

Communicating About Inter-Ethnic Unity: An Investigation on Differences Between Youths of the Three Main Ethnic Groups in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious country such as Malaysia, inter-ethnic unity is considered both enriching to society and a challenge for government. A diverse population with variations in culture, language and religion is often perceived as difficult to govern due to the many different needs, values and expectations of different groups within a multicultural society. Malaysia is often lauded for the inter-ethnic harmony and stability of its society that allows the country to flourish economically. Though there is no violent conflict between the ethnic groups, a sense of national unity proves challenging to achieve as ethnic divides exist along political, socio-economical and geographical lines. This study was conducted to investigate how Malaysian youth participate in the conversation about inter-ethnic unity. Utilising measures of Communicative Actions in Problem Solving from the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), a survey was distributed among 575 university students from four institutions of higher learning in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. A one-way multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether there were any differences between the three main ethnic groups on the six different communicative behaviours pertaining to the issue of inter-ethnic unity. The results showed that there were significant differences in information seeking, information forwarding and information sharing. Among these behaviours, the differences between the Malays and the Chinese were most prominent whereby the Chinese showed relatively lower levels of information seeking and sharing compared to the Malays, and lower levels of information forwarding compared to both the Malays and the Indians.

Keywords: *Communicative behaviour, inter-ethnic unity, Malaysia, youth, STOPS.*

INTRODUCTION

National unity and integration are aspirations all nations strive for. Not only is national unity associated with peace, harmony among citizens and national stability, it is also considered a catalyst for economic development (Scully, 1995). In Malaysia, it is an aspiration that is shared among its multi-cultural society. The challenge that Malaysia's society faces is that despite living and working side-by-side for six decades since independence, meaningful interactions between the ethnic groups remain low (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, & Wolfer, 2017). The findings of the Al Ramiah et al. (2017) study showed that the relationship between the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia - the Malay/ Bumiputera, the Chinese and the Indian - displayed low levels of understanding of each other's cultures. The same study also discovered that there was little meaningful interaction between the main ethnic groups. Many showed a preference for interactions within their own ethnic groups. Chin, Lee, Jawan and Darshan (2015) attribute this to high ethnic consciousness among the population.

As a nation with a rich colonial history, Malaysia has developed a unique socio-cultural population. Shamsul (2008) describes Malaysian society as one that is in a state of stable tensions where the different ethnic groups live harmoniously side-by-side by maintaining constant negotiations to address the needs of the different ethnic groups. The focus on needs by ethnic group is a notion that Tee (2015) opposes as it emphasises ethnic differences that

may be harmful in the long term. The meaning of belonging and national identity varies among the different ethnic groups (Liu, Lawrence, Ward, & Abraham, 2002; Samsudin, 1992; Singh, 2013; Tan, 1988). For instance, Al Ramiah et al. (2017) found that the Malays perceived comparatively higher levels of security when it came to government protection of their rights and privileges. Research by Koh (2015) and Ramasamy (2004) elaborate the dilemmas and perceived injustices that the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups face in Malaysian society.

The low social integration of the different ethnic groups has some Malaysians feeling pessimistic about the future of ethnic relations in the country (Merdeka Center, 2015) but hopeful that conditions will improve. Inter-ethnic issues are generally perceived as sensitive issues and lack avenues for open dialogue (Abdul Rahman, 2002; Nee, 2008). Even so, today's new media landscape has opened new channels for discourse.

The Situational Theory of Publics (STP) provides an outline of the groups of people that comprise society. It distinguishes between non-publics, passive and active publics and provides a means for identifying and managing publics. The Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) provides further refinements of the categories of publics in terms of how they differ in communicative behaviours in the problem-solving process, particularly concerning information transmission and information selection behaviour. Both STP and STOPS attempt to predict communicative action by focusing on the individual's perceptions and how they affect communicative behaviour.

Many scholarly efforts have been made to observe communicative behaviour in various different contexts, from large scale national and social problems to personal, individual-level problems. It is thus timely that an investigation into the perceptions surrounding the problem of inter-ethnic unity among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia be conducted. The different ethnic groups are affected differently by the interplay of power and oppression that have developed over the years as a result of a highly ethnicised society. How do the different ethnic groups communicate about the problem of inter-ethnic unity? This study attempts to answer this question by investigating the differences in levels of communicative behaviour among the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Behaviour in Communication Studies

The concept of communicative behaviour has origins in the cognitive processing theories of information seeking and information processing. A review of the extant literature reveals that communicative behaviour, or information behaviour, is a common research interest in the fields of both communication, and library and information sciences. In communication studies, researchers examine the way audiences gather, process, and evaluate information while in the information sciences, the research focus is on information needs, seeking, uses and satisfaction (Case, 2012).

