

Ethnic Identity Dilemma – A Case Study of the Indian Muslims in Penang¹

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This paper investigates the ethnic identity dilemma among the Indian Muslims in Penang. Penang is an island at northern Malaysia which has the most Indian Muslims populations. 500 respondents were interviewed from all over Penang Island using a face-to-face interview. The study found that while almost 90 percent respondents chose Indian Muslim as their self-reported identity, this percentage decreased approximately when respondents were asked to choose their ethnicity in five different situations, in which, on average only 22 percent respondents chose Indian Muslim as their ethnicity. The study used Logit analysis to investigate the underlying factors that determine identity. The study found that age, primary education, identification with majority group, knowledge about ethnic group and sense of belonging to the ethnic group were significant determinants.

Keywords: Ethnic identity

Introduction

Identity is the way one perceives oneself and this study attempts to explore the socio-economic factors that lead to the perception of oneself to be 'accepted' in a community. Each individual possesses a large number of identities, pertaining to his (her) sex, age, class ethnicity, religion, political orientation and so on. A process of social change means, among other things, changes in the relationships between and within these identities (Fenster, 1996). Nevertheless, there is much ambiguity in defining identity. Ethnic identity is commonly defined as the ethnic component of social identity, as defined by Tajfel (1981; p.255) 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.' Ethnic identity is crucial to the self concept and psychological functioning of ethnic group members (Maldonado, 1975).

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Critical issues include the degree and quality of involvement that is maintained with a person's own culture and heritage; ways of responding to and dealing with the dominant group's often disparaging views of their group; and the impact of these factors on psychological well-being (Phinney, 1990). As explained by Roosens (1989) people change their ethnic identity if they can profit by doing so, which means that ethnicity is something to be played with or to be used for manipulation. Denial of ethnic identity appears to center mainly around prejudice and internal oppression (Semons, 1991). The complexity of ethnic identity leads to the possibility of "ethnic switching" or commonly known as "identity dilemma". "Identity dilemma" could exist among individuals who are descendents of an ethnic group different from that of the residing country.

While many researchers agree that ethnic identity is a dynamic concept, ethnic identity changes with contact with another group. Ethnic identities are fluid across time and social contexts, sometimes even to the point of "ethnic switching" (Alba 1990 and Nagel 1995 as cited in Sanders 2002) that could be associated to individual facing an "identity dilemma" or "identity crisis". Accepting one's ethnic identity is a straightforward task for an individual born in a family living in a country carrying the family's ethnicity. Ethnic minority individuals, being first-generation immigrants or born in the country considered, need to negotiate their identification with their ethnic group and their identification with the mainstream culture of the society, due to their minority status and often racial or cultural distinctiveness (Gong, 2007).

For example, an individual born in a Malay family living in Malaysia would accept herself (himself) as 'Malay'. An individual born in an Indian family with Islam as its religion, living in Malaysia, contributing to the economic development of the country might want to be known as Malays to benefit from being a Bumiputera or would like to be known as Indian to conform to the family roots or would just like to be known as Indian Muslim for what they are or labeled to be. Pressure from the society and environment to be accepted by a common factor in a community could strongly trigger "ethnic switching" or "identity dilemma". Nevertheless individual's economic contribution to a country is elicited to the acceptance of the common factor in a community.

Many ethnic minorities not only develop their own ethnicity but also assimilate to the ethnicity of the majority ethnic group in the country. The recognition that there are some similarities or shared characteristics with the majority ethnic group led to some overlapping forms of social identity. This was confirmed by a study by Gleason (1981)

where he found that the ethnic minority residents of the US not only develop ethnic identities but also assume some form of American identity as well. Judd et.al (1995) further elaborated that those members of ethnic groups who perceive themselves as different from the average American are more likely to develop a greater sense of ethnic identity because of their feelings of being a member of an out-group.

Those individuals who are members of an ethnic group perceive their status as separate from the larger, dominant culture, and as a result, spend time exploring and developing their ethnic identities (Phinney, 1990). Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) found that the ethnic minority individuals develop multiple identities: one representing their own ethnic cultures and the other dominant, national / ethnic ones, being Americans. Weisskirch (2007) found that Asian Americans and Latinos have the highest levels of ethnic identity and see themselves as not being typical Americans more than other ethnic groups. However, Latinos who report not being typical Americans have higher levels of ethnic identity. For Asian Americans, perception of being a typical American made no difference in levels of ethnic identity.

