

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Cohesion Through Participatory Patriotism: A Thematic Analysis on the Role of Volunteering and Cross-Ethnic Interaction Among University Students**Siti Norayu Mohd Basir^{1*}, Mohd Arsad Johanis², Nor Hafizan Habib Sultan³ & Siti Balkis Mohamed Ibrahim⁴***Department of Language & General Studies, Faculty of Business & Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis***ABSTRACT**

Although contemporary university campuses are increasingly diverse, the internalization of patriotic values among students often remains superficial and confined to seasonal national symbols. This limitation is compounded by persistent self segregation and social polarization, which continue to obstruct organic cross-ethnic interactions. To address this gap, this study examines how volunteerism and cross-ethnic interaction conceptualized as 'participatory patriotism' can strengthen social cohesion. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through the triangulation of in-depth interviews with three academic experts and nine undergraduate students. The thematic analysis identified four primary outcomes: the necessity of shifting from symbolic patriotism to tangible social and environmental action; the efficacy of volunteerism in mitigating prejudice; the requirement for structured interventions to target campus polarization; and the role of cross-cultural literacy and constitutional awareness in fostering identity resilience. The study concludes that achieving sustainable ethnic harmony demands a paradigm shift from passive classroom learning to proactive field engagement, demonstrating that a participatory patriotism approach offers a highly practical and effective instrument for social integration.

Keywords: Participatory Patriotism, Social Cohesion, Volunteerism, Campus Polarization, Cross-Ethnic Interaction, Qualitative Triangulation.

ARTICLE INFO**Received:** [31/07/2026]**Accepted:** [07/08/2026]**Published:** [10/08/2026]**Issue Period:** July – August 2026 (Bi-Monthly)**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2026.6320>**Copyright:** © 2026 The Author(s). Published by IJMSSSR. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) License.**INTRODUCTION**

Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia serve not only as centers of academic excellence but also as important agents of socialization in shaping the ecosystem of a multicultural society. Within the context of nation-building, university students represent strategic national assets who must be equipped with strong values of patriotism and ethnic harmony to sustain social cohesion and national stability (Mat Daud & Ishak, 2022; Othman et al., 2023). Traditionally, the discourse on patriotism has often been

associated with emotional attachment, loyalty to the nation, and respect for national symbols such as the flag and national anthem (Samsu, 2022; Abd Rahman et al., 2025). However, in line with contemporary societal changes and increasingly complex social dynamics, the understanding of patriotism must extend beyond emotional sentiment and rhetorical expression.

Accordingly, scholars have begun to emphasize the concept of participatory patriotism. Unlike symbolic patriotism, which is largely passive in nature, participatory patriotism requires the active involvement of citizens in community engagement, volunteerism, and direct contributions to societal well-being regardless of ethnic background (Basir et al., 2021; Samsu, 2022). For university students, volunteer activities and participation in campus-based associations are increasingly recognized as organic platforms for translating patriotic values into tangible actions that contribute meaningfully to social cohesion and the strengthening of interethnic harmony.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

From Symbolic Patriotism to Constructive Patriotism

There is a significant paradigm shift in interpreting the value and meaning of patriotism in the 21st century, especially in facing the challenges of globalization and the explosion of information technology. Traditionally, patriotism is often viewed through the lens of "blind patriotism," characterized by unconditional loyalty to the nation, absolute obedience to authority, and the tendency to reject any form of criticism regarding existing flaws. This form of patriotism often limits the definition of love for the country to symbolic compliance alone, such as singing the national anthem, flying the flag during independence month, and memorizing the official history of the nation without critical analytical understanding.

Conversely, scholars such as Schatz and Staub (1991) have introduced the concept of constructive patriotism. This type of patriotism is more flexible, critical, and prioritizes a balance toward the holistic well-being of the nation without sidelining the rights of minority groups or glorifying the majority. Unlike blind patriotism, citizens who possess constructive patriotism translate their love through concrete actions and a high sense of responsibility. They are prepared to develop the community, foster cross-cultural harmony, and at the same time, are brave enough to critique flawed policies for the common good. In the context of university student life, this transition is critical. Students should not be passive recipients; instead, the value of constructive patriotism needs to be translated into a form of participatory patriotism. Participatory patriotism demands proactive social involvement where the continuity of identity and love for the country are proven through contributions of labor, ideas, and time to build the sustainability and harmony of the surrounding society.

