suggestions, which helped us to improve the quality of the manuscript.

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