Communicative behaviour, as it is used in this study, is a concept developed by Kim and Grunig (2011) that refers to information behaviours performed in the process of problem solving. Its origins are in early communication theories of information transmission and receiving. These early theories tended to view communication as a one-way process. The information sender was assumed to transmit messages to passive recipients who were susceptible to the influences of those messages. Most of these theories focused on the vulnerability of audiences and what communications could do to them. Stemming from earlier notions of behaviourism, it was common thought that communication messages had

the ability to condition audiences to believe and behave in ways desired by the sender (McQuail, 2010).

It is believed that the idea of the active audience rose from the work of Lazarsfeld and Stanton (1942) whose research centred on people's use of media to fulfil personal needs and goals. Herzog (1944) was one of the first scholars to stray from measuring media influences and instead attempted to understand the reasons behind an audience's choice of media. Her research indicated that audiences used media and messages in ways that did not necessarily match those intended by the source and that people were driven by their own personal motivations. The notion of an active audience prompted many researchers to reconsider their assumptions in traditional communication theories. Previous research tended to be source-centric, attributing power to communications and the media. Research that embraced the concept of the active audience was more audience-centric and focused on people, their cognitions, motivations, their ability to participate, and to exercise choice (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Graber, 1984).

Subsequently, the audience became an important component in contemporary communication research. Audiences, people, publics, stakeholders, and consumers are only some of the terms that are used to describe groups of people who are involved in and affected by some form of communication transaction. The myriad of communication disciplines with major focus on audience research bear witness to the importance of understanding people and harnessing their opinions, thoughts and attitudes to leverage the success of messages, products, ideologies, groups, organisations and governments alike (Case, 2012). In the area of strategic communication, the research focus was tuned into the communicative behaviours, or information behaviours of message audiences.

Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics was one of the first contemporary communication theories to formally address communicative behaviours. More specifically, the author focused on the information seeking and information processing behaviours of groups of audiences, or publics. The main tenets of the theory originated in Grunig's (1966) work on economic decision-making based on ideas by Dewey (1927) and Blumer (1966). Grunig (1997) posited that the perceptual variables of involvement, problem recognition and constraint recognition were antecedent to information seeking and information processing. Information seeking, as defined by Grunig (1989) is the "planned scanning of the environment for messages about a specified topic" while information processing refers to "the unplanned discovery of a message followed by the continued processing of it".

Much of the research utilising Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics is within the field of public relations. Even so, communicative behaviours such as information seeking and information processing are a common interest to researchers in other areas of communication such as interpersonal communication, health communication, political communication and organisational communication (Case, 2012).

As such, the use and definitions of the concept of communicative behaviour can vary significantly between different fields of study. In interpersonal communications, Berger and Calabrese (1975) perceive information seeking as a defining factor in the development of interpersonal relationships. However, the authors conceptualise communication behaviour as separate from information seeking. In fact, communication behaviour refers to various communicative actions, both verbal and non-verbal, that follow after information seeking. Researchers in the area of health communication examine the information management behaviour of patients, which include the seeking, avoidance, dissemination, evaluation and

interpretation of health-related information (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002). Political communication researchers focus on how people seek, consume, process and participate in political discourse (e.g. Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006), and in organizational communication, the interest is in how people interact with information to make decisions and solve problems.

Most recently, Kim and Grunig (2011) developed a situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) that examines the communicative behaviours of information acquisition, information selection, and information transmission. The authors propose STOPS to be a general theory that can be used to predict communicative behaviours in many different fields of communication. Improving on the ideas of Grunig (1997), Kim and Grunig (2011) view individuals as connected social actors who use communicative behaviour in problem-solving; people whom not only seek and process information, but also select information and interact with others by transmitting information. The authors assume that communicative behaviour is a by-product of the problem solving process and conceptualise it to be a coping mechanism used instrumentally to find solutions to problems. Thus, individuals are not mere audiences but are communicators who can be either proactive or reactive in their communicative behaviour, depending on their situational motivation to solve the problem at hand.

