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## **LANGUAGES, PLACES, AND PEACE: ETHNIC HARMONY ACROSS URBAN AND RURAL SABAH, MALAYSIA**

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### **Abstract**

This study tackles two research questions: RQ1: Do positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity foster ethnic harmony? and RQ2: Does place of residence influence that relationship? Surveys with 2,725 adults in seven districts of Sabah, Malaysia, captured daily language use, support for linguistic diversity, and perceived inter-ethnic harmony. Overall, respondents expressed strong approval of linguistic diversity and high levels of harmony. Statistical testing confirmed that favourable diversity attitudes are a consistent predictor of harmony, addressing RQ1. A follow-up comparison of urban and rural respondents revealed that this attitude–harmony link is noticeably stronger in rural districts, where mother-tongue use remains part of everyday life - thereby answering RQ2. In urban centres, well-established intercultural activities appear to provide a baseline of harmony, making individual attitudes less decisive. These findings suggest that social-cohesion efforts should be tailored to local contexts. Rural areas can benefit from low-cost, community-run initiatives such as heritage-language media, mother-tongue classes, and intergenerational storytelling, which reinforce positive diversity attitudes already aligned with daily practice. Urban settings, meanwhile, should focus on keeping intercultural programmes genuinely engaging rather than tokenistic. By showing how linguistic attitudes and residential context work together to shape harmony, the study offers a practical framework for other multi-ethnic societies aiming to turn cultural diversity into a shared strength.

**Keywords:** linguistic diversity, ethnic harmony, Sabah, place of residence, language attitudes

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Sabah, a state in Malaysia known for its rich ethnic and linguistic diversity, presents a compelling case study for understanding the dynamics of social harmony in a multicultural setting. With numerous indigenous groups alongside sizable Malay, Chinese, and other communities, Sabah's social fabric is interwoven with a multitude of languages and cultural practices. While diversity can sometimes be perceived as a source of potential conflict, Sabah has largely maintained a commendable level of peaceful coexistence among its various ethnic and religious groups (Sintang, 2014; Sintang, 2024). This paper seeks to delve into this phenomenon by focusing on two key factors: language and place of residence, and their influence on ethnic harmony. The research is guided by two primary questions:

RQ1. Do positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity foster ethnic harmony?

RQ2. Does place of residence influence that relationship?

Addressing these questions, the study uniquely integrates linguistic diversity with urban–rural context to show how attitudes and place jointly shape ethnic harmony, drawing valuable lessons from the unique context of Sabah. The findings of this research hold significance for policymakers, educators, and community leaders seeking to build more inclusive and cohesive societies in Malaysia and beyond. While previous studies have examined either linguistic diversity or urban-rural differences in isolation, this research uniquely integrates both dimensions to reveal how language attitudes interact with place-based contexts in shaping ethnic harmony. By empirically testing the moderating effect of place of residence on the relationship between support for linguistic diversity and inter-ethnic cohesion, this study advances beyond descriptive accounts of Sabah's multiculturalism to provide actionable insights into the specific mechanisms through which linguistic ecologies sustain peace in both urban superdiverse settings and rural vernacular communities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of ethnic harmony in diverse societies necessitates an examination of various theoretical frameworks and empirical findings related to language, culture, and social cohesion. This literature review synthesizes existing scholarship to provide a theoretical foundation, contextualize the research within broader discussions of diversity, and identify the specific research problem and gap addressed by this study in the context of Sabah.

### Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical perspectives inform the understanding of the relationship between language, diversity, and social harmony. Spolsky's language-management model offers a sharper explanatory lens for our research questions by treating language policy as a systemic interplay of three mutually reinforcing components—actual practices, underlying beliefs, and deliberate management interventions—filtered through the social domains in which people interact, such as the family, workplace, and civic life. By conceptualising residents' *attitudes toward linguistic diversity* as a subset of the "beliefs" component, we position RQ1 within the very mechanism that Spolsky argues either sustains or undermines harmonious multilingual co-existence. Moreover, Spolsky emphasises that management efforts must be *domain- and level-specific* to succeed; rural communities, where vernacular practices remain deeply embedded in family and village life, therefore offer different leverage points than urban settings, where market and bureaucratic domains dominate. This insight directly informs RQ2, which probes whether and how the place of residence moderates the attitudes-harmony link by shifting the relative weight of these domains (Spolsky, 2009).

Complementing Spolsky's systems view, Pérez Báez reframes language vitality as a matter not only of cultural rights but of *scientific urgency*, warning that "large percentages of our very object of study may disappear within this century" if proactive measures are not embedded in community life (Pérez Báez, 2018). Integrating her call for documentation and revitalisation underscores the broader scholarly and ethical stakes of examining how positive diversity attitudes can translate into tangible social cohesion. Together, Spolsky's domain-sensitive framework and Pérez Báez's vitality imperative justify our dual focus on micro-level attitudes and meso-level residential contexts as critical levers for both harmonious inter-ethnic relations and the preservation of Sabah's linguistic heritage.

Gavin et al. (2013) also contribute to a mechanistic understanding of linguistic diversity, exploring the drivers of language diversification and the factors that maintain or reduce it. These theoretical insights provide a basis for understanding how the linguistic landscape of Sabah has evolved and how it might influence ethnic interactions.

