

Social Capital and Social Integration among Pakistani Migrants in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

International migration has transformed the demographic and socio-economic landscape of many developing countries including Malaysia. While migrants contribute significantly to economic development their long-term integration into host societies remains uneven and highly dependent on social relationships beyond labour market participation. Existing migration literature generally assumes that social capital facilitates migrant integration; however, limited attention has been given to how different forms of social capital simultaneously promote and constrain integration within multicultural societies. This article examines the relationship between social capital and social integration among Pakistani migrants residing in Ayer Hitam, Johor, Malaysia. Guided by the social capital perspectives of Coleman (1988), Putnam (2000), and Woolcock (2001), this study employed a qualitative case study design involving semi-structured interviews with ten Pakistani migrants. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by *Atlas.ti*. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) bonding social capital as a mechanism of economic and social survival (2) selective community participation, (3) structural and socio-cultural barriers to integration and (4) negotiated integration characterized by adaptation without assimilation. The findings demonstrate that strong bonding social capital provides migrants with emotional support, employment opportunities, financial assistance and collective resilience. However, excessive dependence on intra-ethnic networks simultaneously limits opportunities to develop bridging and linking social capital with the host society and formal institutions. Consequently, although Pakistani migrants exhibit successful economic adaptation, their social integration remains partial, selective and largely instrumental. The study extends contemporary social capital theory by demonstrating that strong internal social capital does not necessarily translate into comprehensive social integration.

Keywords: Social capital, migrant integration, Pakistani migrants

INTRODUCTION

International migration has become one of the most significant demographic and social transformations of the twenty-first century. According to the International Organization for Migration (2023), more than 281 million people currently reside outside their countries of birth, representing approximately 3.6 percent of the world's population. This unprecedented level of human mobility has generated profound economic opportunities while simultaneously creating complex social challenges concerning integration, social cohesion, identity formation and community resilience. Although migration has traditionally been examined from economic and labour market perspectives, increasing scholarly attention has shifted towards understanding how migrants become integrated into host societies beyond employment and legal status (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014).

Malaysia has emerged as one of Southeast Asia's principal migrant-receiving countries. Its rapid industrialisation, relatively stable political environment and expanding service sector have attracted migrant workers, entrepreneurs, students and professionals from neighbouring as well as South Asian countries. Among these migrant populations, the Pakistani community represents an increasingly visible yet under-researched group. Unlike temporary labour migrants concentrated within manufacturing or plantation sectors, many Pakistani migrants establish small businesses, retail enterprises, restaurants, educational services and trading activities that require continuous interaction with local communities. Consequently, their integration experiences provide an important opportunity to understand how migrant communities negotiate everyday social relationships within Malaysia's multicultural environment.

Social integration, however, should not be understood merely as physical presence or economic participation within a receiving society. Ager and Strang (2008) conceptualise integration as a multidimensional process encompassing structural participation, social connections, cultural adaptation, rights, citizenship, identity and mutual acceptance. Integration therefore requires migrants not only to secure employment and housing but also to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships, develop trust across ethnic boundaries and participate actively within broader community life. These dimensions become particularly significant in multicultural societies where ethnic diversity, historical experiences and institutional arrangements shape opportunities for social interaction.

Within migration scholarship, social capital has become one of the most influential concepts for explaining migrant adaptation. Coleman (1988) conceptualised social capital as resources embedded within social relationships that facilitate collective action and individual achievement. Similarly, Putnam (2000) argued that networks, trust and norms of reciprocity strengthen cooperation and social cohesion. Extending these perspectives, Woolcock (2001) differentiated social capital into bonding, bridging and linking dimensions, emphasising that different forms of social relationships generate distinct developmental outcomes. Bonding social capital refers to strong ties among family members, close friends and individuals sharing similar identities; bridging social capital connects individuals across different social groups; while linking social capital reflects vertical relationships with institutions, authorities and formal organisations.

Previous migration studies consistently demonstrate that social capital plays a crucial role during migrants' initial settlement. Co-ethnic networks facilitate employment opportunities, housing, financial assistance, emotional support and access to information, thereby reducing migration risks and uncertainties (Portes, 1998; Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008). Within migrant communities, bonding social capital often functions as an informal welfare system compensating for limited institutional support. For newly arrived migrants, these networks provide practical assistance while simultaneously preserving cultural identity, language, religious practices and community solidarity.