The Indian Muslims populations in Pulau Pinang are chosen for the reasons that Pulau Pinang has the biggest Indian Muslims population in Malaysia. As highlighted by Hanapi Dollah (n.d.) " ... identity of Indian Muslims changes from Indian Muslim to Indian when they join MIC and becomes Indian Muslim again when they form Malaysian Indian Muslim Association (KIMMA) and finally changes further to Malay when they join UMNO".

Literature Review

There is no specific theoretical framework to studying ethnic identity, but based on three broad perspectives that are the social identity theory, acculturation and culture conflict, and identity formation. Social identity theory is presented by social psychologists and asserts that simply being a member of a group provides individuals with a sense of belonging that contributes to a positive self-concept. However, as posit by Tajfel (1978), ethnic groups present a special case of group identity. He asserted that members of low-status groups seek to improve their status in various ways. Individuals may seek to leave the group by 'passing' as members of the dominant group, but this solution may have negative psychological consequences. Furthermore, this solution is not available to individuals who are racially distinct and are categorized by others as ethnic group members (Phinney, 1990). Social identity theory also addresses the possible problems resulting from participation in two cultures. Individual would then be facing issues on whether to choose between the two cultures, two conflicting identities or establish a bicultural ethnic identity.

Acculturation and culture conflict is presented by social psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists that deals broadly with changes in cultural attitudes, values and behaviors that result from contact between two distinct cultures (Berry, Trimble and Olmedo, 1986). Acculturation and culture conflict is more concern with a group than an individual and focused on how minority groups relate to the dominant group. There are two models present under this perspective to provide explanation to understanding of ethnic identity. The models are linear, bipolar model and two-dimensional model. In linear model, ethnic identity is conceptualized along a continuum from strong ethnic ties at one extreme to strong mainstream ties at the other (Simic, 1987 and Ullah, 1985). The two-dimensional model posits that the relationship with the ethnic culture and new culture must be considered and these two relationships may be independent (Phinney, 1990).

Ethnic identity formation is presented from the psychoanalytic views and development and counseling psychologists. According to Erikson (1968) identity is a result of a period of exploration and experimentation that typically takes place during adolescence and that leads to a decision or a commitment in various areas, such as occupation, religion and political orientation. In short, ethnic identity takes place over time, as people explore and make decisions about the role of ethnicity in their lives.

There are not many literature reviews in regard to explaining identity in economic analysis. Akerlof and Kranton (2000, p.717) explained that the concept of identity expands economic analysis for various reasons among others: identity can explain behaviour that appears detrimental, identity underlies new type of externality, identity reveals a new way that preferences can be changed and identity is fundamental to behaviour; choice of identity may be the most important economic decision people make. Sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and anthropologists have commonly agreed to adopt identity as a central concept. Nevertheless, identity, too, can be brought into economic analysis, allowing a new view of many economic problems (Akerlof and Kranton 2000).

Akerlof and Kranton (2000) incorporated identity into general model of behaviour and demonstrated how identity influences economic outcomes. They concluded several examples on identity-related behaviour that are

- i. people have identity-based payoffs derived from their own actions;
- ii. people have identify-based payoffs derived from others' actions;
- iii. third parties can generate persistent changes in these payoffs; and
- iv. some people may choose their identity, but choice may be proscribed for others.

In general, ethnic identity could be measured as comprising the components of self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging to the group, attitudes about a person's group membership, and ethnic involvement (social participation, cultural practices and attitudes) (Phinney, 1990).

Self-identification refers to the ethnic label that a person uses for oneself. For example, a research with children has been concerned largely with the extent to which children 'correctly' label themselves, whether the label they choose corresponds to the ethnicity of their parents (Abound, 1987). Phinney (1990) stated that adolescents and adults can be assumed to know their ethnicity, whereby they know what label to use for themselves. Although this seems to be quite simple and straightforward statement, complexity arises where a person's identity as determined by descent may differ from how a person sees oneself ethnically, given the influence of many factors, among others, peers, environment and political system. Ethnic labeling gets more complicated if the parents are from two or more distinct ethnic groups. There is a possibility that a person chooses to have two identities or to be in between of two identities.

