

University Students' Perceptions on Inter-ethnic Unity among Malaysians: Situational Recognition, Social Self-Construal and Situational Complexity

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ABSTRACT

National unity is pertinent to the stability and progress of a country. For multi-ethnic nations such as Malaysia, diversity is perceived as a challenge to national unity. Extant literature shows that the different ethnic groups in Malaysia have expressed different ideals on inter-ethnic unity and differ in their ideas on how it may be achieved. To what extent do these differences exist? The purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia among the three main ethnic groups. A survey measuring perceptions on the issue of inter-ethnic unity was distributed among 575 university students at four different institutions of higher learning in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The results show that the different ethnic groups held similar problem perceptions in terms of problem recognition, involvement, constraint recognition, and did not differ significantly in terms of their social position on the problem. There were however, significant differences between the Chinese and Malay/*Bumiputeras*, as well as between the Chinese and Indians when it came to perceived level of knowledge and experience about the problem. The findings indicate that different ethnic groups may be differently equipped to handle the issue of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia. Communication and policy efforts to build an integrated nation would benefit from taking these differences into consideration to ensure effective implementation.

Keywords: *Inter-ethnic unity, Malaysia, situational recognition, social self-construal, situational complexity.*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is one of the most diverse countries in Southeast Asia with citizens from various different ethnic groups and religions. The majority of the Malaysian populations are Malay and Indigenous (68.8%), with smaller Chinese (23.2%) and Indian (7%) (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2017). The Malay and Indigenous ethnic groups are considered *Bumiputera* or 'sons of the soil' and are awarded certain constitutional privileges as a result of citizenship negotiations when Chinese and Indian immigrants were naturalised after Malaysia's independence from British colonisation.

Malaysia's colonial history plays a significant role in the socio-cultural landscape of Malaysia as we know it today. Under British rule, different ethnic groups were segregated geographically, socially and economically. When Malaysia gained independence, the governance of society was also divided along ethnic lines. Ethnic-based political parties were initially formed to ensure that the interests of each ethnic group were being protected.

The country's younger generations of voters are in a unique position in today's digital age. Although most are still influenced by the same political sentiments as their elders (Ahmad Rizal et al., 2016), urban youth have more opportunities to interact and

socialise with members of different ethnic groups. Not only do these opportunities present themselves in institutes of higher education and work place settings, but also on social media networks and online communities. Today, youth have better access to a wider range of information and access to a variety of political discourse. This access to information has helped Malaysians develop political literacy and critical thought thereby forming a reflective society that is able to sustain a healthy democratic system (Pandian, 2014).

The actions of younger generations of voters help shape Malaysia's social, political and economic future. The outcomes of Malaysia's elections in 2008 and 2013 were a direct result of urban youth voting patterns. Both the 2008 and 2013 general elections saw *Barisan Nasional* lose their two third majority in Parliament, resulting in the loss of legislative power to make amendments to the constitution. In the 2018 general elections, *Barisan Nasional* lost their majority to their opposition, *Pakatan Harapan*, after 61 years in power. Scholars such as Case (2013), Soon (2013) and Fee and Appudurai (2011) describe these events as a rejection of the current ethnic-based political system and a small step toward a more united Malaysian society where all ethnic groups are treated equal. Studying youth perceptions toward the issue of inter-ethnic unity in today's context is therefore important to understand how the current situation is perceived and how it may evolve in the future.

The objective of this study was to explore the differences in situational recognition, social self-construal and situational complexity perceptions on the issue of inter-ethnic unity among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia. A clear understanding of how different groups respond to the same issue is important to make sense of the behaviours that result from these perceptions. The results of the study are hoped to assist communication practitioners and policy-makers in strengthening inter-ethnic unity and nation building in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Situational Understanding of Problem Situations

Grunig (1997) first introduced the situational theory of publics (STP) to observe how different publics responded to a problem situation. Through the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS), Kim and Grunig (2011) extended the utility of STP to a wider range of problem situations. The authors focus on situational recognition factors: problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement recognition, as predictors to how and when publics would respond to a problem. These factors are assumed to be situational in nature, meaning that perceptions of the situation will differ between individuals and with different problem situations. More recent studies have proposed that contextual factors should also be considered in attempting to understand publics. Vardeman-Winter, Tindall and Jiang (2013) argue that the various roles and identities that publics assume in problem situations should be observed while Shin and Han (2016) found that adding an emotional component in examining problem solving enriched the understanding of publics and their communicative behaviour in problematic situations. Of late, Arina and Samsudin (2017) developed a situational complexity component to address the perceptions of problem complexity.

