

“Do We Still Belong?”: The Multidimensional Nature of National Identity among Malaysian Youth

Zaliha Idris¹, Suhaimee Saahar@Saabar^{2*}

^{1,2}Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies (CMIWS), Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia

¹School of Marketing and Management (SOMM), Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation (APU), Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900286>

Received: 12 September 2026; Accepted: 17 September 2026; Published: 08 October 2026

ABSTRACT

National identity is frequently discussed as a singular sense of belonging, yet its empirical structure may be multidimensional, particularly among youth in multicultural societies. This study examines how National Identity Development is empirically represented as a multidimensional higher-order construct among Malaysian youth. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among 369 Malaysian youth aged 18-30 residing in the Klang Valley, using proportionate stratified random sampling. National Identity Development was assessed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) as a reflective-reflective higher-order construct comprising Membership Meaning (MMD), Positive Regard (PRD), Public Regard (PUD), Identity (IDD), and Centrality/Commitment (CPD). All five dimensions loaded significantly on the higher-order construct (MMD = .724, PRD = .872, PUD = .786, IDD = .739, CPD = .854; $p < .001$), while the higher-order construct demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity (Cronbach's $\alpha = .855$, CR = .897, AVE = .635). PRD recorded the highest observed higher-order loading, followed by CPD. However, the Stage 1 assessment identified measurement concerns for IDD (CR = .574; AVE = .321) and elevated HTMT values for PRD–IDD (.90) and PUD–CPD (.91). The study contributes a measurement-centred understanding of Malaysian youth national identity by demonstrating how five theoretically differentiated yet empirically interconnected dimensions collectively represent National Identity Development, while identifying specific areas requiring further measurement refinement and validation.

Keywords: National Identity Development, National Belonging, Malaysian Youth, Higher-Order Construct, Multidimensional Digital Communication

INTRODUCTION

The questions of national belonging have become increasingly important in multicultural societies, particularly for young people whose identities develop across multiple social and cultural contexts. National belonging extends beyond formal citizenship and can involve membership, evaluation, recognition, self-understanding and commitment. Recent youth research similarly demonstrates that national identification develops in relation to perceptions of belonging, national fit and other social identities (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2020; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2021; Gharaei et al., 2024). The present study therefore focuses specifically on the measurement structure of National Identity Development and examines how its five lower-order dimensions collectively represent the higher-order construct among Malaysian youth.

Contemporary research also shows that national belonging is shaped within socially diverse environments in which young people negotiate inclusion, cultural difference and the meaning of national membership (van Vemde et al., 2021; Wood, 2022; Gharaei et al., 2024). This reinforces the need for measurement approaches that can represent national identity as a differentiated yet interconnected construct.

This distinction is important because national identity is often discussed conceptually as though it were a unitary outcome. In practice, belonging to a national community may encompass different but related orientations. Individuals may attach meaning to membership, evaluate their national identity positively, perceive how that identity is regarded socially, incorporate it into their self-understanding, and express commitment to the nation. Treating these dimensions as interchangeable risks obscuring the multidimensional nature of national identity.

Malaysia provides a theoretically informative setting for such an examination because national identity is negotiated within a plural society in which ethnic, religious, cultural and national identities coexist. Granhenat and Abdullah (2017) demonstrated the value of multidimensional measurement for Malaysian national identity, while Social Identity Theory emphasises that group membership forms part of the self-concept and acquires meaning through categorisation, identification and comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Research in other multicultural settings likewise shows that national identity and belonging can vary according to inclusion, group boundaries, cultural fit and the coexistence of multiple identities (van Vemde et al., 2021; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2021; Verkuyten et al., 2023; Gharaei et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this paper examines National Identity Development as a multidimensional higher-order construct. Its contribution lies in assessing how the five theoretically specified lower-order dimensions are represented within the higher-order measurement structure and in reporting both the strengths and limitations observed at the first- and higher-order levels.

Research Questions

RQ1: How is National Identity Development empirically represented as a multidimensional higher-order construct among Malaysian youth?

RQ2: How do the five lower-order dimensions vary in their higher-order loadings on National Identity Development?

LITERATURE REVIEW

National Identity as a Multidimensional Social Identity

Social Identity Theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). National identity can therefore be understood as a form of collective identification in which the nation becomes a meaningful category of membership. This perspective shifts attention from formal citizenship alone towards the psychological and social meanings attached to membership, recognition and attachment. Research on youth identity development further indicates that national identity interacts with other identity domains and social relationships rather than developing in isolation (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2020; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2021).