Nevertheless, recent literature suggests that social capital may produce contradictory consequences. Although strong intra-ethnic networks strengthen community resilience, excessive dependence upon bonding social capital may unintentionally discourage broader engagement with host communities. Putnam (2007) argues that dense internal networks sometimes reinforce social closure by reducing opportunities for cross-group interaction. Ryan et al. (2008) similarly observe that while co-ethnic networks facilitate settlement, they may also restrict migrants' access to wider social opportunities, thereby limiting the development of bridging relationships. Woolcock (2001) further argues that the absence of linking social capital restricts migrants' access to institutional resources, public services and broader opportunities for social mobility.

This theoretical contradiction is particularly relevant within the Malaysian context. Malaysia's migration governance has historically prioritised labour market regulation, immigration control and economic productivity rather than long-term migrant integration (Kaur, 2014; Devadason & Chan, 2014). Consequently, many migrants depend heavily upon informal ethnic networks to access employment, accommodation and social support. While such arrangements facilitate economic adaptation, they may simultaneously reduce incentives and opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with local communities. As a result, migrants may become economically embedded yet remain socially peripheral.

Despite the growing body of migration literature, empirical research examining the relationship between social capital and migrant integration in Malaysia remains relatively limited. Existing studies have largely concentrated

on labour migration, irregular migration, human trafficking and immigration policy, whereas comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how everyday social relationships shape integration experiences among entrepreneurial migrant communities. Furthermore, studies focusing specifically on Pakistani migrants remain scarce despite their increasing presence within Malaysia's urban and semi-urban economic landscape.

This article addresses these empirical and theoretical gaps by examining the relationship between social capital and social integration among Pakistani migrants residing in Ayer Hitam, Johor. Drawing upon qualitative evidence, the article investigates how different forms of social capital influence migrants' participation within local communities, interactions with host society members and relationships with formal institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration, Social Integration and the Changing Nature of Migrant Communities

International migration has evolved beyond a simple movement of labour across national borders into a multidimensional social phenomenon involving identity negotiation, transnationalism, social networks and community formation. Contemporary migration is increasingly characterised by circular mobility, transnational family arrangements, digital communication and multiple identities that connect migrants simultaneously to both their countries of origin and destination (Castles et al., 2014; Faist, 2000). Consequently, successful migration can no longer be evaluated solely through employment outcomes or economic productivity but must also consider migrants' ability to participate meaningfully within the host society.

Within migration studies, social integration has emerged as one of the central concepts for understanding migrants' long-term incorporation into receiving societies. Rather than representing a one-directional process of assimilation, contemporary scholars conceptualise integration as a dynamic, multidimensional and reciprocal process involving both migrants and host communities (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Integration encompasses structural participation, cultural adaptation, social interaction, political inclusion and identity formation. Ager and Strang (2008) argue that successful integration requires access to employment, housing, education and health services while simultaneously fostering social connections, mutual trust, citizenship and a shared sense of belonging.

This multidimensional understanding is particularly important within multicultural societies such as Malaysia. Unlike classical immigration countries including Canada and Australia, Malaysia has historically adopted a temporary labour migration model that emphasises economic contribution rather than permanent settlement. Consequently, migration governance focuses predominantly on labour market needs, immigration control and legal documentation rather than comprehensive integration policies (Kaur, 2014). Under such circumstances, migrants often rely heavily on their own ethnic communities to compensate for limited institutional support.

Pakistani migrants illustrate this phenomenon particularly well. Many migrants arrive through family sponsorship, business networks or educational opportunities before gradually establishing retail businesses, restaurants, textile shops and trading enterprises. Their economic activities require frequent interaction with local Malaysians; however, economic interaction does not necessarily imply deeper social integration. This distinction forms the central puzzle addressed in this article.