The notion of "harmony in diversity" is another important theoretical underpinning. Banban's (2018) empirical study on harmonious co-existence in the multi-ethnic culture of Qinghai offers valuable insights into how different ethnic groups can coexist peacefully while maintaining their distinct cultural traditions. This study highlights the importance of mutual borrowing, seeking common ground, and respecting differences as key elements of harmonious coexistence (Banban, 2018).

### **General Background**

Linguistic diversity is a global phenomenon, with thousands of languages spoken across the world. This diversity is not merely a matter of different vocabularies and grammatical structures but also reflects diverse ways of knowing, interacting with the environment, and organizing social life. Báez (2018) emphasizes the link between linguistic diversity, language vitality, and the advancement of linguistics as a science, underscoring the importance of documenting and understanding endangered languages. Gavin et al. (2013) discuss the various environmental, geographical, and sociocultural drivers of linguistic diversification, providing a broader context for understanding the origins and maintenance of language diversity in a region like Sabah.

The relationship between language and inter-racial harmony has been a subject of study in various multi-ethnic societies. Chan's (2016) paper on "Language and inter-racial harmony: The Battle for English as Singapore lingua" provides a comparative perspective, illustrating how language policies and the choice of a lingua franca can impact intergroup relations in a different Southeast Asian context. While the historical and socio-political context of Singapore differs from Sabah, the challenges and strategies related to language and harmony discussed in this paper offer valuable points of comparison (Chan, 2016).

The concept of linguistic landscape, which refers to the visibility and salience of languages in the public space, can also provide insights into the dynamics of language use and intergroup relations. Benu et al.'s (2023) study on local language vitality in Kupang city, Indonesia, using a linguistic landscape approach demonstrates how analyzing the presence and use of languages in public signs, advertisements, and other forms of public discourse can reveal patterns of language dominance, vitality, and potential areas of linguistic tension or harmony.

### **Sabah Context**

Sabah's context of ethnic and religious diversity is particularly relevant to this study. Sintang's work on Understanding Sabah's Exemplary Interfaith Relations from a Grassroots Perspective (2024) and Peaceful Co-Existence in Religious Diversity in Sabah, Malaysia (2014) highlights the remarkable degree of cohesion, mutual respect, and accommodation among the diverse communities in Sabah, contrasting it with the often more tense relations in Peninsular Malaysia (Sintang, 2014; 2024). Sintang (2024) attributes this harmony, particularly between Muslim and Christian communities, to familial attitudes and outlooks at the grassroots level. These studies underscore the importance of local-level interactions and attitudes in fostering peaceful coexistence (Sintang, 2014; 2024). The empirical investigation in this study, which gathered data across seven diverse locations in Sabah, including both urban and rural areas, aims to further

explore how these dynamics of harmony are influenced by linguistic practices and specific geographical contexts within the state.

### Research Problem and Gap

Despite the existing literature on linguistic diversity, social harmony, and the specific case of Sabah's interfaith relations, there remains a gap in the comprehensive understanding of how the *interaction* between language use, particularly daily dialect and mother tongue use, and *place of residence* specifically influences ethnic harmony in Sabah. While Sintang's work provides valuable insights into interfaith relations (Sintang, 2014; 2024), a detailed analysis of how the *combination* of linguistic practices and urban versus rural settings shapes ethnic harmony is less explored.

The research problem, therefore, is to empirically investigate the specific influence of language use patterns in conjunction with different places of residence on the levels of ethnic harmony experienced by individuals in Sabah. Existing studies have focused on broader aspects of intergroup relations or examined language or location in isolation or with different variables. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a focused quantitative analysis of these intersecting factors, drawing on the diverse linguistic and geographical landscape of Sabah and the data collected across various locations within the state. By doing so, it seeks to offer a more granular understanding of the complex interplay between linguistic diversity, spatial context, and the achievement of social harmony in a multi-ethnic society.

Spolsky's tripartite ecology - language practices, language beliefs, and language management - clarifies why our study interrogates not only *what* Sabah residents believe about multilingualism but *where* those beliefs operate. By conceptualising "support for linguistic diversity" as a belief-level variable and "place of residence" as a domain bundle that shapes daily practices, we position RQ1 (Do positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity foster ethnic harmony?) and RQ2 (Does place moderate that link?) squarely inside Spolsky's mechanism for sustainable social cohesion. Complementing this systems lens, Pérez Báez reframes language vitality as a matter of *scientific urgency*, warning that the loss of minoritised languages erodes the empirical base of linguistics itself. Together, these perspectives justify our focus on *attitudinal levers* and *spatial context* as dual drivers of both social harmony and the preservation of Sabah's linguistic heritage.

### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine the relationship between support for linguistic diversity and perceptions of social harmony among residents of Sabah, Malaysia. The research focused on how these attitudes and experiences vary across seven different districts in the State and between urban

and rural communities. The map in Figure 1 displays the geographic location of the districts involved in this study. These districts were selected to represent both urban and rural respondents across Sabah, with varying levels of ethnic and linguistic diversity.