If a person has a sense of belonging to a certain ethnic group, a person has no problem to determine a person's ethnic identity. Sometimes, people may use an ethnic label when specifically asked for and yet may not even have a strong sense of belonging to the group chosen (Phinney, 1990). Sense of belonging is difficult to quantify and evaluation of it must be measured with care through several 'feeling of concern' questions.

Attitudes about a person's group membership affect how a person forms his or her ethnic identity. It is commonly accepted that positive attitudes and contentment with a person's own ethnic group provide an acceptance of the ethnic identity. Negative attitudes towards a person's own ethnic group could lead to a denial of one's ethnic identity.

Involvement in the social life and cultural practices of one's group is the most widely used indicator of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). The indicators often used for ethnic involvement are language, friendship, social organizations, religion, cultural traditions and politics.

Akerlof and Kranton (2000) proposed a utility function with identity. Identity is based on social categories (C). Each person j has an assignment of people to these categories, c_j , so that each person has a conception of her (his) own categories and that of all other people. Prescriptions P indicate the behaviour appropriate for people in different social categories in different situations. The utility function with identity is therefore

$$(1) \quad U_j = U_j(a_j, a_{-j}, l_j)$$

where utility depends on j 's identity I_j , as well as on the usual vectors of j 's actions, a_j , and others' actions, a_{-j} . Since a_j and a_{-j} determine j 's consumption of goods and services, these argument and $U_j(\cdot)$ are sufficient to capture the standard economics of own actions and externalities. Hence, the proposed representation of identity is

$$(2) \quad I_j = I_j(a_j, a_{-j}; c_j, \epsilon_j, P)$$

A person j 's identity I_j depends on

- i. j 's assigned social categories c_j
- ii. the extend to which j 's own given characteristics ϵ_j match the ideal of j 's assigned category indicated by the prescription P
- iii. the extend to which j 's own and others' actions correspond to prescribed behaviour indicated by P

With this model constructed, Akerlof and Kranton (2000) experimented with a game theory analysis to understand the economic interaction where identity is based on social difference.

Methodology

The theoretical framework adopted in this study follows mainly the acculturation and culture conflict perspectives. Following Akerlof and Kranton (2000) the identity function takes the form of equation (2) transformed into Logit model to test how socio economic elements influence identity. A typical cross-section binary response model with the error term following a logistic distribution is

$$(3) \quad y_i = \mathbf{1}[x_i' \beta + u_i] > 0$$

x_i is $k \times 1$ regressor vector. (x_1, \dots, x_k) are the independent variables that are the socio economic factors that lead to the formation of ethnic identity (including individual's actions, others' actions, own characteristics and common factor in community i.e. appropriate for people in different social categories in different situations).

β is a parameter vector

u_i is an error term independent of x_i

$$(4) \quad P(u_i/\sigma \leq \lambda) = e^\lambda / (1 + e^\lambda) \quad \forall \lambda \text{ for an unknown positive constant } \sigma$$

$$(5) \quad (x_i', y_i)', i = 1, \dots, N \text{ are observed and iid.}$$

Because logistic distribution is symmetric about 0

$$(6) \quad P(y_i = 1 | x_i) = P(u_i > [-x_i] \beta | x_i) = P(u_i/\sigma > [-x_i] \beta/\sigma | x_i)$$

$$(7) \quad P(y_i = 1 | x_i) = P(y_i = 0 | x_i) = \frac{1}{\{1 + \exp(\frac{x_i' \beta}{\sigma})\}}$$

Participants

Respondents of this study were 500 Indian Muslims in Penang. Penang was chosen as the case study because this is where the majority of Indian Muslims resided. The sample population was selected randomly from residential areas, business vicinities and Indian Muslims organizations. We carried out a face-to-face interview with the respondents. Four (4) student assistants assisted in completing the survey. The survey was done for three months (August – October 2009).

Instruments

Demographic information

Three items were included that asked for age, gender and education attainment. Education attainment is divided into four categories that are no formal education or have never been to school, primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. Three items also asked about the respondent's self-reported ethnicity and their parents' ethnicity.

