

Discourses of Ethnic Harmony in Sabah: Language and Place from a Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

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Abstract. Sabah is often discussed as a distinctive Malaysian context in which ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity are negotiated through everyday social practice. Yet the interactional mechanisms through which Sabahans sustain perceptions of ethnic harmony remain under-examined. This study examines how language use and place of residence shape perceptions of harmony in Sabah. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, we analysed interviews from seven districts spanning urban (Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Tawau) and rural (Kuala Penyu, Ranau, Keningau, Kota Marudu) settings. We introduce the Language-Place Harmony Framework (LPHF), a process model in which place affordances cue code choice (dialect, code-switching, and forms of address); these choices organise face-work and politeness, invite positive stance, and, through repetition, settle into routine cooperation experienced as harmony. Thematic analysis identifies seven recurring patterns: (1) dominant-dialect accommodation as inclusion; (2) everyday multilingualism as routine cooperation; (3) politeness and address as respect work; (4) communal interdependence; (5) generational differences in valuing boundaries; (6) urban-rural contrasts in interactional norms; and (7) resilience through diversity as a shared narrative. The findings show that harmony in Sabah is practised rather than merely proclaimed: it is enacted through accommodative talk, politeness, and place-specific expectations that normalise coexistence. The study contributes to CDA and anthropology-informed language research by specifying a mechanism linking micro-linguistic practice to social cohesion and by identifying policy levers for strengthening everyday contact infrastructures and multilingual accommodation.

Keywords. Critical Discourse Analysis; multilingualism; code-switching; Sabah; ethnic harmony.

Introduction

Ethnic relations in Malaysia constitute a dynamic field shaped by history, public policy, migration, education, and everyday interaction. Rather than treating national cohesion as either fragile or secure, this article begins from the more precise premise that perceptions of interethnic relations vary across locality, institution, and communicative setting. National survey work has shown that Malaysians do not experience ethnic relations uniformly across regions and social contexts (Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional [JPNN] & Institut Kajian Etnik [KITA], 2010). Discourse-oriented research further indicates that language can position social actors as insiders or outsiders and can normalise particular understandings of nationhood and belonging (Rajandran, 2013). These insights make Sabah an important site for examining how cohesion is produced in everyday talk rather than assumed as a fixed cultural trait.

For the purposes of this study, ethnic harmony refers to a socially recognised condition of respectful coexistence and routine cooperation across ethnic boundaries, produced through repeated interaction rather

than understood only as the absence of conflict. Language practices refer to situated communicative choices, including dialect accommodation, code-switching, forms of address, greetings, and politeness, through which speakers negotiate belonging, respect, and social distance. Place affordances refer to the interactional opportunities and locally shared expectations associated with particular settings, such as kampung networks, tamu or markets, schools, workplaces, and urban neighbourhoods, which shape how linguistic choices are interpreted.

Within this wider Malaysian context, Sabah is frequently described in scholarly literature as a setting where interethnic coexistence is sustained through routine contact, intermarriage, mixed-faith family networks, market interaction, and neighbourhood cooperation (Sintang, 2014, 2024; Lukin @ Lokin et al., 2022; Tamring & Mahali, 2020). Home to numerous ethnic and linguistic communities, Sabah provides a useful case for examining how people manage difference in daily life. Linguistic fluidity, interfaith co-presence, and multiracial socialisation are repeatedly identified as practices that help to maintain civility and familiarity across communal lines. Such practices also resonate with the broader argument that multilingualism can support empathy, solidarity, and shared civic identity (Rahman, 2022).

Despite this recognition, limited empirical research has examined the specific role of language practices and place-based contexts in shaping perceptions of ethnic relations in Sabah. Existing studies describe important contact infrastructures and historical experiences of coexistence, but fewer have traced how Sabahans themselves use dialects, code-switching, address terms, and local expectations to negotiate harmony in interviews about everyday life. This gap matters because harmony is not simply an attitude to be measured; it is also a practice that must be repeatedly enacted and interpreted in particular places.

To address this gap, the present study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine how language use and place of residence influence perceptions of ethnic harmony among Sabahans. CDA is especially appropriate because it connects everyday linguistic detail to broader institutional, historical, and social dynamics (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

The significance of the study is threefold. Empirically, it provides district-level qualitative evidence on how harmony is talked into being in everyday Sabahan settings rather than inferred only from broad claims about tolerance. Theoretically, it advances a language-place explanation of cohesion by showing how accommodation, politeness, and local expectations operate together as a mechanism of social inclusion. Practically, it identifies concrete community resources - markets, neighbourhood associations, schools, shared festivals, and multilingual interactional norms - that can be recognised in programmes for social cohesion and national integration.

Critical Discourse Analysis And Multilingual Accommodation

CDA explains how discourse naturalizes or contests social relations by linking textual detail to institutional histories, contemporary power relations, and culturally situated practices (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Blommaert, 2005; Weiss & Wodak, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Its interdisciplinary orientation also overlaps with anthropology, especially where analysis attends to lived practice, place, kinship, ritual, symbolic power, and everyday forms of social classification (Bourdieu, 1991; Goffman, 1967). Across variants, three commitments recur: CDA is problem-oriented, interdisciplinary, and multi-level, moving from textual description to interpretation of production and reception, and finally to explanation in terms of social practice (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). This architecture aligns with Sabah's lived ecologies of coexistence, including markets, halls, co-located religious sites, schools, and neighbourhood institutions where interactional norms are learned and enforced. CDA allows us to treat code choice, footing, and politeness not as decorative style but as mechanisms of membership, respect, and boundary work.

CDA has been applied to Malaysian materials to show how linguistic form positions social actors. In a textbook study, transitivity patterns and participant roles entrenched us/them distinctions, demonstrating how grammar carries ideology (Rajandran, 2013). Methodologically, this signals that discourse features such as pronouns, processes, and evaluatives are not merely descriptive; they normalise identities and histories. Extending this lens to grassroots interviews in Sabah lets us examine how everyday speakers position

insider/outsider, local/non-local, and ally/other through code choice, address terms, and stance, which are precisely the hinge points of ethnic harmony.