**Figure 1: Map of Sabah State Showing the Districts Surveyed**

Source: <https://sabah.gov.my/ms/content/pengenalan>

### Sampling and Data Collection

To ensure a representative sample, the survey employed a probability sampling approach, with the sampling frame constructed using population data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia. A total of 2,725 respondents were selected from seven key locations across Sabah: Sandakan, Tawau, Kuala Penyu, Ranau, Keningau, Kota Kinabalu, and Kota Marudu. Trained enumerators conducted face-to-face interviews, administering the questionnaire in the respondents' preferred language to maximize comprehension and data quality. This approach ensured that the sample reflected the demographic and linguistic diversity of the region, providing a robust foundation for analyzing language-related variables. The study received ethical clearance from the Research Management Centre,

Universiti Malaysia Sabah for the research code SDK0328-2021. Prior to data collection, all respondents were provided with information about the study's purpose and procedures, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. To ensure confidentiality, all responses were anonymized and no personally identifiable information was retained.

### **Instrument and Measures**

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising several validated scales:

- **Support for Linguistic Diversity:** This construct was measured using nine items (B5.1 to B5.9), each rated on a Likert scale. These items assessed respondents' attitudes toward the maintenance and promotion of local dialects and multiple languages within their communities. The mean of these items was used as a composite score for subsequent analyses.
- **Social Harmony:** The Social Harmony scale was constructed by combining responses from five key domains measured on a 5-point Likert scale: religious tolerance (9 items), attitudes toward interethnic marriage (9 items), experiences in local markets/tamu (9 items), participation in ethnic celebrations (9 items), and support for linguistic diversity (9 items). The mean of these 45 items formed the social harmony scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).
- **Urban/Rural Status and Region:** Respondents indicated their place of residence, which was coded to distinguish between urban and rural areas, as well as the specific region (Kota Kinabalu, Kota Marudu, Keningau)

All items were measured using a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater frequency, stronger support, or higher perceived harmony.

### **Reliability Analysis**

To ensure the reliability of the measurement instruments, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for the main scales. The Support for Linguistic Diversity scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.889. The Social Harmony scale showed good reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.794.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise the central tendencies and variability of the main variables. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between support for linguistic diversity and social harmony. To explore regional and urban-rural differences in social harmony, one-way

ANOVA and independent samples t-tests were performed, respectively. A multiple regression analysis was then conducted to assess the influence of support for linguistic diversity and urban/rural status on social harmony, including an interaction term to test whether the effect of linguistic diversity support differed by urban or rural context.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

This section discusses the findings of the study regarding how language use and place of residence shape ethnic harmony across diverse locations in Sabah.

### **Demographic Profile**

The analysis began by examining the demographic profile of the 2,725 respondents who participated in the survey. Understanding the composition of the sample is essential for contextualizing the findings and ensuring the representativeness of the results. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents across key demographic variables including gender, ethnicity, age group, education level, and district of residence. Percentages are calculated based on the total sample size. The sample includes representation from Sabah's major ethnic groups (Dusun, Bajau, Chinese, Kadazan-Dusun, and others) and spans seven districts. Table 1 summarises the distribution of respondents by gender, ethnicity, age range, religion/beliefs, and education level. This comprehensive overview highlights the diversity of the sample and provides a foundation for interpreting subsequent analyses.

As shown in Table 1 below, 1,500 female and 1,225 male respondents participated. Dusun was the largest ethnic group with 925 respondents, followed by Bajau (383), Malays (254), and others. The table lists all ethnicities with their respective counts, including smaller groups like Rungus, Iban, Jawa, and more. In terms of age, the respondents were distributed across typical age ranges. The largest group is 35-44 years old (719), followed by 25-34 years old (609), 45-54 years old (557), 18-24 years old (421), 55-64 years old (296), and above 65 years old (123). There were no respondents under 18. Finally, the most common educational qualification was SPM (1,075), followed by Bachelor's degree (445), SRP (385) Master's, (347), UPSR (263).

| Category  | Label     | Count | Category             | Label               | Count |
|-----------|-----------|-------|----------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Gender    | Female    | 1500  | Age range            | <18                 | 0     |
|           | Male      | 1225  |                      | 18-24               | 421   |
|           | Dusun     | 925   |                      | 25-34               | 609   |
|           | Bajau     | 383   |                      | 35-44               | 719   |
|           | Melayu    | 254   |                      | 45-54               | 557   |
|           | Bugis     | 174   |                      | 55-64               | 296   |
|           | Sungai    | 125   |                      | 65+                 | 123   |
|           | Kadazan   | 115   | Religion/<br>Beliefs | Islam               | 2102  |
|           | Suluk     | 106   |                      | Kristian            | 575   |
|           | Murut     | 91    |                      | Buddha              | 21    |
|           | Tidung    | 80    |                      | Bahai               | 9     |
|           | Bisaya    | 80    |                      | Others              | 8     |
|           | Kedayan   | 74    |                      | Pagan               | 7     |
|           | Brunei    | 69    |                      | Hindu               | 3     |
| Ethnicity | Cina      | 57    | Education            | SPM                 | 1075  |
|           | Sino      | 41    |                      | Bachelors           | 445   |
|           | Rungus    | 37    |                      | SRP                 | 385   |
|           | Banjar    | 27    |                      | Masters             | 347   |
|           | Iban      | 21    |                      | UPSR                | 263   |
|           | Jawa      | 14    |                      | No formal education | 171   |
|           | Cocos     | 9     |                      | Others              | 20    |
|           | Lain-lain | 9     |                      | PhD                 | 19    |
|           | India     | 6     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Ubian     | 5     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Filipino  | 4     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Kegayan   | 3     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Idahan    | 3     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Timur     | 2     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Rumanau   | 2     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Bidayuh   | 2     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Visaya    | 2     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Kayan     | 2     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Buton     | 1     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Lundayeh  | 1     |                      |                     |       |
|           | Dumpas    | 1     |                      |                     |       |