Contextual factors such as these have previously been treated as cross-situational factors that do not change between problem situations. For example, Kim and Grunig (2011) have acknowledged the importance of culture and identity in the problem-solving process but have limited its use to the formulation of strategic messages and have not considered

them in theorising the problem-solving process. In order to capture a more comprehensive picture of a situation, Agarwal, Xu and Poo (2009) recommend that a holistic approach be taken in observing the individual in the problem situation. The authors propose that three types of context be considered in order to do this: personal, shared and stereotype. The present study attempts to capture all three by examining situational recognition, social self-construal and situational complexity.

Current State of Inter-Ethnic Relations in Malaysia

Around the world, Malaysia is perceived as a model for unity in diversity; its population enjoys multi-ethnic peace and a thriving economy (Abdul Rahman, 2002; Shamsul, 2008; Shamsul & Anis, 2014). Even so, from a nation-building perspective, some scholars believe that Malaysia still has ample room for improvement. Heng (2017) describes Malaysia's dominant ideology of nation building as "assimilationist" where the ethnically diverse population is expected to be more culturally homogenous. This view on nation building originated from UMNO's early Malay nationalism ideology and was the basis for social, cultural and political life since the formation of the country. Heng (2017) elaborates that an assimilationist approach was perceived to result in a more "stable and viable nation" (p. 223).

Current research on the state of Malaysian inter-ethnic relations has found several drawbacks of the assimilationist approach. When one culture is dominant, the needs of other cultures are suppressed (Heng, 2017) and ethnic consciousness among the population grows (Chin, Lee, Jawan, & Darshan, 2015). In a recent study conducted by Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wolfer (2017), the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia were found to have very little meaningful interaction between them and showed poor understanding of each other's cultures. More specifically, most ethnic groups preferred to interact with people in their own ethnic groups and a high percentage of non-Malays felt that they were discriminated against. These findings echo previous studies that have shown pessimism toward the state of inter-ethnic relations in the country and feelings of dissatisfaction toward the treatment of ethnic minorities in Malaysia. A survey conducted by Merdeka Center (2015) found that non-*Bumiputera* were the least satisfied with their political representation and perceived that the state of ethnic relations would worsen in the future.

Extant literature on Chinese and Indian perspectives of their position in Malaysian society shows feelings of apprehension amongst the minority ethnic groups (Gomez, 2004). Yow (2017) suggests that the Chinese in Malaysia are not regarded as full citizens due to the political and cultural constraints they experience as a result of "differential citizenship" or the preferential treatment of the Malay/*Bumiputera* ethnic group. Tan (1988) describes the existence of Chinese groups that perceive Malay-centric policies as a cause of ethnic tensions and whom demand the recognition of non-Malay cultural rights. A study on Malaysian-Chinese emigrants finds similar sentiments; Chinese Malaysians who emigrated to other countries felt dissatisfied that they were treated as second-class citizens and perceived that Malaysia's government and electoral process would not see changes under the current constitution (Koh, 2015).

Dissatisfaction toward the status quo is also present in literature on the Malaysian-Indian experience. The political hegemony by the *Bumiputera* has caused a division among middle-class and working-class Indians (Muzaffar, 1993). In negotiating their rights with the dominant leadership, middle-class Indians have focused on economic development, access

to higher education and support for Indian businesses. Concerns of the working-class Indians such as basic access to health, housing and education were not being addressed. As a result, working-class Indians have found it difficult to move out of poverty (Ramasamy, 2004; Singh, 2013). Ramasamy (2004) also elaborates on the religious persecution that the Hindus face in a Malay-Muslim majority. The demolition of existing Hindu temples and protests against the building of new temples have led Hindus to criticize the current government for being insensitive to their religious needs (Mohamed Nawab, 2007). This, and issues arising from Hindu-Muslim religious conversion have left Indians feeling that their cultural and religious rights are secondary to the Malay Muslim majority.

The different experiences of citizenship between the ethnic groups have resulted in distinctive interpretations of belonging and national identity; being Malaysian means something different to each of the groups. Studies conducted to explore national identity among the Malaysian population have found varying results. Samsudin (1992) found that each ethnic group perceived inter-ethnic unity differently. Liu, Lawrence, Ward and Abraham (2002) studied ethnic and national identity among university students in Malaysia and Singapore. Their findings suggest that ethnic identity was significantly stronger in Malaysia with Malaysian Malays found to show the highest levels of ethnic identity. While Singaporeans preferred to describe themselves according to their nationality, Malaysians preferred to be identified by ethnic group. Out of the Malaysians, Malays and Indians preferred an ethnic label while the Chinese were divided equally between an ethnic identity and Malaysian identity.