Within the Malaysian context, national identity has been operationalised multidimensionally rather than as a single undifferentiated attitude. The National Identity Measure was originally developed by Lilli and Diehl (1999) and subsequently applied in the Malaysian context by Granhenat and Abdullah (2017). Its multidimensional orientation is also conceptually consistent with collective self-evaluation approaches that distinguish different ways individuals relate to social-group membership (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). More broadly, multidimensional models of collective identification distinguish membership, evaluation, centrality and related components rather than treating group identity as a single undifferentiated state (Ashmore et al., 2004; Leach et al., 2008; Roccas et al., 2008).

Contemporary research cautions against assuming that national identification has a single meaning or expression. National belonging can be shaped by diversity norms, perceived inclusion, cultural fit and the boundaries through which membership is defined (van Vemde et al., 2021; Wood, 2022; Verkuyten et al., 2023; Gharaei et al., 2024). Measurement should therefore preserve the internal complexity of national identity rather than collapse conceptually different manifestations prematurely.

The Five Dimensions of National Identity Development

National Identity Development was represented by five lower-order dimensions: Membership Meaning Dimension (MMD), Positive Regard Dimension (PRD), Public Regard Dimension (PUD), Identity Dimension (IDD), and Centrality/Commitment Dimension (CPD). The dimensions capture related but non-identical aspects of the individual's relationship with the national community. MMD concerns the meaning attached to national membership; PRD reflects positive regard and pride; PUD concerns perceived public regard; IDD captures identity-related self-understanding; and CPD reflects centrality and commitment in relation to the nation. Together, these dimensions provide a differentiated representation of National Identity Development.

A higher-order specification is theoretically useful when lower-order dimensions are conceptually distinguishable but are expected to manifest a broader common construct. PLS-SEM provides established procedures for specifying and estimating hierarchical component models, including two-stage approaches (Wetzels et al., 2009; Becker et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022; Hair & Alamer, 2022). Such an approach allows multidimensional meaning to be retained while representing an overarching construct parsimoniously.

Contemporary Contexts of National Belonging

National belonging develops within wider social environments in which young people encounter multiple identities, diversity norms and narratives of inclusion. Studies of youth in multicultural settings show that belonging can be associated with intergroup contact, perceived national fit and the negotiation of culturally inclusive national narratives (van Vemde et al., 2021; Wood, 2022; Gharaei et al., 2024). These findings support treating national identity as a multidimensional social-psychological construct whose internal measurement deserves explicit examination.

For the present study, the analytical focus is the measurement of National Identity Development itself. The five lower-order dimensions are therefore examined as components of a higher-order construct, with attention to both their shared representation and their first-order measurement properties.

Measurement Gap and Analytical Focus

The measurement problem addressed in this paper concerns the relationship between conceptual multidimensionality and empirical interconnection. If five national-identity dimensions are theoretically differentiated yet strongly related empirically, a higher-order representation may capture their shared variance. At the same time, weak first-order measurement properties or elevated inter-dimensional associations require transparent reporting. Accordingly, the analysis considers evidence at both the lower-order and higher-order levels rather than relying on Stage 2 results alone.

METHODOLOGY

A proportionate stratified random sampling technique was employed, with ethnicity used as the primary stratification criterion based on the population distribution of Malaysian youth in the study area. The target population comprised Malaysian youth aged 18-30 residing in the Klang Valley, encompassing Selangor, W.P. Kuala Lumpur and W.P. Putrajaya, who were active social media users. Eligible respondents were recruited through the study's designated online recruitment channels. The final analytical sample comprised 369 respondents who met the study eligibility criteria.

National Identity Development was measured using an adapted 21-item National Identity Measure (NIM). The instrument was derived primarily from Lilli and Diehl (1999), informed by its Malaysian application by Granhenat and Abdullah (2017), and conceptually supported by the Collective Self-Esteem Scale of Luhtanen and Crocker (1992). Wording was contextualised for Malaysian youth. The first-order structure comprised MMD (4 items), PRD (4 items), PUD (4 items), IDD (4 items), and CPD (5 items), using a five-point Likert response scale.

The sample comprised 192 males (52.0%) and 177 females (48.0%). Most respondents were aged 23–27 years (70.7%), followed by 28–30 years (22.5%) and 18–22 years (6.8%). Chinese respondents represented 43.6% of the sample, Malay respondents 36.3%, Bumiputera Sabah/Sarawak/Others 12.5%, and Indian respondents 7.6%. TikTok was the most frequently reported main social media platform (55.3%), followed by Instagram (21.7%) and Facebook (20.3%).