**Table 1:** Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

### Language Use and Attitudes

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for items B5.1–B5.9, which index respondents' attitudes toward linguistic diversity in Sabah. All items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree), with higher means indicating stronger support for linguistic diversity. A composite mean across the nine items provides the overall 'support for linguistic diversity' measure used in subsequent analyses:

**Table 2:** Mean Scores for Support for Linguistic Diversity Items

| Item | Mean Score | Item Statement                                                                                                                     |
|------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| B5.1 | 4.5        | I know the existence of various ethnic languages in Sabah as one of the uniqueness that contributes to the unity of the community. |
| B5.2 | 4.5        | I agree that the use of Sabah Malay dialect as an intermediate language that fosters ethnic harmony in Sabah.                      |
| B5.3 | 4.5        | The use of multiple languages does not affect the harmony of the various ethnicities in Sabah.                                     |
| B5.4 | 4.4        | I don't mind if I need to learn another ethnic language.                                                                           |
| B5.5 | 4.3        | I support the teaching of KadazanDusun subject in schools in Sabah.                                                                |
| B5.6 | 4.5        | I support efforts to conserve (preserve) the various ethnic languages in Sabah.                                                    |
| B5.7 | 4.3        | I learned the language of other ethnicities to make it easier for me to communicate with other ethnicities.                        |
| B5.8 | 4.1        | I try to use other ethnic languages when I'm at a party or at a <i>tamu</i> .                                                      |
| B5.9 | 4.1        | I like to follow the broadcasts of various ethnic languages of Sabah on electronic media and social media.                         |

The results indicate that, overall, respondents express strong support for the items on linguistic diversity, with mean scores for most items well above 4 on a 5-point scale. This suggests that the majority of participants agree on the importance of preserving local dialects and supporting efforts to maintain multiple languages in their communities. Notably, items such as B5.1 (“It is important to maintain local dialects”) and B5.6 (“I support efforts to preserve multiple languages in my community”) have particularly high mean scores, reflecting widespread endorsement of these values. These results reinforce the idea that linguistic diversity is not only accepted but actively supported by the communities, which is a positive sign for language preservation initiatives and social cohesion in Sabah.

Building on the strong support for linguistic diversity observed among respondents, it is important to consider how these positive language attitudes relate to broader patterns of social harmony within Sabah’s multiethnic communities. To this end, the Social Harmony scale was constructed by combining responses from five key domains: religious tolerance, attitudes toward interethnic marriage, experiences in local markets (*tamu*), participation in ethnic celebrations, and support for linguistic diversity. This comprehensive scale

provides a holistic measure of how individuals perceive and experience harmonious relations across ethnic lines in their daily lives.

Table 3 below presents descriptive statistics for survey items measuring various dimensions of social harmony, including interethnic trust, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived social harmony. The composite mean score across all items provides an overall measure of social harmony used as the dependent variable in regression analyses. The high reliability of this scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.95) underscores its robustness in capturing the multifaceted nature of social harmony in the state:

**Table 3:** Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Social Harmony Items by Districts

| No. | Location             | Mean        | SD  | N   |
|-----|----------------------|-------------|-----|-----|
| 1   | Keningau             | 4.16        | 0.5 | 400 |
| 2   | <b>Kota Kinabalu</b> | <b>4.34</b> | 0.4 | 400 |
| 3   | <b>Kota Marudu</b>   | <b>4.38</b> | 0.4 | 385 |
| 4   | Kuala Penyu          | 4.26        | 0.5 | 385 |
| 5   | Ranau                | 4.18        | 0.5 | 385 |
| 6   | Sandakan             | 4.14        | 0.5 | 385 |
| 7   | Tawau                | 4.20        | 0.5 | 385 |

The results indicate that perceptions of social harmony are generally high across all regions, with mean scores ranging from 4.14 in Sandakan to 4.38 in Kota Marudu on a 5-point scale. Notably, Kota Marudu and Kota Kinabalu report the highest levels of social harmony, suggesting particularly strong interethnic relations in these areas. The relatively low standard deviations across regions further suggest that these positive attitudes are widely shared within each community.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test whether these regional differences are statistically significant. The analysis reveals a significant effect of region on Social Harmony scores, with an F-statistic of 16.25 and a *p*-value less than .001. This indicates that there are meaningful differences in perceived social harmony among the seven fieldwork locations in Sabah. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests further clarify which regions differ from each other. The most notable findings were:

- Kota Kinabalu and Kota Marudu both have significantly higher Social Harmony scores compared to Keningau (mean differences of 0.18 and 0.22, both  $p < .001$ ).
- Kuala Penyu also differs significantly from Keningau (mean difference 0.10,  $p = .038$ ).
- Some region pairs, such as Keningau vs. Ranau and Keningau vs. Sandakan, do not show significant differences, indicating similar levels of social harmony between these locations.

These results highlight that while social harmony is generally high across Sabah, certain regions - particularly Kota Kinabalu and Kota Marudu - stand out for their especially strong interethnic relations. The significant differences observed may be influenced by factors such as demographic diversity, urbanization, economic opportunities, and the presence of multicultural initiatives in these regions.