The results of the study above differ slightly from the findings of Verkuyten and Khan (2012) who conducted a study on in-group and out-group attitudes among the major ethnic groups in Malaysia and their perceptions on ethnic and national identity. Their results indicate that Malays and Indians showed stronger national identity (as compared to ethnic identity) but similar to the findings of Liu et al. (2002), the Chinese were divided equally between ethnic and national identity. The authors also found that the dominant Malay group had higher national and ethnic identification and showed higher favouritism toward their own ethnic group. In examining the differences between urban and rural Malay youth, Sabariah (2013) found that urban Malays were more likely to identify as "Malaysians" while rural Malays preferred an ethnic "Malay" identity.

More recently, Chin et al. (2015) investigated the ethnic consciousness of Malay and Chinese university students. Their study concluded that ethnic consciousness among the Malays and the Chinese is pronounced; both groups had a heightened awareness of their ethnicity. Additionally, the findings indicated that ethnic solidarity was perceived as an important value in Malaysian society. Malays were unanimously favourable toward their special privileges and invoked ethnic solidarity in defense of the Malay/*Bumiputera* special rights. The Chinese felt ethnic solidarity was needed to face the challenges that arose from the Malay cultural and political hegemony. Al Ramiah et al. (2017) found that Malays perceived their interests were protected by the government and were comfortable receiving preferential treatment through government policies. Even so, Malays acknowledged that the government's economic policies were unfair despite being the primary beneficiaries of these policies. The Chinese and Indian groups indicated significantly lower levels of perceived economic fairness and comfort with Malay/*Bumiputera* special privileges.

Al Ramiah et al. (2017) also examined the dynamics of the interactions between the ethnic groups and the attitudinal outcomes of these interactions. As previously mentioned, interactions between the ethnic groups were low; most Malaysians had very few friends from outside their own ethnic group. Malays were found to be the group with the least number of friends from other ethnicities. Despite the low interaction, people were generally comfortable communicating with those outside their ethnic ingroups. The study also found that most inter-ethnic contact occurred in the workplace with most people reporting more positive interactions than negative interactions. The Al Ramiah et al. (2017) study also explored occurrences of discrimination or unfair treatment that the respondents had personally experienced. Although all three ethnic groups reported low levels of personal discrimination, the Indians showed a higher level (18%) compared to the Chinese and Malays (7.4% each).

Similar to the findings of Verkuyten and Khan (2012) and Liu et al. (2002), Al Ramiah et al. (2017) determined that Malays showed stronger national and ethnic identities when compared to Chinese and Indians. There was also a stronger correlation between national and ethnic identity among the Malay; the authors concluded that being Malay was equivalent to being Malaysian for this particular ethnic group. Additionally, positive out-group attitudes were found to be an important factor toward national identity for non-Malays but did not contribute toward a stronger sense of national identity for the Malays. Al Ramiah et al. (2017) suggest that the inculcation of a national identity among the ethnic groups would require more research and critical examination because the national integration messages and programmes affect the ethnic groups in different ways. The authors' caution that the encouragements of positive out-group attitudes may help strengthen a sense of national identity among non-Malays, but it may have the opposite effect on Malays.

Shamsul (2008) describes the relationship between the ethnic groups in Malaysia as being in a state of "stable tensions". He elaborates that Malaysians live in a society that is diverse and may disagree at times, but the needs of the different ethnic groups are discussed and worked through by "a continuous process of consensus-seeking" (p. 6). Even so, Tee (2015) expresses dismay at Malaysia's focus on negotiating based on ethnicity. Haque (2003) and Petru (2017) posit that the emphasis given to one's ethnicity may indeed cause more harm to national integration.

Abdul Rahman (2002) commented that the different ethnic groups in Malaysian society live together but lack a meaningful understanding of one another's cultures and religions. He calls this "the culture of ignorance" and asserts that it must be overcome through open dialogue to fight prejudice and misunderstanding. Ezhar (2010) proposes that inter-ethnic socialization and intercultural sensitivity should be encouraged among young Malaysians, especially in institutions of higher education. Through interaction and education, a better understanding of one another's individual and cultural rights can be instilled resulting in better relations among people of different ethnicities (Ezhar, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample comprise of university students from four universities in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Multi-stage cluster sampling was utilised to select the universities, faculties and schools involved in the study. A total of 575 students participated in the survey. 30.1% of

the students were from Universiti Putra Malaysia, 24.7% from Multimedia University, 23.7% from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and 21.6% from KDU University College. The average age of respondents was 21.86 years (SD = 2.21, range = 17 to 38 years), with 92.2% of them between the ages of 18 to 24. 63.5% of the respondents were female, 36.5% were male. A majority of the sample was Malay/*Bumiputera* (58.6%), followed by 26.8% Chinese, 9.6% Indian, whereas 5.0% identified as "Other".