Beyond Sabah, multilingualism is associated with empathy, reduced intergroup anxiety, and solidaristic identities (Rahman, 2022). CDA complements this by showing that code choice is indexical: switching into a neighbour's code can display deference, solidarity, or transactional trust, while persisting in a non-local standard can index distance (Auer, 1998; van Dijk, 1993, 1998). Communication Accommodation Theory similarly explains why convergence or divergence in speech can be interpreted as affiliative, distancing, or status-marking in interaction (Giles et al., 1991). Sabahan practice exemplifies a civics of accommodation, in which dominant local codes such as Bisaya, Brunei Malay, Suluk, Dusun, or Bajau may operate as inclusive lingua francas when framed as shared resources rather than exclusionary gatekeepers.

Sabah-Specific Infrastructures of Coexistence

Sabah literature converges on a simple insight: conviviality is practised. Ethnographic and related works document intermarriage, mixed-faith families, co-located houses of worship, customary institutions, festivals, and week-to-week cooperation as ordinary contact infrastructures (Andin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2022; Sintang, 2014, 2024; Sintang et al., 2022; Lukin @ Lokin et al., 2022; Tamring & Mahali, 2020). The tamu and neighbourhood halls function as public arenas where codes are mixed, etiquette is learned, and misunderstandings are repaired, forming a pedagogy of proximity. This shifts emphasis from attitudinal tolerance to routinised cooperation, furnishing the meso-level settings CDA needs to connect micro-choices in talk to macro-perceptions of harmony.

Research Gap and Study Propositions

Problem statement: Although Sabah is often represented as a context of ethnic harmony, the specific discursive mechanisms that sustain such harmony remain insufficiently explained. Existing studies have documented coexistence, intermarriage, shared festivities, interfaith cooperation, customary rights, and institutions of contact (Andin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2022; Sintang et al., 2022; Lukin @ Lokin et al., 2022), but they have not fully shown how everyday language choices are interpreted as respect, inclusion, or distance across different places. Without this explanation, policy discussions risk treating harmony as a cultural attribute rather than as a set of practices that can be protected, taught, and strengthened. This study therefore investigates how place organises contact and expectations. Kampung publics, small-town markets or tamu, and mixed-city flats afford different audiences, repair opportunities, and enforcement of norms. Accordingly, we treat place as a moderator of how accommodative moves are read: a switch may index kin-like solidarity in the kampung, cosmopolitan courtesy in the city, and trustworthiness in the market. The move is the same; the social meaning is locally calibrated.

In sum, four propositions guide our analysis: (1) CDA's multi-level and anthropology-sensitive lens is apt for connecting linguistic detail to Sabah's institutions of proximity; (2) grammar and discourse structures position social actors and normalise ideologies (Rajandran, 2013); (3) in Sabah, harmony is enacted through accommodation, politeness, and routine cooperation (Sintang, 2014, 2024; Lukin @ Lokin et al., 2022; Tamring & Mahali, 2020); and (4) place tunes the social value of code choice. These propositions justify our methodological decision to apply CDA-informed thematic analysis to interview transcripts across seven locales.

The Language-Place Harmony Framework (LPHF)

Developed abductively from the interview data, the Language-Place Harmony Framework (LPHF) treats harmony not as a fixed attitude but as a reproducible interactional mechanism. The framework specifies a pathway that links micro-linguistic practice to wider cohesion: settings or place affordances cue how people speak; code choices such as dialect, code-switching, and forms of address organise face-work and politeness (Goffman, 1967); these invite positive stance; and, through repetition, they settle into routine cooperation experienced as harmony. Figure 1 visualises this sequence.

The LPHF clarifies why place matters. Different settings, for example kampung networks, tamu/markets, schools, and workplaces, tune the indexical value of the same linguistic move. A dialect shift may be heard as humility in one context and formality in another; an honorific may signal warmth in a village hall but mere etiquette in a city office. By making these tuning effects explicit, the LPHF explains how ordinary multilingual practices scale up from moment-to-moment interaction to the public sense of getting along.

Analytically, CDA provides the ladder that connects discursive particulars to social practice: description, interpretation, and explanation. In this study, the LPHF functions as the conceptual scaffold for those explanations. It organises how we read the excerpts, how we relate language choices to interactional work, and how we account for the stabilisation of cooperation in different places, while drawing on interactional sociolinguistics and intercultural discourse research that treat meaning as contextually negotiated (Auer, 1998; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

The framework therefore moves the article beyond description in two ways. First, it specifies a causal-interpretive chain: place affordances shape code choice, code choice performs face-work, face-work invites positive stance, and repeated positive stance stabilises cooperation. Second, it offers a mid-range proposition for comparative work: multilingual accommodation is most likely to be read as harmonious when it occurs in settings where repeated contact, mutual obligation, and local norms of respect are already institutionally supported.

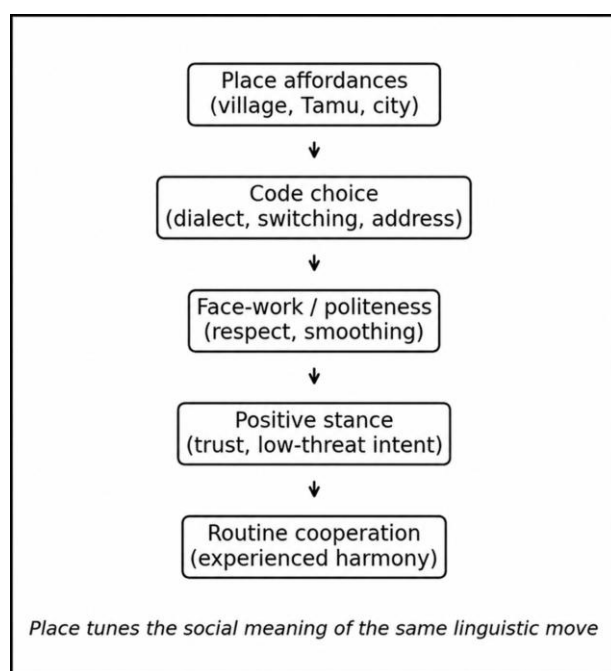


Figure 1. The Language-Place Harmony Framework (LPHF)