Profile of Pakistani Immigrants in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the presence of the Pakistani community has formed a unique migration narrative compared to other migrant groups. In contrast to contract labor in the construction sector, a large number of Pakistanis in Malaysia are actively involved in the retail business sector, particularly textiles, furniture, and household goods. The factor of religious similarity (Islam) is often considered as a catalyst that facilitates their interaction with the local population whose majority is Muslim. However, cultural differences, language, and social stigma against "foreign traders" remain a wall that challenges the process of assimilation and deeper social integration in the structure of Malaysian society. Bilateral relations between Malaysia and Pakistan have a strong historical foundation, marked by cultural similarities, economic cooperation, and diplomatic collaboration that have developed over time (Hussain et.al 2022). Nevertheless, in the current context of the 21st century, both countries face a series of

oppositions that require careful navigation to maintain and improve the quality of the relationship (Hussain et.al 2024). Geopolitical dynamism, economic liquidity, and security issues are some of the main difficulties that require in-depth analysis to understand the prospects and obstacles in the development of this relationship (Hussain et.al 2024).

Social Capital: From Individual Resources to Collective Integration

Among the various theoretical approaches explaining migrant adaptation, social capital has become one of the most influential. Although different scholars conceptualise social capital differently, they generally agree that social relationships constitute valuable resources facilitating individual and collective action.

The earliest influential formulation was proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), who defined social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to durable social networks. Unlike later communitarian perspectives, Bourdieu viewed social capital primarily as a mechanism through which individuals and groups reproduce social inequality. Access to valuable networks provides privileged opportunities unavailable to others, thereby reinforcing existing power relations. Within migration contexts, Bourdieu's perspective suggests that migrants possessing stronger ethnic business networks are better positioned to obtain employment, financial resources and entrepreneurial opportunities than newly arrived migrants without such connections.

While Bourdieu emphasised power and inequality, Coleman (1988) introduced a more functional perspective. Coleman argued that social capital resides within relationships characterised by obligations, expectations, trustworthiness and information channels. According to Coleman, trust enables cooperation by reducing transaction costs and facilitating collective action. For migrant communities, trusted relationships encourage mutual assistance, information sharing, financial cooperation and emotional support, particularly during the initial settlement period.

Coleman's formulation is especially relevant for Pakistani migrant communities because many economic activities depend upon interpersonal trust rather than formal institutional arrangements. New arrivals frequently obtain employment through relatives or friends, receive temporary accommodation from community members and acquire business knowledge through informal ethnic networks. Such practices demonstrate how social capital functions as an alternative mechanism of social protection when formal institutional support remains limited.

However, neither Bourdieu nor Coleman sufficiently differentiated between different forms of social relationships. This distinction was later developed by Robert Putnam (2000), whose contribution has become particularly influential within migration studies.

Putnam's Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Putnam (2000) conceptualises social capital as networks, norms of reciprocity and trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Unlike Bourdieu, who emphasised inequality, Putnam focused primarily on community cohesion and civic engagement. His major theoretical contribution lies in distinguishing between bonding social capital and bridging social capital.

Bonding social capital refers to dense relationships among individuals sharing similar identities, including family members, relatives, close friends, neighbours and ethnic communities. These relationships generate emotional support, solidarity, mutual trust and collective resilience. Within migrant communities, bonding social capital often constitutes the first line of protection against uncertainty by providing accommodation, employment opportunities, financial assistance and psychological support.

For Pakistani migrants in Malaysia, bonding social capital is largely constructed through kinship, shared ethnicity, religious institutions, friendship networks and transnational business relationships. Mosques, ethnic businesses and family connections serve as important spaces where trust and mutual obligations are continuously reproduced. Such networks significantly reduce migration risks and facilitate economic adaptation.

Nevertheless, Putnam (2007) cautions that excessive bonding may simultaneously generate social closure. Communities that rely predominantly upon internal relationships may interact less frequently with wider society,

thereby reducing opportunities to establish cross-cultural friendships and broader civic participation. Strong internal solidarity may therefore unintentionally reinforce ethnic boundaries.

In contrast, bridging social capital connects individuals across different ethnic, cultural and religious groups. These relationships promote intercultural understanding, reduce prejudice and facilitate access to broader economic and social opportunities. For migrants, bridging relationships enhance language acquisition, cultural familiarity, employment mobility and social acceptance.

Within multicultural societies, bridging social capital represents an essential mechanism through which migrants gradually develop a genuine sense of belonging. Rather than replacing ethnic identity, bridging relationships complement bonding ties by expanding migrants' social horizons beyond their immediate ethnic communities.

The present study argues that although Pakistani migrants possess extensive bonding social capital, opportunities for developing bridging relationships remain comparatively limited because daily interactions frequently occur within commercial settings rather than broader community spaces. Consequently, relationships with local Malaysians often remain functional and transactional instead of developing into deeper social relationships.