Data Collection

A pre-test was conducted to test the research instrument in January 2014. The survey was first distributed to a convenience sample of 30 students to assess comprehension and then distributed among 152 students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for pilot testing. Factor analysis and reliability testing were conducted on the pilot data to ensure validity and reliability. Surveys for field data collection were distributed between March and May 2014.

Measures

There were three main concepts in this study: situational recognition, social self-construal and situational complexity. The variables under situational recognition: problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement recognition were adapted from Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving. Problem recognition consisted of 3 items, involvement recognition was measured with 4 items while constraint recognition consisted of 3 items. The concept of social self-construal was adapted from the self-construal scale (SCS) by Singelis (1994) and Markus and Kitayama (1991). Social self-construal consists of two variables, independence and interdependence, treated as two separate identities that co-exist and may become salient in different problem situations. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 representing strong disagreement and 7 representing strong agreement with the statements.

Situational complexity, a concept proposed by Arina and Samsudin (2017), consists of six sub constructs: solution complexity, referent criterion, negative feelings toward the problem situation, environmental salience, problem familiarity, and uncertainty of a solution. Each sub construct of situational complexity was measured using a 7-point Likert scale where 1= strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to observe the means and standard deviations of the different variables in the study. Subsequently, the one-way ANOVA or *analysis of variance* was used to detect statistically significant differences between different ethnic groups for the constructs under situational recognition, social self-construal, and situational complexity. This test was deemed best for these groups of constructs because each construct was treated as independent constructs that do not converge into a larger construct. Once the ANOVA procedures were performed, post hoc tests were conducted to observe where the differences lay. Because many ANOVA procedures were run on the same data set, a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level was used to reduce the chance of a Type 1 error.

RESULTS

Perceptions on Inter-Ethnic Unity in Malaysia

The findings of the descriptive analysis show that the mean scores vary within the middle-range points of the scale. Table 1 indicates the means and standard deviations of the variables in the study. The results suggest that respondents perceived the problem of inter-ethnic disunity as problematic, with problem recognition yielding one of the highest means ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.15$). Respondents showed a moderate agreement score for involvement recognition, which suggests that there was a general agreement that the problem of inter-ethnic unity did or could potentially affect the respondents' lives or the lives of those close to them. Constraint recognition, on the other hand, obtained the lowest mean ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.26$). This suggests that respondents perceived little constraints to problem solution – respondents felt that their personal actions could indeed change the outcome of the situation.

Table 1: Mean scores for the constructs under situational recognition, social self-construal and situational complexity.

Variable	Mean	Std Deviation
Situational Antecedents to Problem Solving		
Problem recognition	5.18	1.15
Involvement recognition	4.57	1.20
Constraint recognition	3.51	1.26
Social Self-construal		
Interdependence	4.76	0.88
Independence	4.66	1.01
Situational Complexity		
Solution complexity	5.35	1.24
Referent criterion	4.37	1.08
Negative feelings toward the problem	5.03	1.37
Environmental salience	4.49	1.29
Problem familiarity	3.98	1.42
Uncertainty of a solution	3.65	1.47

Respondents indicated average means of similar levels for the two constructs under social self-construal. Interdependence ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.88$) showed slightly higher means as compared to independence ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.01$), indicating that respondents feel moderately interdependent but also moderately independent from their social groups.

The constructs under situational complexity displayed some of the more interesting overall means. Solution complexity produced a mean of 5.35 ($SD = 1.24$), the highest mean among all constructs, indicating that respondents recognise the complexity of inter-ethnic disunity in Malaysia, specifically that it is an important problem that must be solved because it has potential dire circumstances to those involved if not remedied. Negative feelings toward the problem also produced one of the highest means ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.37$).

On the other hand, problem familiarity and uncertainty of a solution yielded the lowest means of the set. Problem familiarity produced a mean of 3.98 ($SD = 1.42$), which shows that respondents did not strongly feel that they were familiar with problems of inter-ethnic disunity or problems of the same nature. Uncertainty of a solution also yielded a low mean ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.47$) that indicates lower levels of uncertainty toward a solution for the problem.

Differences Between The Ethnic Groups

Three main hypotheses were constructed to see if there are any significant differences between the ethnic groups throughout the variables of the study. These hypotheses are:

H1: The three main ethnic groups are significantly different in terms of situational antecedents (problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition).