A key objective of this study was to examine whether place of residence - specifically, urban versus rural context - shapes experiences of social harmony in Sabah. The analysis revealed a clear and significant distinction between these groups. Urban residents, represented by Kota Kinabalu, reported a higher mean level of social harmony compared to their rural counterparts across the state. This pattern is summarised in the following Table 4:

**Table 4:** Urban and Rural Respondents Comparison of Social Harmony Mean Scores

| No. | UrbanRural | mean | std  | n    |
|-----|------------|------|------|------|
| 0   | Rural      | 4.22 | 0.47 | 2325 |
| 1   | Urban      | 4.34 | 0.41 | 400  |

As shown on Table 4, the mean social harmony score among urban respondents was 4.34, while rural respondents reported a mean of 4.22. Notably, the standard deviation was lower in urban areas ( $SD = 0.41$  vs.  $0.47$ ), indicating a greater consensus among urban dwellers regarding the state of social harmony. An independent-samples t-test indicated higher harmony among urban respondents than rural respondents, ( $t = 5.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.26$ ). The effect size, while small, represents a meaningful difference given the large sample size and the practical implications for understanding urban-rural dynamics in Sabah's multicultural context. Consistent with this pattern, studies of Kota Kinabalu's Taman Awam Teluk Likas indicate that inclusively planned parks can help institutionalise routine interethnic contact, consistent with a higher urban harmony baseline (Abdul Latip et al., 2023).

These findings suggest that the urban environment in Sabah, characterized by greater exposure to diversity and more opportunities for

interethnic interaction, may foster stronger social cohesion. At the same time, the consistently high mean scores across both urban and rural groups highlight Sabah's overall success in maintaining social harmony within its multi-ethnic society.

This urban–rural difference is not only statistically significant but also meaningful in practical terms. The literature review highlighted the challenges of fostering cohesion in rapidly urbanizing environments; our findings suggest that, in Sabah, urban settings may actually provide more opportunities for positive interethnic contact and shared values, perhaps due to greater exposure to diversity and more inclusive urban policies. Importantly, the relationship between support for linguistic diversity and social harmony is moderated by urban/rural status. The positive effect of supporting linguistic diversity on social harmony is even more pronounced in rural areas. To further clarify these dynamics, a regression analysis was conducted to examine how support for linguistic diversity, urban–rural status, and their interaction jointly influence social harmony in Sabah. The results are summarised in Table 5 below:

**Table 5:** Regression Analysis Predicting Social Harmony from Linguistic Diversity Support and Urban-Rural Status.

| Predictor                                        | B      | SE    | t     | p         |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|-----------|
| Intercept                                        | 1.151  | 0.044 | 26.28 | < .001*** |
| <b>Linguistic Diversity Support</b>              | 0.708  | 0.01  | 70.66 | < .001*** |
| <b>Urban/Rural Status</b>                        | 0.532  | 0.118 | 4.5   | < .001*** |
| <b>Linguistic Diversity x Urban/Rural Status</b> | -0.108 | 0.027 | -4.04 | < .001*** |

As shown in Table 5, support for linguistic diversity was a significant positive predictor of social harmony ( $B = 0.708$ ,  $SE = 0.010$ ,  $t = 70.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that for rural residents, each one-unit increase in support for linguistic diversity was associated with a 0.71-point increase in social harmony. Urban-rural status also significantly predicted social harmony ( $B = 0.532$ ,  $SE = 0.118$ ,  $t = 4.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with urban residents reporting higher social harmony scores than rural residents at average levels of linguistic diversity support.

Most importantly, the interaction between linguistic diversity support and urban-rural status was statistically significant ( $B = -0.108$ ,  $SE = 0.027$ ,  $t = -4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that urban-rural status moderates the relationship between linguistic diversity support and social harmony. Specifically, the positive effect of linguistic diversity support on social harmony was stronger for rural residents than for urban residents.

All predictors in the model are statistically significant at the  $p < .001$  level, underscoring the robustness of these relationships. This complex pattern

highlights that both language attitudes and place of residence play important, interacting roles in shaping social harmony in Sabah. To visually illustrate this interaction and make the statistical relationship more accessible, Figure 2 below presents the association between support for linguistic diversity and social harmony separately for urban and rural respondents:

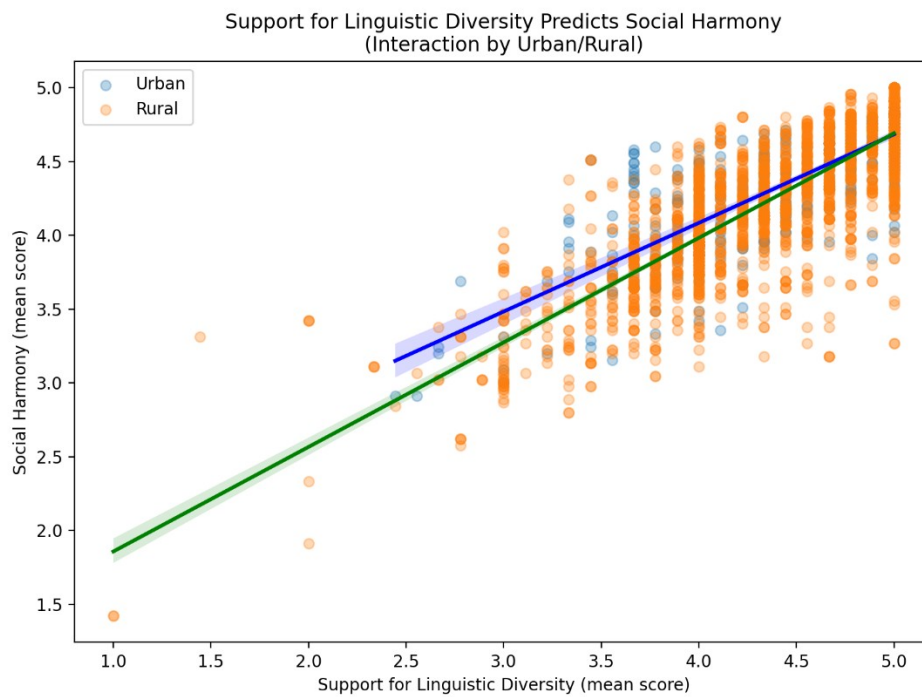


**Figure 2:** Interaction Between Support for Linguistic Diversity and Urban-Rural Status in Predicting Social Harmony

The chart displays two regression lines: blue line for urban respondents and green line for rural respondents. Both lines slope upward, indicating that, regardless of where people live, those who are more supportive of linguistic diversity tend to report higher levels of social harmony. This positive association is consistent with the idea that valuing multiple languages fosters mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

However, the key insight from the visualization - and from the regression analysis results - is that the slope of the line is steeper for rural respondents. In practical terms, this means that the “boost” in social harmony associated with supporting linguistic diversity is even greater in rural areas than in urban ones. For example, a rural resident who strongly supports linguistic diversity is likely to report much higher social harmony than a rural resident who

does not, and this difference is larger than the corresponding difference among urban residents.

This study set out to answer two fundamental questions: (1) Does language and place of residence influence ethnic harmony in a society like Sabah? and (2) How do these factors exert their influence? Through a rigorous quantitative analysis of a diverse sample spanning urban and rural Sabah, our findings provide robust, multi-layered answers that not only advance academic understanding but also offer practical insights for policy and community action.

### **Linguistic Diversity as a Foundation for Social Harmony**

The first and most consistent finding is the powerful, positive association between support for linguistic diversity and social harmony. Respondents who more strongly endorse the preservation and use of multiple languages in their communities report significantly higher levels of social harmony. This result is not only statistically significant but also substantial in practical terms, echoing the arguments of Schreiber and Carius (2016), who contend that embracing diversity - including linguistic diversity - is essential for fostering social cohesion. Their work on inclusive urban planning highlights the value of multilingual public services and accessible urban spaces in strengthening residents' sense of belonging. While their examples focus on global cities such as Toronto and Melbourne, the present findings suggest that similar strategies are both relevant and feasible in Sabah, particularly in urban centres like Kota Kinabalu. The strong endorsement of linguistic diversity among respondents indicates a fertile ground for such inclusive initiatives, which could further enhance inter-ethnic interactions and reduce social exclusion.

The concept of linguistic superdiversity, as articulated by Blommaert and Rampton (2011) and expanded by Duarte and Gogolin (2013), is also highly relevant to the Sabah context. Superdiversity describes the complex, dynamic nature of language use in urban settings with high migration flows, challenging planners to move beyond monolingual frameworks and adopt flexible, multilingual policies. In Sabah, where indigenous languages coexist with Malay and English, our findings underscore the need for planning that supports linguistic pluralism while promoting integration. The high mean scores for support for linguistic diversity reflect a community that is not only tolerant of, but actively values, its multilingual heritage. This is a crucial insight: it suggests that the foundation for social harmony in Sabah is not assimilation, but the celebration and maintenance of difference.

Recent scholarship by Siemund (2023) further supports this interpretation, emphasizing that multilingual development is not merely a byproduct of globalization but a deliberate, community-driven process. Siemund's work demonstrates that when communities invest in the maintenance and development of multiple languages, they foster environments where mutual

respect and understanding can flourish. Our findings resonate with this perspective, showing that support for linguistic diversity is a key driver of social harmony in both urban and rural Sabah.

### **Urban and Rural Dynamics: The Role of Place**

The influence of place of residence - urban versus rural - emerges as another significant determinant of social harmony. Urban residents, on average, report higher levels of social harmony than their rural counterparts. This finding is particularly striking in the case of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah's most cosmopolitan city, which records the highest mean score for social harmony among all regions studied. This result is not coincidental. Kota Kinabalu's demographic diversity, economic opportunities, and history of migration have created a vibrant, multicultural urban environment. The city's high level of social harmony can be attributed to several interrelated factors.

First, as Schreiber and Carius (2016) argue, urban planning that embraces diversity - through multilingual signage, inclusive public services, and accessible community spaces - can significantly enhance residents' sense of belonging. In Kota Kinabalu, such initiatives are not merely theoretical; they are visible in the city's everyday life, from the languages spoken in markets to the cultural festivals celebrated throughout the year. The findings of Isar (2016) further reinforce this point, highlighting that creative urban diversity and intercultural policies can transform multicultural cities into genuinely inclusive spaces. In such environments, the marginal benefit of additional support for linguistic diversity, while still positive, is less dramatic because the baseline for social harmony is already high. This is reflected in our regression analysis, which shows that the positive effect of support for linguistic diversity on social harmony is somewhat weaker in urban areas compared to rural areas. In other words, urban residents in places like Kota Kinabalu already benefit from a broad array of multicultural experiences and institutional supports that foster harmony, regardless of individual attitudes.