Volunteering as a Manifestation of Social Integration and Identity Strengthening

Patriotism requires appreciation and practical application to interpret the feeling of love for the country in reality. Involvement in volunteer activities is one of the emotional manifestations in the form of concrete actions, and it is considered an important effort in carrying out "patriotic duty" among multi-ethnic societies. This is because volunteering places community interests ahead of personal interests, which is the main core in building a good nation-state.

Volunteering has great potential to bring a multi-racial society toward communal well-being organically. It acts as a socialization platform that applies the values of sharing, tolerance, empathy, and interdependence that transcend ethnic boundaries.

When students from various ethnic backgrounds pool their efforts in a volunteer mission, such as disaster relief, environmental clean-up, or community programs in rural areas, they indirectly build a strong foundation of understanding. The process of cross-cultural interaction that occurs naturally in the field

offers an experience that cannot be taught theoretically in a lecture hall. Therefore, volunteerism not only curbs anti-social behavior and the phenomenon of hedonism, but it also functions as a neutralizing agent that breaks down the walls of polarization on campus (Othman et al., 2023). At the same time, this spirit of volunteerism strengthens the students' national identity as it fosters a sense of belonging and the awareness that they play an important role in shaping the future harmony of the nation (Hashim et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory (SIT)

This study is underpinned by the Social Identity Theory (SIT) introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979). SIT explains how humans psychologically construct their identity, attachment, and self-esteem based on membership in a social group (in-group) (Awang Bono et al., 2020). According to this theory, three main cognitive processes exist: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. In the context of students in public universities (IPTA) consisting of diverse ethnic backgrounds, their natural tendency is to go through the process of social categorization, where they subconsciously label and segregate themselves according to race. This situation encourages students to feel more comfortable socializing, joining associations, and completing assignments with members of their own ethnic group. The process of social comparison often leads to the emergence of prejudice and stereotypes towards out-groups, which ultimately manifests the significant phenomena of polarization and self-segregation, whether in the cafeteria, hostel, or lecture hall (Othman et al., 2023).

However, the strength of SIT also lies in its explanation that an individual's identity is not something static or singular, but rather that multiple identities exist. SIT suggests that this conflict and social comparison gap can be bridged by creating a superordinate identity. When students' cross ethnic boundaries and cooperate towards achieving shared goals, such as carrying out volunteer and community service missions, they no longer see themselves merely as 'Malay', 'Chinese', or 'Indian'. Instead, they begin to identify themselves with a larger and more inclusive social identity, namely as a volunteer team and ultimately as 'Bangsa Malaysia' (Malaysian Nation) (Othman et al., 2023). Therefore, interventions through structured volunteerism and associational activities are extremely critical for building bridges of interaction, practically reducing prejudice, and integrating ethnic groups into a complete social cohesion and national identity (Basir et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

Although various policy and formal curriculum initiatives such as compulsory University subjects have been implemented at the IPTA level, the reality of the continuity of social interaction among students outside the lecture hall remains worrying. There is a significant gap between the idealism of harmony taught in class and the actual practice in the field. Past studies and current observations show that the culture of polarization and self-segregation is still entrenched. Students are found to be more comfortable grouping, associating, and interacting within their respective ethnic cocoons, thus hindering the continuity of cross-cultural interaction (Adam et al., 2021; Othman et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the manifestation of patriotism among today's youth is often seasonal, peaking only during the independence month, and failing to translate into sustained social responsibility. If this prejudice and racial wall are not broken down through practical intervention, ethnic harmony in Malaysia will remain cosmetic and fragile. Since true patriotism demands commitment beyond rhetoric, the spirit of volunteerism is seen as a double-edged sword capable of bridging this interaction gap (Basir et al., 2021). When students are involved in volunteer activities that require cross-ethnic interdependence and cooperation, it directly forms a shared identity and goals (Othman et al., 2023).

Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed to assess the extent to which activities outside the lecture hall, particularly through volunteer practices and structured cross-ethnic interaction, can act as the main catalyst.