Identification with majority group

Respondents were asked to rate their perception on their identification with the majority group. In this case, the majority group in Malaysia is the Malays. There are three questions in this section asking respondents about how much they have in common with the Malays, how much they know about the Malay's culture and how much they feel they are part of the Malay's culture. Each question was scored from 1 (none) to 6

(very much). The identification with majority group scale ranges from 3 to 18; the higher the score, the higher is the identification with majority group.

Knowledge about ethnic group

Respondents are asked to rate questions on their knowledge about their ethnic group. The questions include spending time to know more about their ethnic group, have clear information about their ethnic group, understands well the meaning of ethnicity membership and having conversation with other people in the same ethnic group to know more about their ethnic group. Each question was scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The knowledge scale ranges from 4 to 20: the higher the score, the higher is the knowledge about respondents ethnic group.

Belonging to ethnic group

In this section, respondents were asked about their sense of belonging to their ethnic group. This section comprised of eight questions asking about respondents' effort to participate in their ethnic organization, being happy to be in the ethnic group, feeling proud of the ethnic group, affect of ethnicity on everyday life, feeling good about cultural and ethnic background, feeling of belonging to the ethnic group, strong attachment to the ethnic group and involvement in ethnicity activity. Each question was scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The belonging scale ranges from 8 to 40: the higher the score, the higher is the sense of belonging to the ethnic group.

Variables

The dependent variable of the equation is

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ respondent does not have an identity dilemma} + \beta_2 \text{ respondent ch}$$

The categories taken into consideration are based on several questions, in which respondents have to choose their ethnic identity. To be qualified as respondent who does not have identity dilemma, i.e. chooses Indian Muslim as his (her) identity, respondent has to choose Indian Muslim in all questions. The questions are:

Question A5: My ethnicity is _____

Question C8: If given an option to choose an identity, I will choose

Question D1: I want to be known as _____

- Question D3: If I were to join the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), I want to be known as _____
- Question D4: If I were to join the Malaysian Indian Muslim Association (KIMMA), I want to be known as _____
- Question D5: If I were to join the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), I want to be known as _____

The independent variables used in the Logit analysis are as shown below:

AGE	=		Age of the respondent
D1EDU	=	} 1	if respondent receives primary school education
		} 0	if respondent never receives formal education or never been to school
D2EDU	=	} 1	if respondent receives secondary school education
		} 0	if respondent never receives formal education or never been to school
D3EDU	=	} 1	if respondent receives tertiary school education
		} 0	if respondent never receives formal education or never been to school
GENDER	=	} 1	if respondent is male
		} 0	if is female
MAJOR	=		Identification with the majority groups (the higher the value, the more is the identification with the majority groups)
KNOW	=		Knowledge of respondent about his (her) ethnic group (the higher the value, the more is the knowledge about ethnic group)
BELONG	=		Sense of belonging to the ethnic group (the the higher the value, the higher is the sense of belonging to the ethnic group)

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 shows the sample means and standard deviation of the variables used in the analysis. The average number of respondents not having an identity dilemma was only 22 percent. This indicates that many have some kind of identity dilemma under different categories. The mean age of respondents in this research was 36.2 years old with more than half of the respondents being male. The mean score for knowledge of ethnic group, identification with majority group and sense of belonging to the ethnic group was 8.94 percent, 8.99 percent, and 16.33 percent respectively. Only the score of the identification with majority group almost reach half the total score that is 9 points. The other mean scores are not near the half total score of the category. The average respondents receiving tertiary education was 39 percent, receiving secondary education was 44 percent, receiving primary education was 9 percent and not receiving education or having received informal education was 8 percent.

Table 1 – Summary statistics of variables in the statistical model

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev
IDEN	0.219758	0.414501
Independent variables		
AGE	36.15726	14.34128
GENDER	0.512097	0.500358
D1EDU	0.090726	0.287509
D2EDU	0.437500	0.496579
D3EDU	0.389113	0.488041
KNOW	8.947581	2.696289
MAJOR	8.989919	4.151901
BELONG	16.33065	4.657518