Woolcock's Linking Social Capital

While Putnam primarily focused upon horizontal relationships among citizens, Woolcock (2001) introduced the concept of linking social capital, referring to vertical relationships connecting individuals with institutions possessing authority, resources and decision-making power.

Linking social capital includes relationships with government agencies, local authorities, educational institutions, financial organisations and civil society organisations. Such relationships enable individuals to access public services, legal protection, institutional support and opportunities unavailable through informal networks alone.

For migrants, linking social capital is particularly important because successful integration depends not only upon community relationships but also upon institutional inclusion. Migrants who establish constructive relationships with local authorities, immigration agencies, schools and community organisations are generally better positioned to access information, resolve administrative issues and participate within broader society.

However, in many temporary migration systems, institutional relationships remain relatively weak. Malaysia's migration governance primarily regulates migrants through employment permits and immigration procedures rather than integration programmes (Kaur, 2014). Consequently, many migrants continue relying upon ethnic networks instead of formal institutions.

The findings presented later demonstrate that Pakistani migrants frequently perceive interactions with formal institutions as administrative necessities rather than opportunities for social inclusion. This limited development of linking social capital further contributes to partial integration.

Social Capital and Migrant Integration: An Ambivalent Relationship

Although social capital is generally associated with positive developmental outcomes, recent scholarship increasingly recognises its ambivalent nature. Portes (1998) argues that social capital simultaneously generates benefits and constraints depending upon network structure and social context.

Several international studies support this perspective. Ryan et al. (2008), examining Polish migrants in London, found that ethnic networks greatly facilitated settlement but often reduced opportunities for wider social interaction. Similarly, Lancee (2010) demonstrated that bonding social capital enhanced migrants' psychological well-being but did not necessarily improve labour market mobility or broader integration. In Canada and Australia, studies have consistently shown that migrants with balanced bonding and bridging networks generally experience better integration outcomes than migrants relying exclusively upon co-ethnic communities (Berry, 1997).

Within Southeast Asia, migration research has concentrated largely upon labour migration, irregular migration and migration governance. Comparatively fewer studies have examined how different dimensions of social

capital influence integration processes, particularly among entrepreneurial migrant communities. Existing Malaysian research has primarily investigated migrant labour policies (Devadason & Chan, 2014), labour migration management (Kaur, 2014), irregular migration (Kassim & Mat Zin, 2011) and economic contributions. Relatively limited empirical attention has been devoted to understanding how migrants develop social relationships beyond employment.

Furthermore, studies specifically focusing upon Pakistani migrants remain scarce despite their distinctive migration patterns characterised by entrepreneurship, family migration and strong religious networks. This empirical gap provides the primary justification for the present study.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design involving semi-structured interviews with ten Pakistani migrants. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. This sampling was also chosen to determine the main informant sample because this sampling emphasizes the selection of samples that have suitability, credibility and the ability to answer the research questions even though the sample size is small (Emmel, 2013, Patton, 2014). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by *Atlas.ti*. The following are the characteristics of the informant's background.

Table 1: Informants Background

Informants	Gender	Age	Occupation	Period of Stay in Malaysia
I01	male	55	Business Owner	10 year
I02	male	45	worker	5 year
I03	male	33	worker	4 year
I04	male	37	worker	3 year
I05	male	28	worker	2 year
I06	male	53	worker	7 year
I07	male	56	Business Owner	10 year
I08	male	26	worker	4 year
I09	male	45	Business Owner	12 year
I10	male	37	worker	3 year

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how social capital shapes the social integration of Pakistani migrants in Malaysia. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand migrants' lived experiences, perceptions and everyday social interactions within their social contexts rather than measure statistical relationships. The case study enabled an in-depth exploration of the complex processes of trust, belonging and community participation while preserving contextual realities (Yin, 2018). The study focused on the Pakistani migrant community in Ayer Hitam, Johor, with the aim of generating analytical rather than statistical generalisation to advance theoretical understanding of social capital and migrant integration. Ayer Hitam, Johor was selected because it represents an important yet understudied migrant settlement outside Malaysia's major metropolitan centres. The township has become a commercial hub called the "Aneka Warna" where many Pakistani migrants operate family-owned businesses, including restaurants, textile shops and convenience stores. These businesses require regular interaction with local residents making Ayer Hitam, Johor an appropriate setting to examine whether sustained economic engagement contributes to broader social integration beyond workplace relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Bonding Social Capital as a Mechanism of Economic and Social Survival

The strongest finding concerns the central role of bonding social capital in sustaining the Pakistani migrant community. informants consistently described their ethnic community as the primary source of economic security, emotional support and practical assistance.