H2: The three main ethnic groups are significantly different in terms of social self-construal (interdependence and independence).

H3: The three main ethnic groups are significantly different in terms of situational complexity (solution complexity, referent criterion, negative feelings toward the problem, environmental salience, problem familiarity, and uncertainty of a solution).

To test the hypotheses, ANOVA was conducted on the constructs under situational antecedents, social self-construal and situational complexity. Table 1 summarises the results of the ANOVA.

Table 2: One-way ANOVA of constructs under situational recognition, social self-construal and situation complexity between ethnic groups.

Variable		Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F	ρ
<i>Situational Recognition</i>						
Problem recognition	Between groups	.654	2	.327	.258	.773
	Within groups	687.718	542	1.269		
Constraint recognition	Between groups	12.869	2	6.435	4.248	.015
	Within groups	822.443	543	1.515		
Involvement recognition	Between groups	.451	2	.226	.159	.853
	Within groups	768.777	543	1.416		
<i>Social self-construal</i>						
Interdependence	Between groups	7.789	2	3.895	5.413	.005
	Within groups	390.729	543	.720		
Independence	Between groups	10.115	2	5.057	5.128	.006
	Within groups	535.512	543	.986		
<i>Situational complexity</i>						
Solution complexity	Between groups	10.335	2	5.168	3.409	.034
	Within groups	823.040	543	1.516		
Referent criterion	Between groups	21.774	2	10.887	9.668	.000
	Within groups	611.441	543	1.126		

Negative feelings toward the problem	Between groups	12.558	2	6.279	3.459	.032
	Within groups	985.769	543	1.815		
Environmental salience	Between groups	.867	2	.434	.276	.759
	Within groups	852.471	542	1.573		
Problem familiarity	Between groups	5.190	2	2.595	1.297	.274
	Within groups	1086.841	543	2.002		
Uncertainty of a solution	Between groups	16.396	2	8.198	3.867	.021
	Within groups	1150.991	543	2.120		

A more stringent alpha value was set ($p < 0.004$) through a Bonferroni adjustment to reduce Type I errors resulting from the multiple procedures conducted. Using the new alpha value, the difference between ethnic groups was found to be statistically significant in only one construct: referent criterion ($F = 9.668$, $p = 0.000$).

Table 3: Post Hoc tests on referent criterion.

		Malay (n=337)	Chinese (n=153)	Indian (n=55)
Referent criterion	Mean	4.49*	4.06*	4.58*
	Standard deviation	1.02	1.03	1.36

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

A Tukey Post Hoc test shows that there are significant differences in referent criterion between the Malays and Chinese groups and also the Chinese and Indian groups. This is displayed in Table 3. The results show that the Indians had the highest mean scores in referent criterion ($M = 4.58$). This score was not statistically different from the scores of the Malays ($M = 4.49$) but was significantly different from the Chinese ($M = 4.06$). The mean scores of the Chinese and Malays were also statistically different.

DISCUSSION

Situational Recognition Factors

The results of the study show that there was a relatively high level of problem recognition for the issues of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia. Involvement recognition was moderately high and constraint recognition was moderately low. More specifically, the results show that urban youth acknowledge that the state of inter-ethnic unity in the country is far from ideal and needs to be addressed. Even so, their perceived involvement in the issue was only moderate, indicating that impactful, personal experiences with the issue were not common. The low level of constraint recognition shows that respondents did not perceive any significant impediments to personal efforts made toward solving the problem.

Extant literatures on similar issues of public concern display similar patterns in antecedent factors (situational recognition). Chen, Hung-Baesecke and Kim (2016) found that problem recognition was high for the controversial issue of U.S beef imports to Taiwan.

This issue was highly publicized in Taiwanese media and captured the attention of the broad society. Similarly, Kim, Ni, Kim and Kim (2012) studied the resumption of U.S beef imports to South Korea and made comparable observations in levels of problem recognition also due to heavy media coverage of the issue. Issues of inter-ethnic discord are sporadically reported in mainstream and alternative media in Malaysia (e.g. Anon., 2017a; Anon., 2017b; Anon., 2017c; Anon., 2015). Frequent media coverage of these issues contributes to the increase of awareness of the problem situation and thus a high level of problem recognition.