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed sequence through which place affordances cue language choice, organise face-work and politeness, invite positive stance, and gradually stabilise routine cooperation experienced as ethnic harmony. Accordingly, this study aims to examine how language use and place of residence shape perceptions of ethnic harmony in Sabah. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (1) What language practices do respondents associate with respectful interethnic interaction? (2) How do urban and rural settings moderate the meaning of these practices? and (3) How do respondents discursively explain harmony, difference, and cooperation in everyday life?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design grounded in CDA to examine how language use and place of residence shape perceptions of ethnic harmony in Sabah. CDA links linguistic detail to institutional and social contexts, enabling analysis of how talk and code-switching index belonging, respect, and identity (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Weiss & Wodak, 2003). We follow CDA's three analytic stages - close description of discourse, interpretation of context, and explanation in terms of social practice - which align with Sabah's setting, where interethnic harmony is embedded in institutions such as Rukun Tetangga, community halls, markets, schools, and co-located houses of worship (Sintang, 2014, 2024; Tamring & Mahali, 2020; Lukin @ Lokin et al., 2022). CDA's attention to ideology and power further supports our concern with how discourse naturalises or challenges ethnic boundaries (van Dijk, 1993, 1998).

Fieldwork was conducted from May 2022 to October 2024 in seven districts of Sabah, purposively selected to capture variation in urbanisation, coastal-interior location, migration and border mobility, dominant ethnic-linguistic ecologies, and the density of everyday contact infrastructures. The urban sites (Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, and Tawau) represent the state capital, an east-coast port city, and a border-oriented trading town, respectively, each characterised by high mobility and mixed workplace or market interaction. The rural sites (Kuala Penyu, Ranau, Keningau, and Kota Marudu) represent coastal, interior, commuting-corridor, and northern market-network settings with different dominant dialects and community institutions.

Although markets, schools, worship spaces, and neighbourhood associations are found across Sabah, these districts were chosen because the combination of those infrastructures, ethnic-linguistic composition, and mobility patterns allowed meaningful urban-rural and inter-district comparison. Participants were ordinary community members spanning adults to pensioners. Selection prioritised routine cross-ethnic contact and accessible community gatekeepers. To prevent over-counting, we deduplicated individuals appearing across recordings and verified identities against field logs, yielding a consolidated total of 61 adult respondents aged 35-70 ($F = 20$, $M = 41$). Recruitment combined venue-based approaches and community referrals via local gatekeepers. Given space limits, selected excerpts are presented to illustrate each theme; the analysis itself drew on the full dataset.

Table 1. Participants by district and key attributes

District	Code	N	M/F	Age	Ethnic groups	Recruitment	Selection criteria
Kota Kinabalu (U)	KK-01	5	4/1	45–70 (58)	Dusun; Bajau; Chinese	JPNIN; retirees; village leaders	State capital; high mobility
Sandakan (U)	SDK-02	10	5/5	35–60 (48)	Bugis; Dusun; Sungai	JPNIN; teachers; village communities	East-coast port; migrant-indigenous mix
Tawau (U)	TWU-03	3	3/0	45–65 (55)	Bugis; Bajau; Suluk	JPNIN; elected representatives	Border trading town; multilingual mobility
Kuala Penyu (R)	KP-04	8	8/0	45–70 (58)	Kedayan; Dusun Tatana; Brunei	JPNIN; retirees; village communities	Coastal district; strong local identity
Ranau (R)	RNA-05	10	4/6	35–65 (50)	Dusun Liwan; Dusun Bundu	JPNIN; women's association; tamu association	Interior district; dialect diversity
Keningau (R)	KGU-06	12	10/2	35–65 (50)	Dusun; Murut; Banjar	JPNIN; village leaders; communities	Commuting corridor; mixed networks
Kota Marudu (R)	KMD-07	13	7/6	35–70 (53)	Dusun; Rungus; Bajau	JPNIN; village leaders; communities	Northern markets; coastal-interior contact

Note. U = urban; R = rural; M = male; F = female; age is presented as a range followed by the mean in parentheses; JPNIN = Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional.

Table 1 shows that the 61 respondents were distributed across seven districts, with the largest groups drawn from Kota Marudu and Keningau and the smallest group from Tawau. The sample captures urban-rural, coastal-interior, ethnic-linguistic, and recruitment diversity relevant to the comparative analysis.

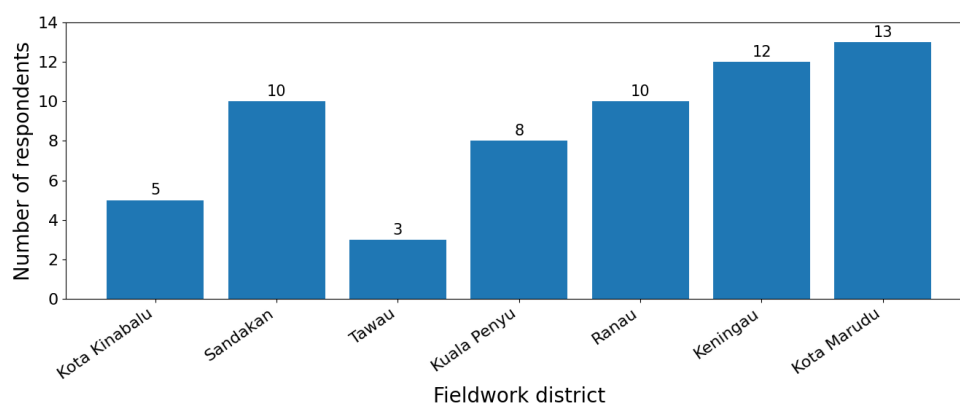


Figure 2. Respondents by fieldwork district (N = 61)

Figure 2 indicates that Kota Marudu contributed the highest number of respondents ($n = 13$), followed by Keningau ($n = 12$), whereas Tawau contributed the lowest number ($n = 3$). The distribution reflects the purposive emphasis on contrasting local contact infrastructures rather than statistical representativeness. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between May 2022 and October 2024. Interview arrangements were made in advance through participants and community gatekeepers, and each interview was digitally audio-recorded with the participant's permission. The semi-structured interview guide was aligned with the study questions and addressed five principal areas: (1) language practices associated with respectful interethnic interaction; (2) dialect accommodation, multilingual code-switching, and forms of address; (3) the influence of urban and rural settings on interactional expectations; (4) experiences of interethnic cooperation, tolerance, and boundary negotiation; and (5) participants' explanations of harmony, diversity, and everyday coexistence. Follow-up questions and probes were used flexibly to clarify meanings and elicit examples specific to each locality.