Communicative Action in Problem Solving

In STOPS, communication behaviour is referred to as Communicative Action in Problem Solving (CAPS) and is a composite of three different categories of communication behaviour: information acquisition, information selection, and information transmission. Each of these categories has an active and passive component, specified in Figure 1 below.

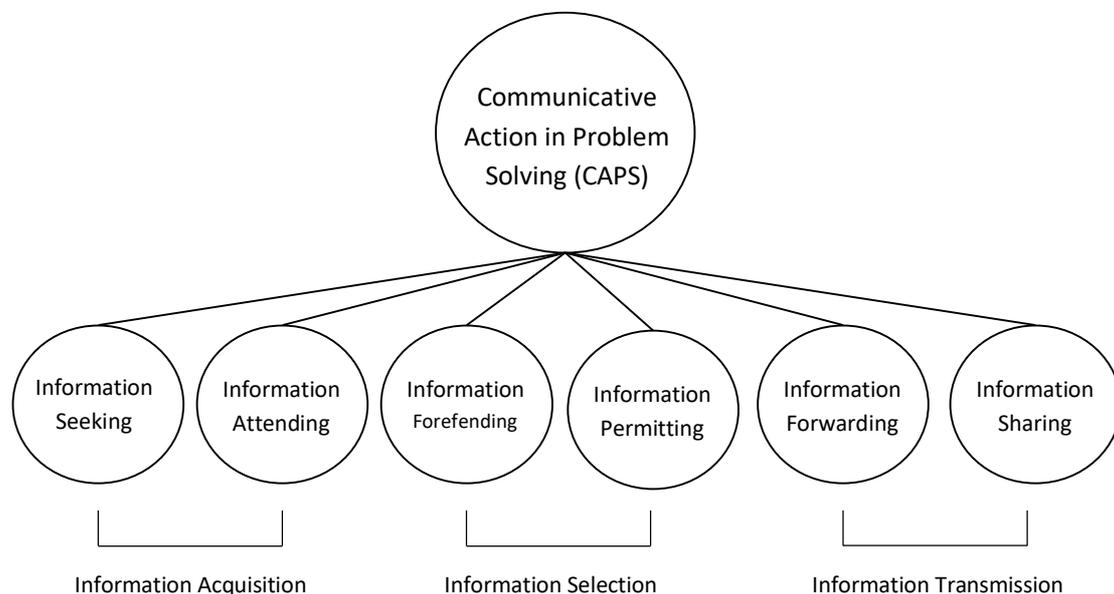


Figure 1: Communicative action in problem solving

a. Information Acquisition

Information acquisition consists of information seeking and information attending. STOPS draws from STP in defining these variables. Information seeking is an active communication behaviour that is a purposive search for information on a given topic (Grunig, 1997).

Information attending, on the other hand, refers to the passive component of information acquisition and is defined as a coincidental encounter with information and the processing of that information.

It is postulated that individuals who are active in CAPS are more likely to participate in both the active and passive forms of information acquisition. Individuals who perceive lower problem perception may only participate in information attending. In the problem-solving process, information acquisition is thought to be the very first step toward seeking a solution.

b. Information Selection

Information selection is defined as a cognitive component of information use. Information forefending is the active form of information selection, while information permitting is its passive counterpart. Information forefending refers to the active filtering of information deemed irrelevant or not useful to the individual. It is usually conducted when an individual becomes more systematic in their interaction with information in a problem situation.

Information permitting refers to the acceptance of any information related to the problem situation. Kim and Grunig (2011) suggest that individuals who are highly motivated to solve a problem show higher participation in both information forefending and information permitting. In the earlier stages of problem solving, information permitting is high and as the process continues, information forefending begins to take over and individuals will be more selective in the information they process.

c. Information Transmission

The novel contribution of STOPS lies in the introduction of the information transmission behaviours of information forwarding and information sharing. Information sharing is the passive component of information transmission that is defined as a reactive sharing of information when an opinion or expertise is requested by other people. Information forwarding refers to the voluntary forwarding of problem-related information, even when it is not requested. In the early stages of problem solving, individuals are thought to forward information as a way to gather more information. In the later stages of problem solving, participation in information forwarding is related to creating similar problem perceptions in others (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Communicating about Inter-Ethnic Unity in Malaysia

The dynamics between people and information have undergone rapid change in the past decade. The many available avenues for information search have granted societies all over the world a type of access to greater opportunity not experienced by generations before. Today, through advances in communication and technology, we are able to keep up with live news reports with minute by minute updates, on communication devices that have become an indispensable part of our lives. Not only can people obtain many types of information on demand, people are also able to create and share information for the consumption of others. These conditions have allowed individuals the opportunity and freedom to gain knowledge, interact with one another, to exchange opinions and share views with others instantaneously.