SPSS was used for preliminary screening and descriptive procedures, while SmartPLS 4 was used for PLS-SEM. National Identity Development was specified as a Reflective-Reflective Type I higher-order construct. A disjoint two-stage procedure was employed, whereby latent variable scores from the five first-order National Identity Development dimensions were subsequently used as indicators of the higher-order construct. This approach follows established recommendations for higher-order construct specification in PLS-SEM (Sarstedt et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022; Hair & Alamer, 2022).

Measurement assessment was conducted using established PLS-SEM criteria for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2022). The analysis used .85 as a conservative HTMT diagnostic criterion while recognising .90 as a more liberal reference point (Henseler et al., 2015). Higher-order indicator significance was assessed using bootstrapping with 500 subsamples.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Stage 1 Measurement Considerations

At the first-order level, most constructs in the wider measurement model demonstrated acceptable reliability and convergent validity. Within the National Identity group, however, the Identity Dimension (IDD) presented a specific measurement limitation. IDD recorded Cronbach's $\alpha = .839$, but composite reliability (CR = .574) and average variance extracted (AVE = .321) fell below the recommended thresholds. The dimension was retained because of its theoretical role within the multidimensional National Identity Development construct, but the weakness is not treated as resolved merely because the analysis proceeded to Stage 2. As summarised in Table 1, the Stage 1 assessment also identified two HTMT values requiring attention, alongside the weaker measurement properties of IDD.

Table 1. Selected Stage 1 measurement considerations for National Identity Development

Stage 1 issue	Value	Interpretation	Treatment
IDD composite reliability	.574	Below recommended level	Retained with limitation acknowledged
IDD AVE	.321	Below .50	Future item refinement required
PRD–IDD HTMT	.90	Above conservative .85 threshold	Limited first-order distinctiveness
PUD–CPD HTMT	.91	Above conservative and slightly above .90	Limited first-order distinctiveness

As shown in Table 1, the HTMT assessment indicated that most first-order construct pairs were below the conservative .85 criterion, but two National Identity pairs required attention: PRD–IDD = .90 and PUD–CPD = .91. These values indicate limited empirical distinctiveness between the paired dimensions at the first-order level. They should not be interpreted as evidence that discriminant validity was uniformly established. Instead, the results suggest that some theoretically differentiated aspects of National Identity Development are highly interconnected within the sample.

Stage 2 Higher-Order Structure of National Identity Development

The Stage 2 assessment examined whether the five lower-order dimensions adequately represented the higher-order National Identity Development construct. Table 2 presents the outer loadings, standard errors, t-values and significance levels for the five higher-order indicators.

Table 2. Outer loadings of the National Identity Development higher-order indicators

Dimension	Interpretive label	Loading	SE	t-value	Significance
MMD	Membership Meaning	.724	.031	23.41	$p < .001$
PRD	Positive Regard	.872	.015	58.23	$p < .001$
PUD	Public Regard	.786	.030	26.52	$p < .001$
IDD	Identity	.739	.029	25.42	$p < .001$
CPD	Centrality/Commitment	.854	.021	39.91	$p < .001$

As reported in Table 2, all five lower-order dimensions loaded above the .708 benchmark on National Identity Development and were statistically significant at $p < .001$. Positive Regard Dimension (PRD) recorded the highest observed loading (.872), followed by Centrality/Commitment Dimension (CPD; .854), Public Regard Dimension (PUD; .786), Identity Dimension (IDD; .739), and Membership Meaning Dimension (MMD; .724). These Stage 2 results are consistent with a higher-order representation of the five dimension scores in this sample, while the Stage 1 measurement limitations remain relevant.

In addition to the outer loadings, the reliability and convergent validity of the higher-order construct were assessed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity of the Stage 2 National Identity Development construct

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
National Identity Development	.855	.897	.635

As shown in Table 3, the higher-order construct demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity, with Cronbach's $\alpha = .855$, CR = .897 and AVE = .635. These Stage 2 statistics support the reliability of the higher-order representation but should be interpreted together with the first-order concerns identified in Table 1.

The Multidimensional Nature of National Belonging

PRD recorded the highest observed higher-order loading, followed by CPD. PRD reflects positive regard and pride associated with national membership, while CPD reflects the centrality and commitment attached to Malaysia. The observed loading pattern indicates how strongly each dimension corresponded with the higher-order construct in this sample; it should not be interpreted as evidence that one dimension is substantively more important than another without formal statistical comparison.