The digital audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by trained bilingual assistants familiar with Sabah Malay and local dialects. Dialectal lexemes, repetitions, address terms, and discourse particles were retained in the analytic dataset, while interviewer turns were removed from the published excerpts to foreground respondent voice. Where analytically relevant, code-switches were minimally tagged to preserve indexical cues. For publication in this English-language article, excerpts are presented in English only. English renderings followed line-by-line alignment; a second transcriber reviewed all selected excerpts, and discrepancies were adjudicated by the analysis lead.

We applied a CDA-informed thematic analysis in five stages: (1) open coding for language practices, place references, and interethnic evaluations; (2) axial coding linking these practices to urban and rural contexts; (3) CDA mapping of pronouns, evaluatives, address terms, and code choices to meanings of respect, inclusion, distance, or stereotyping; (4) cross-site theme generation and comparison; and (5) analyst triangulation to check interpretive consistency. Systemic Functional insights sensitised the close reading of how clause choices enact social relations, without undertaking full transitivity counts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Rajandran, 2013). The analytic procedures were linked directly to the research questions by comparing how language practices were described across localities and how participants interpreted harmony, difference, and cooperation in urban and rural settings.

Verbatim excerpts and cross-checks across urban/rural contexts support credibility. A codebook documenting analytic decisions enhanced dependability, while analytic memos addressing uncertainties strengthened confirmability by constraining claims under ambiguity. Finally, by highlighting cross-site

patterning and including representative quotations, we sought to enable readers to judge transferability to other multilingual, multiethnic settings.

Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and protection of participants' rights and privacy. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Respondents were informed of the study purpose, the use of digital audio recording, their right to decline any question, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Transcripts were anonymised, and site-based participant identifiers were used in the presentation of findings to protect privacy. Each identifier combines the district abbreviation used in Table 1 (KK, SDK, TWU, KP, RNA, KGU, or KMD) with a sequential respondent number, for example RNA-R07 for a respondent from Ranau.

The Findings

The analysis of interviews across seven urban and rural locales in Sabah revealed seven interrelated themes that illuminate how language use and place of residence shape perceptions of ethnic harmony. Excerpts are presented in English only for international readability, and site-based participant identifiers and locales are indicated. The seven themes align with the LPHF sequence. Place affordances shape indexical code choices, which organise face-work and politeness, elicit positive stance attributions, and stabilise routines of cooperation, with effects tuned by urban-rural settings.

1. Dominant-dialect accommodation as social inclusion (LPHF: place to code choice)
2. Multilingual code-switching as everyday practice (LPHF: place to code choice)
3. Politeness and address as respect work (LPHF: code choice to face-work)
4. Communal interdependence (LPHF: face-work to positive stance)
5. Generational differences in valuing boundaries (LPHF: face-work to positive stance)
6. Urban-rural contrasts in interactional norms (LPHF: place tunes meaning)
7. Resilience through diversity (LPHF: stance to stabilised cooperation)

Theme 1: Dominant-Dialect Accommodation As Social Inclusion

Across multiple locales, respondents emphasised adapting to the dominant dialect of a setting to signal respect and ensure smooth relations. This practice is framed as conscious deference that aligns the speaker with the host community:

"When we enter another person's village, we follow their dialect so that they feel comfortable."

(RNA-R01, Ranau)

Accommodation is interpreted not as loss of identity but as a gesture of inclusion: adopting an interlocutor's dialect is a relational act that reduces social distance and sustains harmony in multiethnic encounters.

Table 2. Dialect accommodation as social inclusion

Theme	Respondent quotation	Interpretation
Dialect accommodation	"We usually follow the language of people here, because then they feel we are part of them." (KP-R02, Kuala Penyu)	Using the host's dialect positions the speaker as "one of us."
Dialect accommodation	"If we use only our own accent, people may think we are arrogant." (SDK-R03, Sandakan)	Retaining one's own dialect may be misread as aloofness; accommodation indexes humility.

Overall, Table 2 indicates that speakers interpret dialect accommodation as both inclusion and humility, while persistent use of an outsider accent may be read as social distance.

Theme 2: Multilingual Code-Switching as Everyday Practice

Respondents described switching among Malay, English, and Indigenous languages as ordinary and valued. Beyond functionality, switching displays solidarity and prevents misunderstanding in diverse gatherings:

"Sometimes we speak Malay, mix in a little English, and then use Dusun. That is normal; everyone understands."
(KK-R04, Kota Kinabalu)

Code-switching is thus a practice of hospitality that affirms shared belonging in plural settings.

Table 3. Code-switching as a practice of harmony

Theme	Respondent quotation	Interpretation
Multilingual code-switching	"When we meet older people, we use their language. With young people, we can mix Malay and English." (TWU-R05, Tawau)	Language choice adapts to generational expectations; flexibility signals courtesy.
Multilingual code-switching	"Mixing languages is not a problem; it is enjoyable because everyone can join in." (KGU-R06, Keningau)	Switching is reframed positively as enabling inclusive participation.

Overall, Table 3 shows that code-switching is calibrated to generation and audience and is valued because it broadens participation in multilingual encounters.

Theme 3: Politeness And Address As Respect Work

Politeness strategies, including honorifics, greetings, and bahasa halus or refined speech, are repeatedly described as essential to harmonious interaction. Terms of address reinforce interethnic civility:

"When speaking, we must use respectful forms of address, such as Sir or Madam, so that people feel appreciated." (KMD-R07, Kota Marudu)

Harmony is enacted not only through what is said, but how it is said; politeness is a symbolic resource for mutual recognition.

Table 4. Politeness as respect

Theme	Respondent quotation	Interpretation
Politeness	"When we meet elders, we should greet them first before speaking. That is a sign of respect." (RNA-R07, Ranau)	Greeting rituals establish goodwill before conversation.
Politeness	"Refined language is important, because if we are harsh, people may feel hurt." (KP-R08, Kuala Penyu)	Refined speech avoids offence and maintains harmony.

Overall, Table 4 demonstrates that greetings, honorifics, and refined speech operate as practical safeguards against offence and as visible signs of mutual respect.