Second, the concept of linguistic superdiversity is particularly salient in Kota Kinabalu. The city's population is characterized by a high degree of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, with indigenous languages, Malay, English, and various migrant languages coexisting in a dynamic, ever-evolving landscape. Blommaert and Rampton (2011) and Duarte and Gogolin (2013) argue that such superdiverse environments require flexible, adaptive policies that go beyond traditional monolingual or even bilingual frameworks. Our findings suggest that Kota Kinabalu's success in fostering social harmony is due, in part, to its ability to accommodate and celebrate this superdiversity. The city's high mean score for social harmony is a testament to the effectiveness of these inclusive, pluralistic approaches.

### **Rural Strengths: The Case of Kota Marudu**

Equally noteworthy is the case of Kota Marudu, a rural area that also records a high mean score for social harmony. This finding challenges the assumption that urban areas are inherently better equipped to manage diversity and suggests that rural communities possess their own unique strengths. In Kota Marudu, the strength of social cohesion may be rooted in the close-knit nature of rural life, where interpersonal relationships are more direct and language plays a central role in daily interactions. The regression analysis supports this interpretation, showing that the positive effect of supporting linguistic diversity is especially pronounced in rural contexts. In practical terms, this means that a rural resident who strongly supports linguistic diversity is likely to report much higher social harmony than a rural resident who does not, and this difference is larger than the corresponding difference among urban residents.

This finding aligns with Duarte and Gogolin's (2013) argument that rural multilingualism, when valued and supported, can serve as a powerful engine for social integration and mutual trust. In rural communities, language is often more than a tool for communication - it is a marker of identity, belonging, and mutual respect. Thus, efforts to promote linguistic inclusivity in these areas can yield substantial dividends for social harmony. Siemund (2023) also emphasizes the importance of local language practices and attitudes in sustaining social cohesion in less urbanized settings. Our findings provide empirical support for this perspective, demonstrating that rural communities like Kota Marudu can achieve high levels of social harmony when linguistic diversity is embraced.

### **Interpreting the Regression Analysis: Implications for the Research Questions**

The regression analysis offers a rich and persuasive interpretation into the interplay between language attitudes and place of residence in shaping social harmony. Most notably, the significant and negative interaction term indicates that while support for linguistic diversity is associated with higher social harmony in both urban and rural contexts, the strength of this association is somewhat weaker in urban areas. In other words, the "boost" in social harmony that comes from supporting linguistic diversity is more pronounced in rural settings. This is a critical finding, as it challenges the often-unquestioned assumption that urban environments, by virtue of their diversity and cosmopolitanism, are always the most fertile ground for interethnic harmony.

What does this mean for our understanding of social cohesion in Sabah? First, it underscores the importance of context. In urban areas like Kota Kinabalu, where social harmony is already high—likely due to a combination of demographic diversity, economic opportunity, and the presence of multicultural initiatives—the marginal benefit of additional support for linguistic diversity, while still positive, is less dramatic. This aligns with the arguments of Schreiber

and Carius (2016), who highlight that urban planning and policy interventions, such as multilingual signage, inclusive public services, and intercultural community centres, can create environments where diversity is normalized and celebrated. In such settings, the baseline for social harmony is already elevated, and the incremental gains from further support for linguistic diversity, though real, are less pronounced.

Conversely, in rural areas like Kota Marudu, where linguistic and cultural ecologies tend to be more homogeneous, individual attitudes toward linguistic diversity play a more decisive role in shaping interethnic relations. In that context, the Lower Kinabatangan case shows how these attitudes can be institutionally scaffolded: collaborative management structures create predictable opportunities for contact and trust-building routines that thereby amplify the attitudinal gradient observed (Pimid et al., 2020). Here, the regression analysis reveals that the positive effect of supporting linguistic diversity on social harmony is especially strong. This finding resonates with the work of Duarte and Gogolin (2013) and Siemund (2023), who argue that in less urbanized settings, language is often a core marker of identity and belonging. When rural residents value and support linguistic diversity, the resulting boost in social harmony is substantial. This suggests that efforts to promote linguistic inclusivity in rural areas can yield significant dividends for social cohesion, perhaps even more so than in urban contexts.

The significance of these findings cannot be overstated. They provide a powerful empirical rebuttal to the notion that diversity is inherently destabilizing or that rural areas are less capable of managing pluralism. Instead, the data show that both urban and rural communities in Sabah are capable of achieving high levels of social harmony, provided that linguistic diversity is valued and supported. This is a crucial insight for policymakers, educators, and community leaders, as it highlights the need for context-sensitive interventions that recognize and build upon the unique strengths of different communities.

### **The “So What?”: Implications and Significance**

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. First, they challenge simplistic narratives about the risks of diversity and instead highlight the potential for inclusive, context-sensitive policies to build stronger, more cohesive societies. In urban areas, the high levels of social harmony observed in places like Kota Kinabalu demonstrate that diversity, when managed thoughtfully and inclusively, can be a source of strength rather than division. The presence of multicultural initiatives, economic opportunities, and everyday intercultural contact creates an environment where social harmony can flourish.