For newly arrived migrants, ethnic networks functioned as an informal settlement system. Family members, relatives and fellow Pakistanis assisted newcomers in finding employment, accommodation and business opportunities before they became familiar with Malaysian society.

"When I first came here, everything was arranged by my cousin. He found me a place to stay and introduced me to people who helped me start working." (I04)

"Without the Pakistani community, life here would have been much more difficult because we depend on each other." (I02)

These narratives demonstrate that migration was rarely an individual undertaking. Instead, migration occurred within established transnational social networks that reduced uncertainty and facilitated adaptation.

Information regarding employment opportunities was exchanged freely among community members.

"If another Pakistani needs help, we help because tomorrow we may need help too." (I07)

Such reciprocal obligations reflect Coleman's (1988) conceptualisation of social capital, where trust reduces transaction costs and facilitates cooperation. Unlike formal institutional arrangements, these relationships were maintained through shared cultural norms, religious identity and long-term interpersonal familiarity.

Informants described Friday prayers as opportunities to exchange business information, discuss immigration matters and support newly arrived migrants. Thus, religion operated not merely as spiritual practice but also as an institutional mechanism for maintaining community cohesion.

Ethnic business networks constituted another important dimension of bonding social capital. Informants frequently purchased supplies from fellow Pakistanis, referred customers to one another and shared commercial knowledge. Competition existed but rarely undermined community solidarity. Instead, informants described business success as benefiting the wider community because successful entrepreneurs often employed newly arrived migrants.

This finding suggests that ethnic entrepreneurship represents a collective rather than purely individual strategy for socioeconomic mobility. These findings indicate that bonding social capital extends beyond emotional attachment. Instead, it functions simultaneously as economic capital, informational capital, cultural capital and psychological capital. Without these networks, informants believed their migration experiences would have been significantly more difficult. However, the strength of these internal relationships also produced unintended consequences discussed in subsequent themes.

Theme 2: Selective Community Participation: Integration through Economic Interaction

The second major finding concerns the nature rather than the frequency of interaction between Pakistani migrants and Malaysian society. Informants generally reported frequent contact with local Malaysians. However, these interactions occurred primarily within commercial rather than social settings. Consequently, interaction did not necessarily produce deeper integration.

Informants interacted daily with customers, suppliers, neighbouring shop owners and service providers. Nevertheless, these relationships remained largely transactional.

"I know many Malays because they come to my shop every day." (I01)

However, when asked whether those customers later became close friends, the informant answered:

"No. Usually they are customers only." (I09)

"We respect each other, but after work everyone goes back to their own community." (I08)

These responses illustrate that frequent interaction alone does not automatically produce meaningful social relationships. Many informants explained that long working hours limited opportunities for broader community

involvement. Others expressed uncertainty regarding whether their participation would be welcomed. Consequently, social participation remained selective and pragmatic.

Informants generally viewed interaction with Malaysians as necessary for business success rather than social inclusion. Economic relationships therefore became the principal avenue through which migrants connected with host society. This pattern differs substantially from broader conceptions of integration emphasising civic participation, interpersonal friendship and community belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008).

The findings suggest that Pakistani migrants experience what may be termed instrumental integration. Interaction occurs because economic activities require cooperation. However, these interactions rarely evolve into strong interpersonal relationships characterised by mutual trust, emotional intimacy or long-term friendship. Consequently, economic participation should not be interpreted as evidence of comprehensive social integration.

Theme 3: Structural Barriers and the Persistence of Social Boundaries

Although informants generally expressed positive attitudes towards Malaysians, they identified numerous structural barriers limiting deeper integration. Several informants reported limited proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia. Although sufficient for commercial transactions, language limitations reduced confidence when participating in broader community activities.

Informants explained that complex conversations remained challenging despite years of residence. Time constraints, business ownership required exceptionally long working hours, many shops operated from early morning until late evening. Consequently, informants possessed limited opportunities to develop friendships beyond business relationships.