Theme 4: Communal interdependence

Especially in rural areas, communal obligations, including mutual help at weddings, funerals, and harvests, anchor interethnic relations. Harmony is practised as reciprocity:

"When there is a death or a feast, the whole village comes to help, regardless of ethnicity."
(KGU-R09, Keningau)

Collective responsibility transcends ethnic boundaries, embedding harmony in shared labour.

Table 5. Communal interdependence

Theme	Respondent quotation	Interpretation
Communal interdependence	"Here we are used to mutual help; when there is major work, everyone helps." (KP-R09, Kuala Penyu)	Shared tasks normalise interdependence and de-emphasise difference.
Communal interdependence	"When there is a feast, Chinese and Dusun neighbours all come. That is our custom." (SDK-R10, Sandakan)	Celebrations bring diverse communities together; participation reinforces belonging.

Overall, Table 5 indicates that shared labour and participation in community events convert everyday civility into durable expectations of reciprocity across ethnic boundaries.

Theme 5: Generational Differences in Valuing Boundaries

Across sites, age cohorts attribute different meanings to mixing. Younger respondents tend to downplay ethnic boundaries, while many elders emphasise cultural preservation:

"Young people today are used to mixed friendships; they do not think too much about ethnicity."
(KK-R11, Kota Kinabalu)

Some elders worried that intermarriage or intensive mixing could erode traditions. Harmony is valued across generations, but its terms are negotiated differently.

Table 6. Generational differences in ethnic perceptions

Theme	Respondent quotation	Interpretation
Generational differences	"Young people today are more open; everyone mixes without difficulty." (SDK-R12, Sandakan)	Youth normalise everyday mixing.
Generational differences	"Older people worry about intermarriage because they fear customs may be lost." (RNA-R13, Ranau)	Elders frame intermarriage as a potential threat to continuity.

Overall, Table 6 highlights a generational contrast: younger respondents normalise mixing, whereas some older respondents link harmony to the preservation of cultural continuity.

Theme 6: Urban-Rural Contrasts in Interactional Norms

Place moderates the meaning of cooperative conduct. In kampung settings, solidarity is enacted through kin-like obligations; in cities, harmony is framed as courteous coexistence:

"In the city, we simply show respect. It is not like the village, where everyone is expected to help."
(KK-R14, Kota Kinabalu)

Thus, in rural contexts harmony is realised through participation and collective action; in urban flats and workplaces, it is often realised through polite restraint.

Table 7. Urban-rural contrasts

Theme	Respondent quotation	Interpretation
Urban-rural contrasts	"In the village, everyone helps one another. In the city, everyone is busy." (KGU-R15, Keningau)	Rural harmony ties to communal labour; urban life emphasises independence.
Urban-rural contrasts	"The city has more cultures, but relationships are more formal." (TWU-R16, Tawau)	Urban diversity broadens exposure; interaction is polite rather than intimate.

Overall, Table 7 shows that rural harmony is associated with collective obligation, while urban harmony is more often expressed through formal courtesy and respectful distance.

Theme 7: Resilience Through Diversity

Respondents articulated pride in Sabah's diversity, framing pluralism as strength. Festivals, interfaith visits, and co-located houses of worship normalise difference and build bonds:

"Sabah is different; we are used to celebrating Hari Raya together, Christmas together, with all religions present." (KMD-R17, Kota Marudu)

Harmony is perceived as resilient precisely because it is embedded in routine pluralism.

Table 8. Resilience through diversity

Theme	Respondent quotation	Interpretation
Resilience through diversity	"In Sabah, we regard all festivals as being for everyone, regardless of religion." (SDK-R18, Sandakan)	Festivals are shared across boundaries, reinforcing collective identity.
Resilience through diversity	"We are used to hearing the call to prayer and church bells together." (RNA-R19, Ranau)	Co-located worship sites normalise diversity as part of a shared soundscape.

Overall, Table 8 indicates that shared festivals and interfaith co-presence enable respondents to narrate diversity as an ordinary and resilient basis of collective identity.

Table 9. Analytical consolidation of findings across the LPHF

LPHF stage	Empirical pattern	Mechanism	Claim
Place → code choice	Dominant dialect accommodation and code-switching in kampung, tamu, workplace, and urban settings.	Speakers adjust dialect or language repertoire to display humility, reduce distance, and invite participation.	Harmony begins as a situated linguistic judgement: the same code choice becomes inclusive when local norms read it as respect.
Code choice → face-work	Respectful address, greetings, and refined speech are repeatedly linked to smooth interaction.	Politeness protects interlocutors from embarrassment, offence, or exclusion.	Harmony is not simply an attitude; it is performed through recurring face-saving practices.
Face-work → positive stance	Mutual help in ceremonies, funerals, and neighbourhood activities turns polite talk into trust.	Reciprocity confirms that respectful speech is backed by social responsibility.	Communal interdependence converts discourse into durable social expectation.
Place tunes meaning	Urban sites emphasise courteous coexistence, while rural settings emphasise obligation and participation.	Place shapes how accommodation is interpreted: as civility, kin-like solidarity, or trustworthiness.	Sabah's harmony is place-calibrated rather than uniform across all districts.
Stance → stabilised cooperation	Diversity is narrated as routine through festivals, interfaith co-presence, and shared soundscapes.	Repeated positive stance normalises pluralism as everyday life.	The central argument is that Sabah's harmony is reproduced through repeated language-place practices, not merely inherited as culture.

Table 9 consolidates the seven themes into a single process account: place shapes the meaning of code choice, code choice performs face-work, reciprocal practice supports positive stance, and repeated positive stance stabilises cooperation. The table therefore connects the empirical themes directly to the central explanatory claim of the LPHF.

Synthesis of Findings

The seven themes are best read not as separate descriptive categories but as a sequential argument about how harmony is produced. First, dominant-dialect accommodation, multilingual code-switching, and politeness form a practical repertoire for managing difference without turning difference into conflict. Second, place gives this repertoire its social meaning: rural kampung settings privilege reciprocal duties and shared work, while urban contexts emphasise social etiquette and courteous coexistence. Third, diversity becomes resilient when repeated encounters in markets, neighbourhoods, festivals, and shared institutions make cooperation predictable.