Hague and Loader (1999) outlined potential outcomes of communication technology that would impact the process of democracy the world over. These include: boundless interactions unlimited by country borders, the freedom to join communities and express

opinions with little censorship, the freedom of production and dissemination of information, the availability of alternative ideology uncensored by the state, and the adoption of global and local identities. The authors were cautious to mention that in 1999, the features and use of communication technology were still limited and that participation, voice and autonomy were still imperative for a true enhancement in democracy.

Two decades later, participation, voice and autonomy have established their place in the various features communication technology has provided. People around the world are empowered through access to information and through the ability to contribute to conversations/ discourse like never before. As a result, the information landscape of today has become a diverse ground of fact and fiction. Today's individual must equip themselves with the skills to identify reliable sources, evaluate information for their relevance and authenticity, and effectively use the information. In turn, organisations, authorities or governments seeking to communicate with these people must strategise how to present their messages using the right channels to effectively reach their audiences and mitigate misinformation. This is especially important in issues of national concern that could have potentially large implications for society at large.

In Malaysia, one such issue is the development of national unity and inter-ethnic integration. Nooraini (2009) points to the establishment of a National Unity Panel in 2007 as a sign that the state of national unity in Malaysia was concerning enough to warrant increased government intervention. Based on news reports, the author cites that there had been 950 ethnic incidents reported to the police in 2006 and 2007 (Hamidah & Lee, 2007). Although national unity has been a key development area since Malaysia's independence, a lack of open dialogue on these issues has caused feelings of discontent to fester underneath the generally harmonious interactions between the ethnic groups (Nee, 2008). Many have taken to the Internet to voice their dissatisfaction where an undercurrent of prejudice and discrimination between the ethnic groups is felt (Nooraini, 2009).

A survey by Merdeka Center (2015) revealed that pessimism toward the state of ethnic relations in the country have been rising in recent years with many anticipating that the relationship between the ethnic groups would worsen in the future. This sentiment was due to negative perceptions on the state of national stability with many criticising political representation, government economic management, and fairness of the economic system. Despite the negative perceptions at the macro level, Malaysians were shown to share more positive perceptions on national unity at the micro level. Most indicated positive interactions between ethnic groups and generally harmonious relationships at the community level. Al Ramiah et al. (2017) corroborate these findings; their study indicates that interactions between the ethnic groups at work or in the neighbourhood were mostly positive. Even so, Al Ramiah et al. (2017) are cautious to note that overall interactions between the ethnic groups were still relatively low; each of the ethnic groups showed a preference for friendships within their own ethnic group.

The government of Malaysia has sought to address the low integration of the ethnic groups through various mechanisms to nurture a sense of community and foster better relationships between the ethnic groups. Inter-ethnic unity has been a key objective in Malaysia's development plans since The Second Malaysia Plan (Samsudin, 1992) and remains an important focus until today. Two of the most common means for fostering unity in the masses are through formal education and nation-building programmes. In education, some of the notable efforts to build Malaysian nationalism and cultivate better relationships

between students of multi-ethnic backgrounds are: the teaching of civic education and citizenship in school, the establishment of the National Service Training Programme (PLKN) as a compulsory training programme for selected Malaysian students after secondary school, and the introduction of ethnic relation as a compulsory course for students in public universities. Nation-building concepts such as Bangsa Malaysia and 1Malaysia were formed to foster a sense of one-ness between Malaysians by acknowledging diversity and embracing our differences. Bangsa Malaysia, a concept proposed by Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1991, faced difficulties in implementation as it did not garner support from the conservative Malay members of the ruling party (Shamsul, 1996) and was eventually dropped. Malaysia's sixth Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak, then introduced the 1Malaysia vision in 2009. Heng (2017) outlines several reasons why the 1Malaysia concept failed to appeal to the Malaysian masses, among which are: the poor implementation of community programmes such as 1Malaysia government clinics and grocery stores; the skepticism of the *rakyat* on government commitment to honour the 1Malaysia values in governance and policy; and the alleged corruption surrounding 1MDB – one of 1Malaysia's largest initiatives.