This holistic intervention not only functions as a mechanism to foster participatory patriotism to break down segregation walls, but it is also critical in linking the understanding of ethnic harmony and the strengthening of self-identity, toward producing a generation with high, sincere, and consistent patriotic tendencies.

Research Objectives

Based on the problem statement above, this study was formulated to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore the role of volunteer and association activities as a platform for the manifestation of participatory patriotism among students in Public Higher Education Institutions (IPTA).
2. To analyze the effectiveness of cross-ethnic interaction outside the lecture hall in breaking down prejudice and building social cohesion.
- 3.

Research Questions

1. How can volunteer practices and association activities form students' participatory patriotism values?
2. To what extent is practical cross-ethnic interaction capable of overcoming issues of polarization and self-segregation in the campus environment?

Research Design

This study uses a fully qualitative approach to explore and deeply understand the phenomenon of ethnic harmony, volunteerism, and the fostering of participatory patriotism among students. An exploratory case study design is applied as it allows researchers to examine experiences, perceptions, and the reality of social interaction directly from the perspective of the actors themselves in the field. This approach aligns with the research objectives which demand descriptive and analytical answers (examining the 'how' and 'why' elements), which are difficult to measure through quantitative instruments alone.

Sampling and Research Informants

Purposive sampling techniques were used to select informants who were truly relevant and had direct experience with the focus of the study. The selection of informants was divided into two main groups to enable a comprehensive data triangulation process:

- **Expert/Educator Group (Top-Down Perspective):** Consists of three academic experts and Ethnic Relations subject instructors at higher education institutions, coded as X1, X2, and X3. Their selection is based on expertise in the fields of sociology, nationhood, and experience in handling student interaction continuity in lecture halls.
- **Student Group (Bottom-Up Perspective):** Consists of nine public higher education institution students (coded from RP1 to RP9). They represent ethnic diversity and have a background of involvement in extra-curricular activities such as associations and volunteering.

Data Analysis Method

The obtained verbatim data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The analysis process involved several phases of cross-reading to familiarize with the data, followed by an open coding process to identify recurring patterns and meaningful phrases shared by the informants. These codes were then grouped into several main themes aligned with the research objectives, such as 'the transition from symbolic patriotism to action' and 'associations as a mechanism of unity'. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher applied the source triangulation method. This process involved coordination and cross-

comparison between the answers provided by the academic expert group (X1, X2, X3) with the narrative of reality experienced by the students (RP1-RP9).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section discusses the results of the qualitative analysis obtained from in-depth interviews with three academic experts (X1, X2, X3) and supported by triangulation of views from nine students (RP1–RP9). The thematic analysis has synthesized this data into four main themes that answer the research questions holistically.

Theme 1: Transition from Symbolic Patriotism to Participatory Patriotism

The findings show a strong consensus among the expert group and students that the definition of patriotism today needs to go beyond rhetorical elements. Expert informants criticized the phenomenon of patriotism that is seasonal and only prioritizes symbols without genuine appreciation. X3 critically questioned this shallow understanding by asserting:

"How do we show love for the country? Is it by flying the flag that we are patriotic, is it by singing the national anthem that we are patriotic? No, love for the country must be through knowledge... Only in August do we want to fly the flag. If it's not there, then it's not [patriotic]."

This criticism is in line with the students' views, who interpret participatory patriotism through physical work and community sustainability. For example, RP2 translates love for the country through environmental conservation, such as the practice of maintaining cleanliness and using recyclable straws to preserve the country's image. Meanwhile, RP6 and RP9 prove their patriotism by going to the field to collect trash and joining flood relief volunteer missions organized by the university. X1 also supports this shift by stating that scholars and students cannot just theorize in the lecture hall:

"The problem with lecturers is that we feel great just by reading books. We have to go to the field and mix with other people in the community. Reading books is important, but community involvement is very helpful."

Theme 2: The Reality of Polarization and Self-Segregation on Campus

Although students are formally exposed to ethnic harmony courses, observations in the field reveal that the culture of self-segregation is still deep-rooted. X3 revealed a worrying scenario in the lecture hall, where students psychologically choose to cluster based on ethnic similarities and stereotypical physical characteristics:

"It's not that it's being created, but it really always happens. In fact, not only among races but even among beauty too. If the group is pretty, only the pretty ones. If they are chubby, only the chubby ones... They will choose and stereotype to that level. That is within the race itself. So if among the Chinese, all are Chinese."