Taken together, these findings indicate that harmony in Sabah is neither accidental nor automatic. It is actively constructed in speech, enacted through communal practice, and interpreted through the lenses of place and generation. In LPHF terms, this is the pathway by which place-tuned code choices organise face-work, invite positive stance, and settle into routinised cooperation.

This consolidation strengthens the empirical claim of the article: language does not merely reflect pre-existing harmony; it helps organise the conditions under which harmony becomes recognisable, repeatable, and socially expected. The LPHF therefore explains why everyday multilingual practices matter for social cohesion and why similar practices may carry different meanings across urban and rural settings.

Discussion

Language as a Resource of Inclusion

The findings support the view that language is not merely a vehicle for transmitting information but a relational resource through which speakers display belonging, humility, and willingness to cooperate. Respondents' accounts of dialect accommodation, code-switching, greetings, and refined forms of address show that ethnic harmony is accomplished through small but recurrent communicative choices. This interpretation supports classic work on accommodation and interactional meaning, which treats convergence and code choice as socially consequential rather than stylistically neutral (Auer, 1998; Giles et al., 1991). It also supports Rajandran's (2013) argument that linguistic forms position social actors as insiders or outsiders. In the Sabah data, however, the positioning is often explicitly inclusive: speakers describe adjusting their repertoire to reduce distance and to make an interlocutor feel recognised.

Recent research provides a useful comparative basis for this interpretation. Bibi and Hamida (2024), applying Communication Accommodation Theory to international students in Indonesia, show that communicative adaptation assists cross-cultural adjustment and competence. Mathe and Motsaathebe (2025) similarly conceptualise multilingual accommodation as the inclusion of both minoritised and majorised languages within a shared public sphere. The present findings support these studies but extend them in two respects. First, they locate accommodation in ordinary interethnic encounters rather than primarily in educational or mediated settings. Second, they show that the social value of accommodation depends on how local participants interpret the move. A shift into a local dialect becomes harmonious not because convergence is inherently positive, but because it is read as humility, respect, or readiness to participate.

This qualification is important because language choice can also reproduce inequality. Svensson (2025) argues that linguistic diversity should be examined not only as a multicultural asset but also through the inequalities that shape access, participation, and recognition. Gu and Ho (2025) likewise demonstrate that linguistic hostility and racialised judgements can turn language into a mechanism of exclusion. The Sabah findings therefore challenge an uncomplicated celebration of multilingualism. Accommodation appears inclusive when it is voluntary, reciprocal, and supported by shared norms; it may become exclusionary when

one group is consistently expected to abandon its preferred code, when proficiency is treated as a test of authenticity, or when accent is used to rank speakers. Thus, the study supports the inclusionary potential of multilingual practice while retaining CDA's concern with unequal linguistic authority.

Place As Moderator of Harmony

The findings also support the proposition that ethnic harmony is place-calibrated rather than spatially uniform. Rural accounts emphasised mutual assistance, collective participation, and kin-like obligation, whereas urban accounts more often emphasised courtesy, restraint, and the management of difference among people whose relationships may be less intimate. This pattern is consistent with Sabah-based research that identifies neighbourhood institutions, festivals, customary arrangements, and interfaith cooperation as infrastructures of everyday coexistence (Andin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2022; Sintang, 2014, 2024; Sintang et al., 2022). It is also consistent with the quantitative study by Stephen et al. (2025), which found that favourable attitudes toward linguistic diversity predicted perceived harmony across seven Sabah districts and that the relationship was stronger in rural areas. The current qualitative evidence extends that result by explaining why residential context matters: rural settings attach accommodation to repeated obligations and reputational accountability, while urban settings attach it more strongly to civility across socially diverse but less interdependent networks.

The place effect should not be reduced to a simple rural–urban binary. Qi et al.'s (2024) systematic review shows that public spaces can foster social cohesion by enabling co-presence and interaction, but that outcomes are conditioned by accessibility, safety, demographic composition, place attachment, and other contextual factors. The LPHF adds a discursive layer to this spatial literature. A market, community hall, school, workplace, or worship-adjacent space does not produce harmony merely by bringing people together. It provides affordances for contact, but communicative norms determine whether that contact becomes recognition, indifference, misunderstanding, or exclusion. In this sense, place operates as an opportunity structure whose effects are mediated by code choice, politeness, expectations of repair, and the likelihood of future encounters.

The findings also qualify claims that diversity itself produces cohesion. Chan and Kawalerowicz (2024) show, in the British context, that apparent negative associations between diversity and several dimensions of cohesion are substantially reduced when neighbourhood deprivation is considered. Their analysis challenges explanations that attribute cohesion or fragmentation directly to demographic diversity. The Sabah evidence points in the same direction from a qualitative perspective: pluralism becomes socially productive when it is supported by functioning contact infrastructures, locally legitimate communicative repertoires, and expectations of reciprocity. Where these supports are weak, spatial proximity alone may not yield cooperation. The implication is that place in the LPHF is neither a fixed container nor a deterministic variable; it is a socially organised context that distributes opportunities, obligations, and meanings.

Interpreting The Stages of the LPHF

The first stage of the LPHF, place affordances to code choice, explains how settings cue particular linguistic possibilities without mechanically determining them. Kampung networks, tamu, urban workplaces, schools, and community events differ in audience composition, familiarity, status relations, and expectations of repeated contact. These features make some codes or forms of address more interactionally appropriate than others. The finding extends conventional accounts of code-switching by showing that speakers orient not only to the person before them but also to the social history and normative expectations attached to the setting. Code choice is therefore simultaneously interpersonal and spatial: speakers select from their repertoires in anticipation of how a locally situated audience will interpret the move.

The second stage, code choice to face-work, specifies the interactional work performed by accommodation. Drawing on Goffman (1967), the framework treats greetings, honorifics, refined speech, dialect shifts, and code-switching as resources for protecting dignity and reducing the risk of embarrassment or exclusion. This stage supports Communication Accommodation Theory's proposition that convergence may communicate affiliation (Giles et al., 1991), but it extends CAT by identifying politeness and face protection as the immediate mechanism through which convergence becomes socially meaningful. The same

linguistic shift may fail to generate affiliation when it is exaggerated, patronising, strategically manipulative, or interpreted as mockery. LPHF therefore separates the observable move from its locally attributed meaning.