The efficacy of past and current nation-building efforts is a continuing interest for the nation. Scholars have performed assessments and analysis of the programmes, both in education and public campaigns, to determine their impact and identify future measures of improvement (see Gill, Ahmad Tarmizi & Jayum, 2012; Sabariah, 2013; Suhida & Siti Mazih, 2014; Varghese & Ghazali, 2017). In attempt to understand the many dynamics of national unity and nation-building, a lot of academic research has been conducted to understand the concept, to examine its historical effects and analyse how prominent events and policy have impacted national unity (Ahmat, 1980; Balasubramaniam, 2006; Gullick, 1981; Heng, 2017; Lopez, 2014; Mohamad Zaidin et al., 2014; Oh, 1967; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993).

Research trends on national unity and inter-ethnic relations have rarely examined how Malaysians themselves confront issues of inter-ethnic unity. A possible avenue for further research is to explore how Malaysians perceive and respond to problems of inter-ethnic unity. Kim and Grunig (2011) provide a potential framework for this in STOPS. The theory proposes that when confronted with a problem, individuals will participate in communicative behaviours in attempt to solve the problem. These communicative behaviours are made up of information acquisition, information selection and information transmission. STOPS delineates the situational factors that contribute to these communicative behaviours. By using STOPS to study inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia, an understanding of the perceptions on problems of inter-ethnic unity may be obtained and connected to the resulting communicative behaviours. Arina, Chang, and Mohd Yusof (2018) have reported how Malaysian university students perceive the problem of inter-ethnic unity. It was found that there were no significant differences in levels of situational recognition between the ethnic groups. Even so, there were some differences in perceived level of knowledge and experience about inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia. This study is an expansion on the aforementioned paper to investigate the communicative behaviours that result from the perceptions of the problem.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

University students from four universities located in the Klang Valley were surveyed in this study. The universities, faculties and schools involved in the study were selected through a multi-stage cluster sampling technique. The total number of students that participated in the

survey was 575 students. The sample comprised of students from Universiti Putra Malaysia (30.1%), Multimedia University (24.7%), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (23.7%) and KDU University College (21.6%). Of these, 58.6% identified as Malay/ Bumiputera, 26.8% identified as Chinese, 9.6% were Indian and 5.0% were of other ethnicities.

Data Collection

The research instrument utilised in this study underwent pre-testing in January 2014. This was done by surveying 30 students from the Media Communication Programme, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. A pilot study was then conducted among 152 students at two different faculties in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to ensure validity and reliability of the research instrument. Field data was collected in the months of March, April and May of 2014.

Measures

Communicative behaviour or CAPS consists of six communication behaviours: information seeking, information attending, information forefending, information permitting, information forwarding and information sharing. These constructs were derived and adapted from STOPS (Kim & Grunig, 2011). A total of 35 items were utilised to measure the communicative behaviours. A 7-point scale was used where 1 = strong disagreement and 7 = strong agreement.

Data Analysis

The one-way MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) was conducted to test for significant differences between ethnic groups for the constructs under CAPS. The MANOVA was more appropriate in this context because it is specifically able to deal with multiple dependent variables. Once the MANOVA procedure was run (to detect differences), post hoc tests were conducted to observe where the differences lay. A Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level was used to reduce the chance of a Type 1 error.

RESULTS

The general level of communicative behaviours were first assessed through descriptive analysis. Table 1 shows the mean scores of all communicative behaviours. All behaviours were at a moderately high level (scores between 4.01 and 5.50 of the scale).

Table 1: Mean scores for the constructs under situational antecedents to problem solving, communicative action in problem solving, social self-construal and situational complexity

Variable	Mean	Std Deviation
Information seeking	4.35	1.34
Information attending	4.81	1.21
Information forefending	4.32	1.13
Information permitting	4.87	1.13
Information forwarding	4.38	1.21
Information sharing	4.18	1.31

The main research objective was addressed by conducting a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to test the hypothesis that there would be one or more mean differences between ethnic groups (Malay/ Bumiputera, Chinese, Indian) and CAPS scores. A statistically significant MANOVA effect was obtained, $F(12, 1074) = 2.21, p = .010$; Wilks' Lambda = .95. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, there were statistically significant differences in information seeking $F(2, 542) = 9.00$; information forwarding $F(2, 542) = 9.30$; and information sharing $F(2, 542) = 5.80$, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .008. No statistically significant differences were found for information attending, information forefending, and information permitting. This is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: One-way MANOVA on CAPS