This expert observation is honestly acknowledged by the students. Informants RP5, RP6, and RP9 acknowledge that polarization is clearly visible in class where Malay, Chinese, and Indian students are more comfortable sitting and interacting within their respective ethnic groups due to awkwardness and a lack of desire to communicate across races. This situation is further complicated by the explosion of technology. According to X3, addiction to gadgets causes students to pay less attention to their surroundings, thus hindering face-to-face social interaction. This scenario proves that a plural campus environment does not automatically guarantee assimilation if there is no structured intervention.

Theme 3: Volunteer and Association Interventions as Unifying Mechanisms

To break down these walls of segregation, the research findings found that volunteer activities and association tasks function as very effective neutralization agents. Interestingly, interaction that was initially "forced" through academic structures has yielded organic understanding. X3 applies a method of mark deduction to force students out of their ethnic comfort zones:

"So I will say, I will deduct a very large amount of marks when you are only in a Chinese group. Why? When they do not go out to other races, how will they get to know them? Like the Malay proverb says, 'If you don't know them, you can't love them'."

This strategy is supported by the students' experience. RP8 stated that cross-racial interaction in completing assignments directly reduced prejudice. More meaningfully, interventions through uniformed bodies and extra-curricular volunteering are proven to change the perception landscape totally. RP5 shared the experience of participating in cross-racial volunteer activities that successfully broke his stereotypes; he began to realize that other races are not arrogant and are ready to cooperate. RP3, who was involved in a river cleaning mission under the SUKSI unit, also felt how various ethnicities united and began to see friends of different races as a family. Therefore, X3 highly encourages the re-establishment of state-based associations that combine various races in one state to enliven brotherhood (*ukhuwah*).

Theme 4: Cultural Literacy, Knowledge, and Family as the Foundation of Identity

The findings found that the emotion of patriotism and volunteering will not be sustainable if it is not pinned with knowledge (literacy) and grassroots education. X3 argues that sentiments of racial tension and feelings of discrimination are often triggered by ignorance about history, the social contract, and the state constitution. Love for the country, according to him, will be shaky and easily waver without knowledge. This understanding is proven to empower student identity. RP4 emphasized that learning the Constitution made him aware of citizenship rights, thus giving him a sense of safety and not being easily "bullied" by racial sentiments. RP2 also stated that understanding regarding the taboos of other ethnicities makes him more tolerant.

Besides cognitive elements, experts also concluded that the strength of participatory patriotism values starts from home. According to sociologist X2, patriotism is very dependent on the individual's biography, namely family structure and community. This view is reinforced by X1 who sees religion as the main epistemological framework; for example, for Muslim students, volunteer work and good ethnic relations are driven by the understanding that other races are also servants of God's creation who must be respected. Student RP1 confirmed this conclusion by stating that a strong identity is actually rooted in family upbringing since childhood, which acts as a shield from the influence of outside elements.

DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis presented, this study finds that the revitalization of ethnic harmony and the construction of national identity among university students cannot rely solely on didactic approaches within the lecture hall. While policy initiatives such as the implementation of Ethnic Relations courses are rational, they are not yet robust enough to address the reality of social polarization on the ground. Therefore, the concept of participatory patriotism through volunteerism and structured interaction emerges as a critical double-edged sword.

The research findings, which reveal the phenomenon of polarization where students cluster by race and physical presence, directly support the fundamental assumptions of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to SIT, humans cognitively tend to undergo a process of social categorization to

protect psychological comfort (in-group bias). This phenomenon explains why cross-ethnic interaction does not occur organically even when students are within a diverse campus ecosystem.

However, this study proves that such segregation is not static. When lecturers implement structured interventions, such as imposing mark deductions for groups that do not mix (forced interaction), interaction begins to form. This aligns with the Contact Hypothesis, which suggests that prejudice and stereotypes between groups can be reduced through meaningful interaction, provided it occurs under conditions of equal status and aims toward positive cooperation. In other words, "constructive coercion" at the initial stage is necessary before fraternal bonds (ukhuwah) can bloom organically.