The third stage, face-work to positive stance, captures the inferential transition from a communicative act to a judgement about the speaker. Respondents did not describe politeness as an isolated convention; they interpreted it as evidence of respect, humility, friendliness, or willingness to coexist. Positive stance is important because harmony depends partly on how intentions are attributed. Yet these attributions remain revisable. A polite encounter that is contradicted by discriminatory behaviour, unequal treatment, or refusal of reciprocal help may not generate trust. The framework consequently treats stance as an interactional achievement supported by consistency between talk and conduct rather than as a stable attitude inferred from a single utterance.

The fourth stage, positive stance to stabilised cooperation, explains how repeated favourable interpretations can become routine social expectations. Communal assistance during ceremonies, funerals, festivals, neighbourhood activities, and everyday transactions demonstrates that respectful talk is backed by practical responsibility. Repetition matters because it reduces uncertainty: participants learn that accommodation and politeness are not exceptional performances but predictable features of local interaction. This is where micro-level discourse scales up to meso-level social cohesion. The process is cumulative rather than instantaneous, and it depends on memory, reputation, institutional continuity, and opportunities for renewed contact.

The framework should nevertheless be read as recursive rather than rigidly linear. Routine cooperation can itself reshape place affordances by making multilingual behaviour more expected; positive relationships can widen speakers' repertoires; and institutional practices can formalise forms of address that initially emerged informally. Likewise, a conflict or exclusionary episode can reverse the sequence, causing previously affiliative codes to be reinterpreted as strategic or insincere. The principal value of the LPHF is therefore not a claim that every encounter follows four fixed steps, but an analytical account of the linked processes through which linguistic practices may become socially recognisable as harmony.

Intergenerational Tensions and Boundary Negotiation

The intergenerational findings complicate any assumption that harmony requires the disappearance of ethnic boundaries. Younger respondents often normalised mixed friendships and linguistic flexibility, whereas some older respondents associated continuity with the protection of customs, language, and marriage practices. These positions do not map neatly onto openness versus intolerance. Rather, they represent different diagnoses of what threatens collective wellbeing. Younger speakers may perceive rigid boundaries as obstacles to participation, while older speakers may perceive unqualified mixing as a risk to cultural transmission. CDA is useful here because it identifies the competing temporal narratives through which both groups claim to protect harmony.

This result extends earlier Sabah scholarship by showing that coexistence is negotiated not only between ethnic or religious groups but also within communities across generations. It also introduces a boundary condition for accommodation. Convergence may be welcomed as solidarity in an immediate interaction while simultaneously raising concern about long-term language shift or cultural erosion. Mathe and Motsaathebe's (2025) emphasis on accommodating both minoritised and majorised languages is relevant: inclusion cannot be equated with movement toward a dominant code alone. Sustainable harmony requires a balance between flexible intergroup communication and opportunities for heritage-language maintenance. The LPHF therefore distinguishes interactional accommodation from assimilation. The former expands participation while preserving the legitimacy of multiple repertoires; the latter may reduce visible difference by transferring the burden of adaptation disproportionately to less powerful groups.

Resilience Through Diversity

Respondents' narrative of resilience through diversity supports previous accounts of Sabah as a setting in which pluralism is normalised through repeated social practice. Shared festivals, interfaith visits, mixed neighbourhoods, markets, and overlapping soundscapes were described as ordinary components of collective

life rather than exceptional demonstrations of tolerance. This supports Lukin @ Lokin et al. (2022), who emphasise historical experience and everyday coexistence, and other Sabah-based studies that identify Indigenous festivals and interfaith cooperation as sites of tolerance and relationship-building (Andin et al., 2022; Sintang et al., 2022). It also accords with Sintang's (2024) grassroots account of Sabah's interfaith relations.

The current study nevertheless extends this literature by identifying the communicative mechanism beneath the broader narrative of resilience. Diversity becomes a resource when participants possess interactional means for making difference manageable: they can shift codes, recognise appropriate forms of address, repair misunderstanding, and connect respectful speech with reciprocal action. The contribution is therefore more specific than the claim that frequent contact produces tolerance. Contact is filtered through local language ideologies and power relations. When difference is treated as familiar and negotiable, interaction can confirm a shared identity; when it is racialised, hierarchically ranked, or framed as a deficiency, the same diversity may generate exclusion, as demonstrated in Gu and Ho's (2025) analysis of linguistic hostility.

This interpretation also challenges romantic accounts of Sabah harmony. A collective narrative of resilience can conceal unequal experiences if only dominant or socially secure voices define what counts as harmonious. CDA requires attention to silences, contradictions, and the possibility that polite coexistence may coexist with unequal access to institutions or pressure to conform linguistically. The data support a positive account of routine pluralism, but the theoretical implication is conditional: resilience is maintained through ongoing work and can weaken when opportunities for meaningful contact decline, when public narratives stigmatise particular groups, or when institutional practices reward only one legitimate way of speaking.

Implications for CDA and Communication Accommodation Theory

For CDA, the study demonstrates the value of moving from the critique of exclusionary representation to the analysis of ordinary practices that reproduce cooperation. CDA has often foregrounded how discourse naturalises hierarchy, othering, and unequal access (Blommaert, 2005; van Dijk, 1993, 1998; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Those concerns remain essential, but the Sabah evidence shows that discourse also naturalises civility, reciprocity, and shared belonging. The LPHF provides a middle-range mechanism linking textual or interactional details to social practice: code choice and address forms perform face-work; face-work informs stance; repeated stance supports routine cooperation. This gives CDA a more explicit account of how constructive social relations can be discursively reproduced without treating harmony as free from power.

At the same time, recent Critical Discourse Studies cautions against analysing identities as single, stable categories. Esposito (2024) argues for greater attention to intersecting and dynamic configurations of identity and inequality. Applied to the present study, this means that future CDA work should examine how ethnicity interacts with generation, gender, class, migration status, occupation, and urban–rural mobility. A dialect choice that indexes solidarity for a long-term resident may index vulnerability for a recent migrant; an honorific may communicate respect while also reproducing age or status hierarchy. The LPHF can accommodate these complexities if place affordances and stance attributions are analysed in relation to unequal access to linguistic capital rather than as culturally uniform norms.