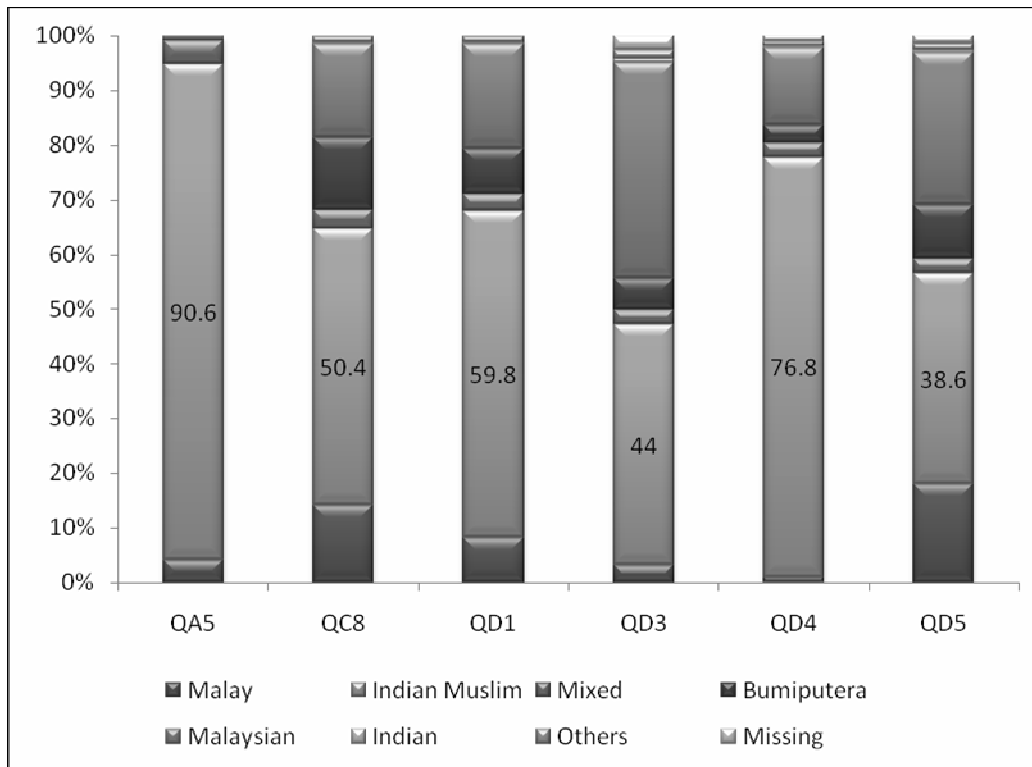
Descriptive analysis on choice of identity

When asked about self-reported ethnicity, 90.6 percent chose Indian Muslim, 4.4 percent chose mix ethnic group, 4.2 percent chose Malay and 0.4 percent chose being Bumiputera and Malaysian. When respondents were asked to choose an identity when they were given an option, the percentage of respondents choosing Indian Muslim as their identity decreased to 50.4 percent, increased to 14.2 percent for Malay, 13.2 percent for Bumiputera and 17 percent for Malaysian. A different set of analysis was found when respondents were asked about the ethnic identity they want to be known as. The percentage choosing Indian Muslims decreased from the percentage of self-reported ethnicity but increased from the percentage of choosing an identity when given an option. When respondents were asked about the ethnic identity they want to be known as, the percentage of Indian Muslim was 59.8 percent, followed by Malaysian by 19 percent, Bumiputera 8.4 percent and Malay 8.2 percent.

When asked what identity respondents would want to hold when join the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), only 44 percent wanted to be known as Indian Muslim and the next majority of 39.4 percent wanted just to be known as Malaysian without any attachment of ethnicity. The rest of 5.8 percent, 3.2 percent, 2.6 percent and 0.8 percent wanted to be known as Bumiputera, Malay, mixed ethnic group and Indian respectively. The percentage of respondents wanted to be known as Indian Muslims increased when they were asked their identity when joining the Indian Muslim Association (KIMMA with 76.8 percent respondents. The others wanted to be known as Malaysian (14.2 percent), Bumiputera (3.2 percent), mixed ethnic group (2.6 percent), Malay (1.0 percent) and Indian (0.2) percent. The least number of respondents wanted to be known as Indian Muslims if they were to join the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) with only 38.6 percent. Many (27.8 percent) didn't want to be associated with any ethnic group by choosing Malaysian. The rest were Malay (18 percent), Bumiputera (9.8 percent), mixed ethnic group (2.6 percent) and Indian (0.4 percent).