Variable	Total squared	Degrees of freedom	Mean squared	F	p
Information seeking	30.993	2	15.496	9.004	.000
Information attending	8.269	2	4.134	2.881	.057
Information forefending	8.784	2	4.392	3.471	.032
Information permitting	6.271	2	3.135	2.466	.086
Information forwarding	26.436	2	13.218	9.300	.000
Information sharing	19.633	2	9.817	5.806	.003

Univariate ANOVAs were further conducted to explore the differences between ethnic groups in information seeking, information forwarding and information sharing (Table 3). The results of this analysis indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in information seeking behaviour between the Malay ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.29$) and Chinese ($M = 3.98, SD = 1.36$) ethnic groups. Similarly, there is also a significant difference in information sharing between the Malays ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.27$) and the Chinese ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.24$). The Chinese were also statistically different from the Malays and the Indians in terms of their information forwarding behaviour with a lower mean ($M = 4.02, SD = 1.15$) compared to their Malay ($M = 4.49, SD = 1.17$) and Indian ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.39$) counterparts.

Table 3: Post Hoc tests on information seeking, information forwarding and information sharing

		Malay/ Bumi (n=337)	Chinese (n=153)	Indian (n=55)
Information seeking	Mean	4.51*	3.98*	4.47
	Standard deviation	1.29	1.36	1.33
Information forwarding	Mean	4.49*	4.02*	4.59*
	Standard deviation	1.17	1.15	1.39
Information sharing	Mean	4.26*	3.87*	4.42
	Standard deviation	1.27	1.24	1.60

DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that CAPS were only moderately high with comparatively higher levels in the passive behaviours of information acquisition and information selection. The passive component of information transmission was lowest among all CAPS. Three communicative behaviours were found to be significantly different among the ethnic groups: information seeking, information forwarding and information sharing. These are discussed below.

Information Acquisition

Information acquisition consists of the active information seeking and passive information attending. The results indicated that information attending on the issue of inter-ethnic unity was higher than information seeking among respondents of the study. Prior studies link low levels of information seeking and higher levels of information attending with low involvement recognition, as was found in the results of this study (Grunig, 1976; Kim & Grunig, 2011). This is particularly relevant to the issue of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia as it is described as a latent problem (Montesino, 2011) in a state of “stable tensions” (Shamsul, 2008). Individuals are only likely to become active in information seeking when the issue becomes a hot issue where problem recognition is high, constraint recognition is low and involvement recognition is high (Grunig, 1997). When a problem is latent, active information seeking is less likely to occur but individuals remain aware of the problem and may pay attention when they encounter information about the issue.

While no differences in information attending were found between the ethnic groups, information seeking was significantly different between the Malay/ Bumiputera and the Chinese whereby the Chinese indicated lower levels of information seeking at slightly below the mid-point of the scale ($M = 3.98$). One possible reason for the lower level of information seeking among the Chinese group is that inter-ethnic discourse in Malaysia is skewed in favour of the dominant Malay/ Bumiputera group.

The existing discourse on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia is largely favourable to the Malay majority. Malay Muslim culture is embedded in governance, the constitution, policy, and in many other aspects of the daily Malaysian reality (Hoffstaedter, 2008; Holst, 2012; Lopez, 2014; Montesino, 2011; Tan, 1988). Thus, dominant conversations about inter-ethnic issues support the Malay agenda and their special position in Malaysian society. This is demonstrated through the rise of cultural nationalism and discourse that perpetuates the distinctions between Malays and non-Malays (Balasubramaniam, 2007; Khoo, 2014). Pro-Malay statements and opinions have become normalised as part of the discourse with little admonition (e.g. Anon., 2008; Anon., 2009; Anon., 2010; Lim, 2015; Tong, 2015; Zulkifli, 2008). As a significant minority group, the Chinese may find little available information consistent with their opinions and beliefs regarding inter-ethnic unity. These circumstances may not be conducive to information seeking among the Chinese; when individuals do not feel that the information available is relevant or supportive of their opinion, engagement in active information seeking is less likely.

Information Selection

Information selection encompasses information forefending (active) and information permitting (passive). The results of this study show that both information selection behaviours were moderately high. The passive behaviour – information permitting – was

found to be slightly higher than the active information forefending. There were no differences in information selection between the three major ethnic groups.