For Communication Accommodation Theory, the findings support the significance of convergence and divergence but revise the assumption that accommodation has a stable relational meaning. Bibi and Hamida (2024) show that accommodation strategies contribute to cross-cultural adjustment, while the present study demonstrates how such strategies are evaluated within locally specific histories of contact. LPHF thus adds three elements to CAT: place as a moderator of interpretation, face-work as an intervening mechanism, and repetition as the process through which momentary accommodation may scale up to collective expectations. It also emphasises that non-accommodation is not automatically hostile. Maintaining a heritage code may express continuity or equality, while convergence may be coercive if expected only from a minoritised speaker. The theoretical task is therefore to analyse who accommodates, to whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences.

Boundary Conditions and Limitations of the LPHF

The LPHF has several theoretical limitations. First, it is an abductively developed interpretive model based on interview accounts; the study identifies a plausible process but does not establish a causal sequence through direct observation or longitudinal testing. Respondents may also narrate harmony according to socially desirable community scripts. Future research should therefore compare reported norms with naturally occurring interaction, examine repair after misunderstanding, and test whether repeated accommodative encounters predict changes in trust or cooperation over time.

Second, the framework may function less effectively in settings characterised by severe power asymmetry, segregation, material deprivation, institutional discrimination, or active political mobilisation of ethnic difference. Under such conditions, polite language may be insufficient to overcome unequal access or entrenched mistrust. Svensson (2025) shows why linguistic inequalities must be considered alongside communicative competence, while Chan and Kawalerowicz (2024) demonstrate that material conditions can substantially alter apparent relationships between diversity and cohesion. The LPHF therefore should not be used to shift responsibility for cohesion onto individual speakers. Accommodation can support inclusion, but it cannot substitute for fair institutions, accessible public spaces, equitable services, and protection from discrimination.

Third, the model presumes opportunities for repeated contact and locally intelligible norms. It may be weakened in transient settings where participants do not expect to meet again, in highly segregated neighbourhoods, in digital interactions where contextual cues are reduced, or in encounters where speakers lack a shared repertoire for repair. It may also fail when accommodation is interpreted as appropriation, mockery, loss of authenticity, or strategic impression management. These conditions do not invalidate the model; they identify variables that future comparative studies should test, including voluntariness, reciprocity, relative status, frequency of contact, institutional support, perceived safety, and the availability of alternative codes.

Finally, place categories must remain analytically flexible. Urban and rural settings are internally diverse, and mobility links villages, towns, workplaces, schools, and online networks. The model should not essentialise kampung life as automatically communal or urban life as inherently distant. Rather, it predicts that the meaning of accommodation will vary with the density of relationships, the organisation of public space, local histories, and expectations of mutual obligation. Comparative research across districts, generations, institutions, and interaction types is needed to determine which combinations most reliably convert linguistic accommodation into sustained cooperation.

Theoretical And Practical Contribution of The Study

The principal theoretical contribution of the study is to translate the general proposition that language contributes to ethnic harmony into an analysable, place-sensitive mechanism. The findings support existing research on accommodation, multilingualism, interfaith coexistence, and public contact, but extend it by specifying how code choice, face-work, stance attribution, and repetition are connected. They also challenge deterministic accounts in which either diversity or accommodation automatically produces cohesion. The LPHF instead proposes that harmony emerges when communicative practices are voluntarily and reciprocally interpreted as respect within settings that provide repeated contact and institutional support.

For ethnic-relations research, this shifts analytical attention from harmony as a static attitude to harmony as an interactional and institutional accomplishment. Surveys remain valuable for identifying distributions and associations, as illustrated by Stephen et al. (2025), but discourse analysis can explain the social mechanisms that make those associations meaningful. The framework therefore supports mixed-method and comparative designs in which attitudinal measures are examined alongside naturally occurring interaction, spatial context, and community institutions.

Practically, the findings imply that social-cohesion initiatives should protect both contact infrastructures and multilingual legitimacy. Markets, neighbourhood halls, schools, festivals, mediation networks, and community organisations can create opportunities for repeated interaction, but programmes should also cultivate reciprocal accommodation, respectful address, intergenerational language transmission,

and accessible ways of repairing misunderstanding. The objective is not to prescribe a single code or demand convergence from minoritised communities. It is to sustain settings in which multiple repertoires are recognised and in which communicative flexibility is supported by equitable participation. In this way, the LPHF offers a cautious but actionable explanation of how everyday discourse may contribute to durable ethnic harmony in Sabah and other multilingual societies.

Conclusion

This study examined how language use and place of residence shape perceptions of ethnic harmony in Sabah. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis of interviews from seven urban and rural districts, the findings show that harmony is not simply inherited as a cultural trait or expressed as an abstract attitude. It is repeatedly enacted through dominant-dialect accommodation, multilingual code-switching, respectful forms of address, and place-specific expectations of cooperation. The Language-Place Harmony Framework (LPHF) captures this process by explaining how place affordances cue code choice, how code choice performs face-work and politeness, and how repeated positive interaction stabilises cooperation. Rural settings tend to attach harmony to mutual obligation and participation, whereas urban settings more often frame it through courtesy and respectful coexistence.

The study contributes theoretically by linking micro-level linguistic practices to wider patterns of ethnic relations and social cohesion. It extends CDA by specifying how ordinary discourse can organise inclusion, belonging, and boundary negotiation across different social settings. The LPHF also complements Communication Accommodation Theory by showing that accommodation is interpreted through local norms, institutional conditions, and unequal social relations rather than functioning as a universally positive strategy. Practically, the findings indicate that multilingual repertoires and everyday contact infrastructures—including markets, neighbourhood organisations, schools, festivals, and community mediation networks—should be recognised as resources for cohesion. Such initiatives should support reciprocal accommodation and equitable participation rather than require minority communities to abandon their linguistic identities.

The study is limited by its qualitative sample, uneven representation of Sabah's ethnic communities, and reliance on transcripts that could not fully capture paralinguistic and embodied features of interaction. The LPHF should therefore be treated as a context-sensitive explanatory framework rather than a universal causal model. Future research could test the framework through comparative and mixed-method studies across other Malaysian regions and examine whether language-place mechanisms operate similarly in digital environments. Overall, ethnic harmony in Sabah emerges as an active, place-calibrated accomplishment sustained through repeated multilingual and interethnic practice.

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