The most significant finding in this study is the role of volunteerism and associational activities as platforms to dismantle the walls of prejudice. When students participate in community activities, such as environmental clean-ups or flood relief missions, they indirectly apply the concept of constructive patriotism.

Referring to the SIT framework, these volunteering activities successfully create a superordinate identity. While conducting charitable work, students no longer define themselves based on ethnicity (e.g., "I am a Malay/Chinese student"); instead, they are united under a larger umbrella of identity (e.g., "We are the University volunteer team that loves the nation"). This shift in identity explains why students who initially harbored prejudices began to realize that peers from other ethnicities also possess empathy and can cooperate excellently. Indirectly, it proves that volunteerism is not merely a platform for social work, but a powerful socialization process in shaping identity and national spirit.

This discussion would not be complete without referring to the grassroots of patriotism. The study finds that the emotion of love for the country and the spirit of volunteerism will become loose if not intertwined with knowledge of cross-cultural literacy, history, constitutional rights, and spiritual strength.

These findings carry significant implications for the design of the civics curriculum in Malaysia. Complaining that university students lack patriotism is unjust if the educational and family systems fail to instill values of openness and understanding regarding shared rights and responsibilities. For certain groups, such as Muslims, religion is seen as a firm foundation for the practice of patriotism and tolerance toward other races; however, this understanding must be harmonized with the foundations of the Rukun Negara to ensure inclusivity for non-Muslim students.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This study has successfully examined the gap between the idealism of patriotism formally imparted through educational frameworks and the practical realities of its enactment among university students beyond the classroom setting. Overall, the findings indicate that the appreciation of ethnic harmony and love for the nation should not remain confined to emotional and symbolic dimensions alone. In addressing the challenges of social polarization and self-segregation that continue to persist within university environments, a paradigm shift toward participatory patriotism is essential. Participatory patriotism requires citizens, particularly university students, to translate their national identity into proactive actions, active engagement, and direct contributions toward societal well-being.

In this context, volunteerism and structured cross-ethnic interaction have proven to function as effective dual-purpose mechanisms. First, they serve as neutralizing agents capable of dismantling prejudice and stereotypes through direct experiences of intercultural collaboration in real-life settings. Second, they provide opportunities for students to develop a superordinate identity, whereby differences in ethnicity, skin color, and cultural background are transcended through shared humanitarian goals and collective social responsibility. This process of organic socialization constitutes a fundamental basis for the construction of a stronger and more inclusive Malaysian national identity.

The findings of this study also carry significant implications for student development policies in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Universities and relevant ministries must recognize that ethnic harmony is neither an automatic outcome nor something that can be fully achieved through conventional lecture-based approaches (chalk and talk) within Ethnic Relations courses. Therefore, several strategic interventions are proposed to strengthen the agenda of unity and patriotism among university students.

- i. Universities should strengthen community-based programs (student-led initiatives) by reducing overly centralized top-down approaches and granting greater autonomy to student organizations to design and implement cross-ethnic volunteerism initiatives. Such an approach would enhance leadership capacity, accountability, and social ownership among students.
- ii. Efforts to revitalize cross-cultural associations, such as state-based student societies (e.g., Persatuan Anak Negeri) and clubs centered on national values, should be intensified as platforms for inclusive social interaction. These platforms can provide neutral and informal spaces for intercultural engagement, thereby fostering solidarity and strengthening the spirit of togetherness beyond academic contexts.
- iii. The assessment system for core university subjects should be reinforced through an action-based assessment approach by integrating participation in extracurricular activities and community fieldwork into the evaluation framework. The implementation of group assignments requiring ethnically diverse team compositions could stimulate more structured and organic social interaction among students.

In conclusion, social cohesion should not be viewed as a fixed condition or a final destination, but rather as a dynamic and continuous process that requires sustained commitment, intercultural literacy, and the willingness to invest time and effort. A generation of university students shaped through volunteerism and participatory patriotism holds the potential to become a strategic national asset in safeguarding social harmony and ensuring the sustainability of the nation's future.

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