Similar to levels of information acquisition, the moderate levels of information selection activity can be attributed to the latent state of inter-ethnic unity issues in Malaysia. Kim and Grunig (2011) posit that information permitting is more common in the early stages of problem solving when individuals are more open to accepting information from different viewpoints and sources. This is reflected in the behaviour of the respondents of this study and is consistent with the moderate level of information forefending. It is only later in the problem-solving process, or when the problem situation becomes critical, that individuals become more selective in the problem-related information that they accept (Kim & Grunig, 2011; McKeever, McKeever, Holton, & Li, 2016). Because the issue of inter-ethnic unity has not risen to critical levels, the Malaysian society is dormant on the issue but information selection remains open and unbridled.

Information Transmission

The results of the study indicate that both components of information transmission – information forwarding and information sharing – are moderately high. Even so, the levels of the passive component, information sharing, was slightly lower than its active counterpart. Furthermore, significant differences were found between the ethnic groups for both communicative behaviours.

The Chinese showed a significantly lower level of information forwarding compared to the Malay/ Bumiputera and Indian groups. This means that out of the three major ethnic groups, the Chinese were less likely to actively instigate conversation and/ or collective action to find a solution for inter-ethnic disunity. These findings are similar to the findings of Al Ramiah et al. (2017) that indicate that the Chinese were only moderately likely to engage in collective action to advocate for the rights of their ingroup. According to the same study, the Chinese group had a stronger preference for personal solutions to qualms about inter-ethnic disparity.

The Chinese also showed a significantly lower level of information sharing compared to the Malay/ Bumiputera group, with a mean score below the mid-point of the scale ($M = 3.87$). These results indicate that the Chinese were significantly less likely to share their thoughts and opinions on the issue of inter-ethnic unity when asked. There are several reasons that may explain this behaviour: i) low confidence in the efficacy of information transmission toward problem solution; and ii) the negative implications of participating in information transmission about the issue.

Firstly, Kim and Grunig (2011) theorise that information transmission is a communicative behaviour instrumental in problem solving. Individuals spread information about problems in order to create similar problem perceptions among others as an effort to initiate collective action toward a solution. Malaysian Chinese may not believe that spreading information about the issue of inter-ethnic unity will lead to a solution to the problem. According to Yow (2016), Malaysian Chinese have long been struggling for their voice and rights to be addressed as equal citizens but are often sidelined in official discourse. This powerlessness not only discourages them from actively participating in information transmission but may cause them to disengage with the issue entirely (Nazir, Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2017).

Secondly, inter-ethnic relations are a sensitive topic in Malaysia. Irresponsible statements, the expression of controversial opinions and opinions that deviate from the norm can often be misconstrued and perceived as hate speech that may disrupt national harmony. For this reason, the Malaysian government takes these types of offenses seriously and they are often punishable by law. Some of the laws used to quell discourse that may incite hate include the Sedition Act 1948, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012. These laws have come under criticism regarding their misuse (Anbalagan, 2017) as they have been used to detain activists and terrorists alike (Hani Shamira, 2017; Sheith Khidhir, 2016). Even with calls for reform from international human rights organisations the laws have persisted. The existence of these laws has effectively reduced the number of incidents involving inter-ethnic conflict but also limits freedom of speech and constructive dialogue toward a more unified Malaysian society.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided insights that are useful for understanding the levels of communicative activeness among Malaysians in issues of inter-ethnic unity. The results of this research have provided descriptive data on how the different ethnic groups respond to issues of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia. The results indicate that all six communicative behaviours are at moderately high levels for most ethnic groups but with statistically significant differences in information seeking, information sharing and information forwarding. These behaviours were at significantly lower levels for the Chinese ethnic group. The differences in communicative behaviour among the ethnic groups suggest that the dominant discourse on inter-ethnic unity may favour the Malay majority and in turn may have effects on the perceived freedom of minority groups to participate in communicative behaviour on the issue of inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia.

It is recommended that a qualitative study be conducted to further explore these differences between the ethnic groups. This study was conducted using a quantitative survey method which does not allow for in-depth perceptions or experiences to be recorded. Respondents' choice of answers is limited to what is predefined by the researcher. Employing qualitative methods such as focus groups or in-depth interviews would provide a more holistic picture of the situation. Qualitative methods are able to collect richer data and furnish researchers with deeper insight into the issues and behaviours under study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project funded by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS/1/2011/SS/UKM/03/6) awarded by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education Malaysia.

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