Even though issues of inter-ethnic conflict are broadcast in Malaysian media, the cases reported tend to be “extreme” acts or perspectives that generally do not reflect the opinions or experiences of the everyday Malaysian. For example, protests against a church’s use of a cross by Malay-Muslims (Reuters, 2015), and the use of a severed cow’s head in a protest against the construction of a Hindu temple (Anon., 2009) were isolated events that did not advance to a higher-level conflict. According to Al Ramiah et al. (2017), most Malaysians do not experience any “meaningful interaction” with members of other ethnic groups and prefer to befriend those who belong to the same ethnic group. As a result, active inter-ethnic conflicts do not occur in their daily lives. This would explain why involvement recognition among respondents was at a moderate level. Respondents are aware that they can be affected by inter-ethnic conflict but feel disconnected from the issue as they have not personally experienced it and are not presently engaged in active inter-ethnic conflict (Merdeka Center, 2015).

The lower level of constraint recognition indicates that even if a situation of inter-ethnic conflict is encountered, respondents perceived that they would be able to find and implement a resolution with relative ease. Perhaps Malaysians perceive no underlying complexities in their personal efforts to solve the problem, and feel that they can effectively take small steps to improve the situation. This shows the general perception that there are no significant barriers to prevent a solution from being effectively implemented should one be required.

Extant literatures on hot issue publics show that people tend to perceive higher constraints in controversial issues (Grunig, 1997). On the other hand, Kim et al. (2012) found that a person’s interest in the problem/issue at hand influences constraint recognition – the greater the interest in the issue, the less constraints are perceived to problem resolution. Problems of inter-ethnic unity may be considered a “hot issue” in the sense that it involves a majority of the population. These issues garner a lot of interest among Malaysians because it affects all of society and because of this, there is a general consciousness that problems of this nature exist. With this consciousness comes a familiarity; people tend to have more developed opinions or thoughts about the issue and possess stronger cognitive frames on how it can be handled (Kim et al., 2012).

Hot-issue publics are usually perceived as unstable groups that hold fleeting opinions on the issue at hand (Grunig, 1997). This group is typically influenced by media coverage on the issue and may dissipate when media coverage dwindles. Aldoory and Grunig (2012) found that the cognitions developed while the issue is salient do not remain; they weaken as time passes. Even so, the authors also acknowledge that hot-issue publics remain aware about the issue and as a result, are more likely to recognise similar issues in the future (Hung-Baesecke, Chen & Kim, 2015).

There were no significant differences found between the different ethnic groups for all three situational recognition factors. This means that the levels of problem recognition, involvement recognition and constraint recognition were roughly the same for all three groups. Today's younger generation Malaysians share a complex colonial history and were raised in an environment where ethnic differences are salient. This is visible in Malaysia's ethnic-based political structure (Jha, 2009; Segawa, 2016), the hegemony of Malay culture (Montesino, 2011), and a governance system that operates based on race and ethnicity (Gill, Keong, Beng & Yan, 2013; Tee, 2015). Malaysians of different ethnicities live together but do not interact (Al Ramiah et al., 2017) and they are aware that inter-ethnic integration in its current state is not ideal.

Situational Complexity Factors

Situational complexity consists of six sub-constructs: solution complexity, referent criterion, negative feelings toward the problem situation, environmental salience, problem familiarity, and uncertainty of a solution. The results of the study show that overall, the respondents showed high levels of solution complexity and negative feelings toward the problem situation, moderately high levels of referent criterion and environmental salience, and moderately low levels of problem familiarity and uncertainty of a solution. Only one significant difference was found between the three ethnic groups: referent criterion.

a. Solution Complexity

The results of the study indicated that solution complexity was high for the issue of inter-ethnic disunity. There were no statistically significant differences found in solution complexity for the three different ethnic groups studied. Respondents characterised the problem solution as urgent, crucial, collaborative and would result in negative consequences if not solved.

The findings are consistent with the literature on inter-ethnic issues in Malaysia. Al Ramiah et al. (2017) have found that Malaysians generally support efforts to improve social integration among different ethnic groups but had different views on how that may be achieved. Two notable findings in their study were: i) that Malays showed a lower level of agreement toward the integration suggestions, especially toward the Malay special privileges; and ii) the Chinese expressed disagreement toward the abolishment of vernacular schools. This demonstrates the differences of opinion that exist among Malaysians on how issues of inter-ethnic disunity can be addressed.

b. Negative Feelings Toward The Problem

Negative feelings toward the problem of inter-ethnic disunity were also found to be high among the respondents of the study. More specifically, respondents indicated that there were feelings of anger and dissatisfaction about the problem situation and that the current state of the problem made them feel uneasy. No significant differences in the level of negative feelings were found between the three ethnic groups.