MMD, PUD and IDD also contributed significantly to the higher-order construct. Their comparatively lower load does not imply that they are unimportant. Rather, the pattern supports a multidimensional structure in which several orientations collectively represent National Identity Development.

The Stage 1 HTMT pattern adds an important qualification. The elevated PRD-IDD and PUD-CPD values indicate limited empirical distinctiveness between these paired dimensions at the first-order level. This pattern

is consistent with the possibility that theoretically differentiated aspects of national identity may remain closely interconnected in empirical measurement. The higher-order representation therefore provides a parsimonious account of shared variance without implying that the first-order measurement concerns have been eliminated.

The IDD result is equally important for measurement transparency. Although IDD loaded satisfactorily at Stage 2, its weaker first-order CR and AVE identify an area requiring further refinement and validation. Retaining the dimension preserves its theoretical role within the multidimensional conceptualisation of National Identity Development while recognising the need for further examination of its measurement properties.

Theoretical Contribution

The paper contributes by examining National Identity Development explicitly as a multidimensional higher-order construct. The findings show that membership meaning, positive regard, public regard, identity and centrality/commitment are interconnected manifestations of a broader national identity construct. This measurement-centred perspective complements research showing that national identity among young people develops through multiple, interconnected aspects of belonging and self-definition (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2020; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2021; Gharaei et al., 2024).

The findings also contribute to Social Identity Theory-informed research by demonstrating how collective national identification can be represented hierarchically while retaining theoretically differentiated dimensions. This is consistent with the proposition that group membership contributes to self-concept while encompassing evaluative, relational and identity-based meanings (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Contextually, the study extends multidimensional national-identity measurement within a Malaysian youth sample. This is relevant because research across multicultural settings increasingly treats national belonging as connected to inclusion, cultural diversity, national fit and the coexistence of multiple social identities (van Vemde et al., 2021; Wood, 2022; Verkuyten et al., 2023; Gharaei et al., 2024).

Limitations And Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study focused on 369 Malaysian youth aged 18-30 residing in the Klang Valley. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted within the geographical and demographic context of the study. Future research could extend the assessment of National Identity Development to youth populations across other regions of Malaysia to examine the applicability of the measurement structure in broader settings.

At the first-order level, the Identity Dimension (IDD) recorded composite reliability and average variance extracted values below the recommended thresholds, while the PRD-IDD and PUD-CPD pairs showed elevated HTMT values. These findings indicate areas of the measurement model that warrant further examination. Nevertheless, IDD was retained because of its theoretical relevance within the multidimensional conceptualisation of National Identity Development. Future studies could further refine and validate the measurement of this dimension and examine the empirical distinctiveness of closely related dimensions across different samples.

The present study examined National Identity Development using the theorised five-dimensional higher-order specification comprising Membership Meaning (MMD), Positive Regard (PRD), Public Regard (PUD), Identity (IDD), and Centrality/Commitment (CPD). Future research could further evaluate the robustness of this multidimensional specification across independent samples and research contexts. Such validation would provide additional evidence regarding the stability and applicability of the higher-order measurement structure.

The present analysis did not involve comparisons across demographic groups. Future studies examining differences across gender, age, ethnicity or other demographic characteristics should establish measurement invariance before interpreting between-group differences (Henseler et al., 2016). Further research using broader geographical coverage and diverse youth samples would also strengthen understanding of how the multidimensional structure of National Identity Development operates across different Malaysian contexts.

CONCLUSION

National belonging among the Malaysian youth in this study was represented as a multidimensional construct rather than a single undifferentiated attitude. The higher-order measurement results show that Membership Meaning, Positive Regard, Public Regard, Identity, and Centrality/Commitment all contributed significantly to National Identity Development. Positive Regard recorded the highest observed higher-order loading (.872), followed by Centrality/Commitment (.854), while the overall construct demonstrated satisfactory reliability and convergent validity ($\alpha = .855$, $CR = .897$, $AVE = .635$).

At the same time, the Stage 1 results identify measurement issues that qualify this interpretation. Limited empirical distinctiveness was observed between PRD and IDD and between PUD and CPD, while IDD displayed weaker first-order reliability and convergent validity. These findings indicate specific areas for future refinement while retaining the value of examining National Identity Development multidimensionally.