This result confirmed the idea of Roosens (1989), in which the perception of ethnicity rises and falls in intensity according to relevant circumstances. Figure 1 shows the graphical analysis of the changes in choosing ethnic identity among the respondents under different situations described in each question. The percentage of individual choosing Indian Muslim as their identities in all situations are shown in the bar line.

Figure 1 – Choice of ethnic identity under several situations



Logit Analysis

Testing for Goodness-of-Fit

To check whether the model fits the data well, tests of Likelihood Ratio (LR) Statistics, Expected Prediction Table and the Hosmer-Lemeshow (H-L) were performed. The results of the tests are as summarised in Table 2 below. The LR and H-L tests show that the data fits the model well. As shown by the expected prediction statistics, the model currently predicts 76.81 percent of the outcome of the sample. Therefore, we conclude that this model is a good fit.

Table 2 – Summary of Goodness-of-Fit Tests

Test	Statistic and Probability
Likelihood Ratio (LR) Statistics	61.10555 P = [0.000000]
Expected Prediction Table	76.81%
Hosmer-Lemeshow (H-L)	21.3800 $\chi^2(8) = 0.0062$

Table 3 – Regression results (odds ratios)

Variables	Coefficient (β)	z-Statistic	Odds Ratio (e^{β})	Marginal Effect
Constant	0.417659	0.406803	1.518403	
AGE	-0.037674	-3.057215**	0.963027	-0.006
GENDER	0.248005	1.050976	1.281466	0.037
D1EDU	1.345380	2.289635**	3.839645	0.201
D3EDU	0.205347	0.355748	1.227951	0.031
D4EDU	-0.637212	-0.995511	0.528765	-0.095
KNOW	0.159947	2.584408**	1.173449	0.024
MAJOR	0.079689	2.647469**	1.08295	0.012
BELONG	-0.170993	-3.956992**	0.842827	-0.026

** significantly different from zero at the 5 percent level

Table 3 presents the results of the logit analysis of having or not having identity dilemma. The coefficients should be interpreted as the effects of the variables on the log odds of not having identity dilemma versus not (logarithm of the probability of not having identity dilemma). The Odds Ratio column is the antilog value of the β coefficient. The Marginal Effect column provides the marginal effect of a change in β on the probability of not having identity dilemma.

Being male has a positive effect on the odds ratio, but the effect is not statistically significant. Age has a statistically significant effect on the odds ratio; that is being older results in a lower probability of not having an identity dilemma. This result is related to the assimilation process in which the older generation has assimilated to the ethnicity of the majority ethnic group on the country and realizes many similarities and shared characteristics.

Having received secondary and tertiary education has no effect on the odds ratio of not having an identity dilemma. However, primary education has a positive significant effect on the odds ratio of not having an identity dilemma.

Knowledge of ethnic group has a significant positive effect, where the more knowledge an individual has on his (her) ethnic group, the higher is the probability of not having an identity dilemma. A one point increase in the knowledge score would increase the probability of not having an identity dilemma by 2.4 percent.

Identification with the majority group has a significant positive effect, where the more an individual feel identified with the majority group, the higher is the probability of not having an identity dilemma. A one point increase in the identification with the majority group score would increase the probability of not having an identity dilemma by 1.2 percent.

Sense of belonging to the ethnic group has a significant negative effect on the log of the odds ratio of not having an identity dilemma. The higher is the sense of belonging to the ethnic group, the lower is the probability of not having an identity dilemma. A one point increase in the sense of belonging to the ethnic group would decrease the probability of not having an identity dilemma by 2.6 percent. Although individuals feel proud, love and admiration of their ethnic group, they also feel that they should be known by other ethnic group. This contradicts the result of Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) and Weisskirch (2007).

Conclusion

This study has investigated the identity choice among the Indian Muslims population in Penang. The study found that more than 80 percent of the respondents have some kind of identity dilemma, in which, respondents did not choose Indian Muslim as their identity. Respondents were asked to choose their ethnic identity to be affiliated with under 6 different situations included choosing self-reported identity, option to choose an identity, identity want to be known as, identity when joining the Malaysian Indian Congress, identity when joining the Malaysian Indian Muslim Association and identity when joining the United Malay National Organization. Using Logit analysis, the factors to determine the choice of identity were investigated. The study found that age, primary education, knowledge about ethnic group, identification with majority group and sense of belonging to ethnic group are important determinants to the choice of identity.

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