Extant literature indicates that negative feelings toward problems of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia are not a new occurrence. Studies by Tan (1988), Yacob (2006), Hugo (2011) and Neo (2014) have indicated that certain segments within the Malaysian population feel threatened, insecure, distrustful and defensive over their position in Malaysian society. Occurrences of discrimination receive wide media coverage (Pusat

KOMAS, 2017) and become viral on social media, generating more negative sentiment surrounding issues of inter-ethnic disunity and causing deeper unease about the issue.

It must be emphasised that negative feelings toward the problem are different from negative experiences with the problem. In a study conducted on the state of integration at Vision Schools in Malaysia, Najeemah (2012) found that occurrences of prejudice and negative stereotypes among students were relatively low. Even though actual conflict or occurrences of prejudice may be low, it does not prevent individuals from feeling angry or dissatisfied with the situation (Al Ramiah et al., 2017).

c. Referent Criterion

Referent criterion refers to an individual's frame of reference toward the issue, inclusive of the knowledge and experience with the problem or problems of the same nature and the confidence that the individual has in that knowledge and experience. Those with high levels of referent criterion have prior experience in dealing with similar problems, have strong opinions about the issue and how to solve it, and are more confident on their knowledge regarding the issue. A moderately high level of referent criterion was indicated in the overall results of the study. Even so, there was a significant difference between the Malay/*Bumiputera* and the Chinese as well as the Chinese and Indians whereby Chinese respondents expressed lower levels of referent criterion.

Although Malaysia prides itself in being a model for peace and economic growth for multi-ethnic societies around the world, some would argue that the ethnic groups in Malaysia are of unequal stature (Gomez, 2004). BN and UMNO have built a government system that continually provides privileges and benefits to Malays through development policies such as the New Economic Policy, the National Development Plan and the New Economic Model (Montesino, 2011; Muid Izawan, Moniza & Hellmueler, 2017; Segawa, 2015). These development policies have brought many advantages to the nation as a whole and have also resulted in an environment for the Malays and *Bumiputeras* to thrive. The same environment is perceived as suppressive or limiting to other ethnic groups, who do not feel as if they have equal opportunity in their own country (Jha, 2009). This has created different experiences of citizenship and integration between the different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Prior research has shown that Malays have a stronger "Malaysian" national identity compared to the Chinese and Indians (Al Ramiah et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2002; Sabariah, 2013). The Chinese and Indian communities have often struggled with their position as equal Malaysians. Al Ramiah et al. (2017) and Al Ramiah (2009) found that Malaysian Chinese and Indians do not perceive that Malaysian policies were fair to them or that their group interests were being protected.

The results of this study indicate that only the Chinese group displayed lower levels of referent criterion. As a significant minority, the Chinese feel that their political voice and cultural rights are not prioritised (Yow, 2017) to the extent that many consider migrating abroad for better opportunities (Al Ramiah et al., 2017). The ethnic constraints and inequality may have a significant impact on their knowledge and experience, and how confident they feel that a problem such as ethnic disunity may be solved. The Indians, however, displayed higher referent criterion despite experiencing similar political, cultural and economic constraints. It may be argued that the Malays possess greater confidence in their knowledge and experiences on the issue of ethnic disunity due to their dominant

position in Malaysian society. This would imply that the Indians have different reasons for their level of referent criterion.

Malay cultural and political hegemony has had a direct impact on the marginalisation of ethnic Indians (Montesino, 2011; Singh, 2013). A significant number of Malaysian Indians still live in relative poverty with high unemployment rates and low education attainment (Belle, 2008). This situation in itself has bred negative sentiments among the Indian community of being ‘forgotten Malaysians’ (Muzaffar, 1993) with no foreseeable improvement of their political and economic standings. Thus, the experience and knowledge of “unity” may take on a different meaning and manifest in the form of exasperation among the Indian community (see Bukhari, 2006; Fee, 2002; Mohamed Nawab, 2007). The referent criterion experienced by them could relate to strong opinions about the issue but low confidence or knowledge in a solution.

d. Environmental Salience

The results also indicated a moderately high level of environmental salience among respondents. This refers to the prominence of the issue in the respondents’ daily lives, including exposure to the issue through friends and family or through social media. No significant differences between the three major ethnic groups were found.