The central contribution of the paper is a more precise measurement-centred account of what National Identity Development represents empirically in this sample. The findings indicate that national belonging encompasses interconnected orientations towards membership, positive regard, public regard, identity and centrality/commitment. This provides a basis for further validation of multidimensional national identity among Malaysian youth and for subsequent research examining its relationships with other social and communication phenomena.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future Malaysian national-identity research should continue to examine national belonging multidimensionally rather than relying solely on global measures. Researchers should further refine the first-order IDD measurement, reassess the empirical boundaries between closely related dimensions, and establish measurement invariance before undertaking demographic-group comparisons. Replication across broader Malaysian settings would also help determine the stability and applicability of the five-dimensional higher-order representation.

Dataset Disclosure

The data analysed in this study were drawn from the author's broader doctoral research project. The present article addresses a distinct research objective by focusing specifically on the measurement structure of National Identity Development.

REFERENCES

1. Becker, J.-M., Klein, K., & Wetzels, M. (2012). Hierarchical latent variable models in PLS-SEM: Guidelines for using reflective-formative type models. *Long Range Planning*, 45(5–6), 359–394. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2012.10.001>
2. Gharaei, N., Fleischmann, F., & Phalet, K. (2024). National identity development among minority youth: Longitudinal relations with national fit perceptions and school belonging. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 53, 2746–2761. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-024-02036-0>
3. Granhenat, M., & Abdullah, A. N. (2017). Using National Identity Measure as an indicator of Malaysian national identity. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 2(2), 214–223. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol2iss2pp214-223>
4. Hair, J. F., & Alamer, A. (2022). Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in second language and education research: Guidelines using an applied example. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 1(3), 100027. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2022.100027>
5. Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2022). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
6. Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2015). A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 43, 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-014-0403-8>

7. Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2016). Testing measurement invariance of composites using partial least squares. *International Marketing Review*, 33(3), 405–431. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-09-2014-0304>
8. Lilli, W., & Diehl, M. (1999). Measuring national identity (MZES Working Paper No. 10). Mannheim Centre for European Social Research.
9. Luhtanen, R., & Crocker, J. (1992). A collective self-esteem scale: Self-evaluation of one's social identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18(3), 302–318. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167292183006>
10. Mastrotheodoros, S., Kornienko, O., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Motti-Stefanidi, F. (2021). Developmental interplay between ethnic, national, and personal identity in immigrant adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 50(6), 1126–1139. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01434-y>
11. Sarstedt, M., Hair, J. F., Cheah, J.-H., Becker, J.-M., & Ringle, C. M. (2019). How to specify, estimate, and validate higher-order constructs in PLS-SEM. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 27(3), 197–211. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2019.05.003>
12. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
13. Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Kornienko, O., McDermott, E. R., & Motti-Stefanidi, F. (2020). National identity development and friendship network dynamics among immigrant and non-immigrant youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 49(3), 706–723. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01181-1>
14. van Vemde, L., Hornstra, L., & Thijs, J. (2021). Classroom predictors of national belonging: The role of interethnic contact and teachers' and classmates' diversity norms. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 50, 1709–1725. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01430-2>
15. Verkuyten, M., Gale, J., Adelman, L., & Yogeeswaran, K. (2023). Maintaining a tolerant national identity: Divergent implications for the acceptance of minority groups. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 53(10), 1027–1039. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12993>
16. Wood, B. E. (2022). Belonging to the nation: Negotiating narratives of national identity in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Political Geography*, 99, 102790. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102790>
17. Ashmore, R. D., Deaux, K., & McLaughlin-Volpe, T. (2004). An organizing framework for collective identity: Articulation and significance of multidimensionality. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(1), 80–114. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.1.80>
18. Leach, C. W., van Zomeren, M., Zebel, S., Vliek, M. L. W., Pennekamp, S. F., Doosje, B., Ouwerkerk, J. W., & Spears, R. (2008). Group-level self-definition and self-investment: A hierarchical (multicomponent) model of in-group identification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(1), 144–165. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.95.1.144>
19. Roccas, S., Sagiv, L., Schwartz, S., Halevy, N., & Eidelson, R. (2008). Toward a unifying model of identification with groups: Integrating theoretical perspectives. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12(3), 280–306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868308319225>
20. Wetzels, M., Odekerken-Schröder, G., & van Oppen, C. (2009). Using PLS path modeling for assessing hierarchical construct models: Guidelines and empirical illustration. *MIS Quarterly*, 33(1), 177–195. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20650284>