

Singaporeans more likely to accept new citizens who are Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian: Survey

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SINGAPORE: Singaporeans are more likely to accept a new citizen of Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian descent as "truly Singaporean" than someone not from these groups, findings from a survey on ethnic identity in Singapore showed.

These findings, released on Wednesday (Nov 8), were from a survey conducted from May to July this year by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) with funding from Channel NewsAsia.

This indicates that the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) racial categorisation system that Singapore uses is "closely associated" with national identity, principal investigator Dr Mathew Mathews, senior research fellow at the IPS said.

Reflecting this, more than 90 per cent of respondents found it at least somewhat acceptable for someone with a Chinese, Malay, or Indian background to be accepted as "truly Singaporean" if they became a new citizen.

"The clearest finding we can get from this is that our core ethnic identity, the CMI group, and to some extent the Eurasians, attract a very very strong level of consensus ... I think that reflects the salience of our CMIO model," said Dr Mathews.

The 10 groups presented to respondents included Japanese, Korean and Caucasian, in addition to the core ethnic groups in Singapore.

Ranking in the bottom three were those of the Filipino, Arab and African backgrounds. Even then, more than 60 per cent of the respondents accepted that these groups could be truly Singaporean.

"Many Singaporeans have come to accept the fact that you can have Singaporeans of any kind of national background, as long as they choose to be naturalised, they can be accepted," Dr Mathews said.

ABILITY TO COOK ETHNIC FOOD NOT KEY TO YOUNGER RESPONDENTS

Passing down the ability to cook ethnic food, which includes dishes like nasi lemak, sugee cake and bak chang, was considered "unimportant" or "somewhat unimportant" when it came to ethnic identity for 40 per cent of respondents aged 21 to 25.

On the other hand, more than 80 per cent of those above the age of 66 found this aspect important.

Some aspects of ethnic identity, especially those not recognised on a national level, were not as important to younger respondents as to the older ones, Dr Mathews said.

"Often, culture, when it is left to itself, tends to fade. We have new ways of doing things. In the process, you can see a loss of many aspects of culture, which people might cherish."

When certain aspects of culture are lost, people will begin to question the richness of their heritage and culture, he said. He added the especially for the Chinese, there is comparatively less importance in passing on traditions, like those for weddings and clothes.

A report on the survey highlighted this finding, asking: "Will access to ethnic food decline over the years given the falling emphasis, especially among millennials, on transmitting the skills and knowledge required to prepare such dishes?"

The lack of interest in passing on traditional cooking methods and recipes in order to retain ethnic identity however did not translate to passing on ethnic pride.

Younger respondents were as likely as older respondents to consider passing down ethnic pride to their children as important. Three-quarters of respondents between the ages of 21 and 25 years regarded this to be at least somewhat important, as did 77 per cent of respondents aged 56 to 65.

LANGUAGE, FESTIVALS IMPORTANT FEATURES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Respondents were presented with a list of more than 35 indicators across several broad categories including language, food, and lifestyle, and asked how important it was for someone who considers himself a Singaporean Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Eurasian to have or do these.

Being able to speak, read and write in their community language and celebrating key festivals emerged as important aspects for Singaporeans when it came to identifying with their race.

More than 86 per cent of all respondents found language to be at least somewhat important to their ethnic identity, while an overwhelming majority of respondents across the ethnic groups recognised the importance of celebrating their ethnic community's key festival.

Nearly 92 per cent of Chinese regarded the celebration of Chinese New Year as at least somewhat important, as did 96 per cent of Malays when it came to Hari Raya Puasa. Similarly, 88 per cent of Indians held such sentiments towards Deepavali.

"State policies help to preserve certain aspects of culture, for example, language, key celebrations. and of course, participation tends to be higher because people are more aware of that," Dr Mathews said.

Dr Mathews said that interestingly, speaking good English was also an important aspect of ethnic identity across the groups, a sign that what people identify with is fluid and evolving. More than one in seven respondents across Indians, Malays and Chinese thought that speaking good English was important to their ethnic identity.

The report said that the survey, which involved more than 2,000 respondents across ages educational levels and ethnic groups, also showed that overall, ethnic identity was important to a majority or 63 per cent of respondents.

However, despite policies to build awareness of, and interactions with, Singaporeans from other ethnic groups, Singapore is still not the "multicultural nirvana" that some would expect.

"When we asked every community to rank what would be important to another community, the tendency was to not know how important some of those items may have been," Dr Mathews

said, adding that this may reflect the lack of awareness about what is important to different groups.

"That happens, especially when you don't participate enough in festivals, or the rituals of important ceremonies of each of these communities. The more we get those opportunities, the better," he said.