In rural areas, the findings suggest that social cohesion is not only possible but can be exceptionally strong when linguistic diversity is embraced. The case of Kota Marudu illustrates that rural communities, often perceived as

less adaptable to change, can in fact be leaders in fostering interethnic harmony when they value and support linguistic pluralism. This challenges deficit-based views of rurality and highlights the potential for rural areas to serve as models of inclusive community-building.

Second, the findings underscore the importance of language as a vehicle for social integration. The consistent positive association between support for linguistic diversity and social harmony across all contexts suggests that language policies and practices are not merely symbolic but have real, tangible effects on the quality of interethnic relations. This aligns with the arguments of Siemund (2023), who emphasizes the role of multilingual development in promoting social cohesion, and with the broader literature on linguistic superdiversity, which calls for flexible, pluralistic approaches to language policy in both urban and rural settings.

Third, the results highlight the need for tailored interventions. While promoting linguistic diversity is beneficial everywhere, the mechanisms through which it enhances social harmony may differ between urban and rural contexts. In urban areas, policy interventions that normalize and celebrate diversity such as multilingual signage, inclusive public services, and intercultural community centres are likely to be most effective. In rural areas, efforts to foster positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity at the community level may yield the greatest benefits.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study's unique contribution lies in empirically demonstrating that the relationship between linguistic diversity attitudes and ethnic harmony is not universal but place-contingent - a finding that challenges one-size-fits-all language policy approaches and advances the discourse beyond static descriptions of multiculturalism to dynamic, context-sensitive models of how language ecologies sustain peace across different settlement types.

Our analysis extends Spolsky's (2009) ecology of language management from theory to evidence and, crucially, to action. We demonstrate that favourable beliefs about linguistic diversity are a reliable predictor of inter-ethnic harmony, yet their influence is not uniform: the effect intensifies in rural districts where vernacular languages still anchor everyday life. This pattern suggests that beliefs, practices, and locally designed language initiatives converge most powerfully where the community's linguistic repertoire remains intact - precisely the synergy Spolsky identifies as the engine of sustainable language policy. In urban settings, however, intercultural programmes and bureaucratic routines already scaffold multilingual interaction; individual attitudes therefore add only marginal gains, producing a "floor" beneath which harmony is unlikely to fall.

Taken together, these patterns invite a wider lens. Viewed through Pérez Báez's (2018) call to safeguard the empirical foundation of linguistics, these findings carry twin imperatives. First, scholars can leverage the rural amplification effect to trace fuller causal chains linking beliefs to observed practices and, in turn, to measurable social outcomes. Second, policymakers should prioritise low-cost, high-impact interventions that strengthen pro-diversity beliefs where vernacular use is still vibrant -community-run media, mother-tongue schooling, and intergenerational storytelling circles - while fine-tuning urban programmes to ensure they remain responsive rather than merely symbolic. By situating attitudes within the lived ecology of language, our study not only clarifies how harmony is produced but also charts a practical route for preserving the linguistic heritage on which both local cultures and linguistic science depend.

### **Policy and Research Implications**

The findings of this study carry concrete implications for language and social cohesion policy in multilingual settings such as Sabah. First, they affirm the critical importance of embedding linguistic diversity within development planning - not only through national language policies but also through localized initiatives that resonate with community values.

In urban areas, where infrastructural supports for intercultural interaction already exist, efforts should focus on sustaining inclusive practices such as multilingual signage, cultural festivals, and equitable access to public services. In rural contexts, however, policy interventions must centre on community-led language initiatives, intergenerational transmission, and capacity building for linguistic awareness at the grassroots level. Education systems, media platforms, and civic spaces can all play pivotal roles in normalizing linguistic plurality as a foundation for social unity. These differentiated strategies are essential for advancing Malaysia's commitments to social integration under frameworks such as the SDGs and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The use of self-reported survey data, while appropriate for measuring perceptions and attitudes, carries inherent limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, responses may be subject to social desirability bias, whereby participants overstate their support for linguistic diversity and ethnic harmony to align with perceived social norms, potentially inflating the observed positive associations. Second, self-reported attitudes may not fully correspond to actual behaviors or lived experiences of interethnic interaction, meaning our findings reflect stated beliefs rather than behavioral outcomes. Third, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; while we observe that positive language attitudes

correlate with higher harmony scores, we cannot definitively establish whether favourable attitudes foster harmony or whether harmonious environments cultivate positive attitudes toward diversity.

These limitations suggest that our findings are best interpreted as revealing associations between language beliefs and perceived social cohesion within Sabah's specific context, rather than universal causal mechanisms. Generalizability beyond Sabah - particularly to contexts with different colonial histories, language policies, or patterns of ethnic settlement, should be approached cautiously. Additionally, although the sample was large and geographically diverse, future research should explore longitudinal designs or ethnographic approaches to better capture the evolving nature of language ideologies and intergroup dynamics. Comparative studies across other Malaysian states or Southeast Asian regions could also illuminate how regional variations in language policy and migration patterns influence social cohesion. Finally, further research should interrogate the role of digital media and online linguistic landscapes in shaping contemporary attitudes toward multilingualism, especially among youth populations.

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