Montesino (2011) describes inter-ethnic issues as dormant problems that may easily turn into conflict. In Malaysia, the ethnic group distinction is difficult to ignore. Political parties are constructed along ethnic lines (Segawa, 2017), public policy is skewed to benefit one particular ethnic group (Mason & Omar, 2003), ethnic media focus on the preservation of individuals cultures (Lee & Mohd Safar, 2015), and education systems are visibly segregated (Gill et al., 2013; Lopez, 2015; Montesino, 2011). Open conflict is rare but issues of ethnic discrimination and disunity do occasionally make headlines (see Case, 2013; Pusat KOMAS, 2016, 2017). The emergence of social media has also influenced the salience of these issues with people able to contribute to the discourse by sharing their personal opinions. Problems of inter-ethnic unity may not be explicitly discussed but are implicit in the way that it is embedded into the Malaysian reality.

e. Problem Familiarity

Problem familiarity refers to how accustomed the individual is to issues of the same nature. The results of the study show that problem familiarity among respondents was moderately low for all three ethnic groups. This indicates that respondents do not encounter similar problems very often. The low level of problem familiarity also shows that problems of inter-ethnic unity are a unique type of problem incomparable to other types of problems in the respondent’s experience. This is consistent with statements made by Abdul Rahman (2007) and Shamsul (2008) that highlight the uniqueness of inter-ethnic unity problems in Malaysia, especially because problems of the same nature have caused wars and open conflict in other countries around the world (Evers, 2014). Although the issue may be salient, Malaysians do not perceive that the problem is familiar to them.

f. Uncertainty of a Solution

Consistent with the low level of constraint recognition, the results of the study also show that uncertainty of a solution was moderately low. More specifically, there was little uncertainty about whether or not a viable solution to the problem could be found;

respondents did not express concern that a solution did not exist. These results indicate that issues of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia are not impossible to solve. The study by Al Ramiah et al. (2017) indicated that Malaysians are generally open toward efforts to improve inter-ethnic relations in the country. Even so, the ideals differ among the ethnic groups. While Malays are comfortable with the special privileges that they are awarded, the Chinese and Indians would like to see change in terms of a more inclusive, multicultural development policy. Despite the differences in ideals, Malaysians remain hopeful that the situation will improve (Heng, 2017).

Social Self-Construal Factors

Two factors under social self-construal were observed in this study: independence and interdependence. Both were found to be moderately high in the subjects of the study, with interdependence levels only slightly higher than independence levels. There were no differences in levels of independent and interdependent social self-construals between the ethnic groups. These results are consistent with the findings of extant literature. Collectivist Asian societies are shown to display values and behaviour that are accommodating to the opinions of others within the ingroup (Hofstede, 1980) and there is a focus on fulfilling the expectations and “fitting in” with the community (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Even so, modernisation has affected these traditional collectivist values in younger generations (Hwang, 1996). Although interdependent values still persevere to some extent, modern Asians, especially those in emerging economies, are beginning to adopt values and behaviour of an independent nature (Lu & Kao, 2002).

Triandis (1995) and Fiske, Kitayama, Markus and Nisbett (1998) have acknowledged that each individual may possess both independent and interdependent self-construals at the same time. The coexistence of the two social self-construals were found in studies conducted by Sinha and Tripathi (1994) in India, as well as Lin and Fu (1990) in China.

For Malaysians younger generation, beliefs about the issue and the importance of inter-ethnic unity may be highly influenced by family and members of their respective communities. At the same time, they are also negotiating their beliefs and adapting to new needs, new information and new dynamics that are unique to their position in society in the current time and place.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study have shown that Malaysia's ethnicised history may have had an impact on perceptions of inter-ethnic unity and national integration. Even though perceptions of the problem, involvement and constraints were similar among the different ethnic groups, there were significant differences in levels of perceived experience and readiness to handle the problem. Communication practitioners with an aim to improve perceptions and information behaviours of Malaysians on issues of inter-ethnic unity may utilise this information to better understand the psychology behind the behaviour of publics. Different approaches to address the different needs of the ethnic groups may then be formulated for more effective inter-ethnic integration in the country. Petru (2017) has recommended that the ethnic segmentation of Malaysians into the simplistic categories of Malay/ *Bumiputera*, Chinese and Indians in society be challenged as the dynamics of a society are far more complex. Even so, given that the use of ethnic segmentation is prevalent in the systemic functions of Malaysian society, it cannot be denied that its effects

have resulted in diverse worldviews and experiences of being Malaysian. In turn, this influences how the different ethnic groups identify with issues of inter-ethnic unity and their subsequent behaviour.

The 2018 General Elections have resulted in a new *Pakatan Harapan* government for Malaysia. For the first time in the 61 years since independence, *Barisan Nasional* is no longer the government in power. With the establishment of this new government comes a new hope for the future of Malaysians and aspirations toward a more inclusive nationhood. The results of this study can help authorities understand why there are barriers to inter-ethnic unity and effectively plan to overcome those barriers.

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