"Most of my life is at the shop." (I02)

"... there are also but not always able to go... like a ceremony at the surau once a month..." (I03)

This simple statement illustrates how occupational demands shape social opportunities. Informants also referred to immigration procedures as creating uncertainty. Visa renewals, administrative requirements and documentation obligations generated continuous concern. Rather than encouraging institutional engagement, these experiences often reinforced dependence upon ethnic networks capable of providing advice and assistance.

"...no activity with agencies at their place but fire dept will come once a while..." (I06)

"...police everyday patrols here... sometimes they will stop and ask..." (I10)

"...The problem here, for example, when the council comes to work is to check the license, SSM..." (I02)

Several informants believed that negative public perceptions occasionally influenced social interaction. Although overt discrimination was rarely reported, some informants sensed cautious attitudes from local residents during initial encounters. Over time, these perceptions generally improved through repeated interaction. Nevertheless, stereotypes continued to influence first impressions.

"... there are a few stories sometimes with my wife, mother... father doesn't say..." (I05)

These findings indicate that barriers to integration are not primarily cultural. Instead, they emerge from interactions between migration governance, labour demands, language and public perceptions. Consequently, integration should be understood as a structural rather than purely individual process.

Theme 4: Negotiated Integration: Economic Success without Deep Social Integration

The final theme represents the most significant contribution of this study. Informants did not perceive themselves as socially isolated. Nor did they consider themselves fully integrated. Instead, they described a process of continuous negotiation between preserving Pakistani identity and adapting to Malaysian society.

. “...yaa... we don’t have time to mix around...” (I08)

Informants consistently emphasised maintaining Pakistani cultural traditions, family values, language, religious practices and food culture. These cultural practices were regarded as essential components of community identity. Informants did not believe successful integration required abandoning these traditions. At the same time, informants demonstrated considerable adaptation. Many spoke conversational Bahasa Malaysia and most understood local customs.

Informants complied with local laws and respected cultural sensitivities. Nevertheless, adaptation remained selective. Core cultural identities were intentionally preserved.

“...there is also money to give to the children of the “hari raya” (I010)

Perhaps the most important finding emerging from the interviews is that economic success did not necessarily produce deeper social integration. Informants generally experienced stable businesses, regular Malaysian customers, financial independence and positive commercial relationships.

However, comparatively few described close Malaysian friendships, participation in civic organisations, leadership within community associations and extensive cross-ethnic family relationships.

“...there is one... Malay... but we only go out drinking once a month...” (I06)

Pakistani migrants are neither socially excluded nor fully integrated. Instead, they occupy an intermediate position characterised by successful economic adaptation, strong ethnic solidarity, selective interaction with host communities, preserved cultural identity and limited institutional engagement. This pattern is best conceptualised as negotiated integration. Rather than assimilation, migrants continuously negotiate how much adaptation is necessary while maintaining community cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between social capital and social integration among Pakistani migrants in Ayer Hitam, Johor, Malaysia. Drawing upon qualitative evidence and the theoretical perspectives of Coleman, Putnam and Woolcock, the study demonstrates that social capital performs multiple and sometimes contradictory functions throughout the migration process.

The findings reveal that strong bonding social capital constitutes the foundation of migrants' economic adaptation and community resilience. Family networks, religious institutions and ethnic entrepreneurship provide essential resources enabling migrants to overcome settlement challenges. However, these same networks simultaneously reduce dependence upon wider social relationships, thereby limiting opportunities to develop bridging and linking social capital.

Consequently, Pakistani migrants experience a form of partial integration characterised by successful economic participation but comparatively limited social embeddedness within the wider Malaysian community. The principal contribution of this study is therefore the demonstration that economic integration does not necessarily lead to social integration. Instead, meaningful integration depends upon maintaining a balanced relationship among bonding, bridging and linking social capital.

Accordingly, this study proposes the concept of negotiated integration, which recognises that migrants continuously balance cultural preservation with selective adaptation rather than pursuing complete assimilation. Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study provides practical implications for migration governance by highlighting the importance of promoting cross-community interaction and institutional inclusion alongside economic participation.

Ultimately, successful migrant integration should not be measured solely by employment or economic productivity but by migrants' ability to develop meaningful social relationships, participate within community life and cultivate a genuine sense of belonging within the receiving society.

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