S'poreans angry survey finds 15.6% S'poreans find Muslims threatening

Sulaiman Daud & Belmont Lay
Mothership, 29 March 2019

The Institute of Policy Studies published a new big survey research (PDF document) on March 28, 2019 on religious relations in Singapore.

And it has stirred up some feelings on the ground after some of its findings were reported.

Why is one of the findings controversial?

One of the more controversial findings is that Muslims were considered the most threatening religious group among Singaporeans.

Table 79: Perceived threat of people belonging to the following groups

(%)	Very threatening	Somewhat threatening	Not very threatening	Not all threatening
Christians	1.0	5.5	23.8	69.7
Muslims	2.1	13.5	24.4	60.1
Hindus	0.6	3.6	29.0	66.8
Buddhists	0.4	2.4	25.5	71.6
Jews	1.0	4.3	26.3	68.4
Atheists	0.9	4.2	25.4	69.4

15.6% find Muslim threatening

According to the survey, 13.5 percent of respondents considered Muslims "somewhat threatening", while 2.1 percent considered Muslims to be "very threatening", for a combined 15.6 percent total.

Conversely, seen another way: This means that 84.4 percent of Singaporeans view Muslims as "not very" or "not at all threatening".

This means that the majority of respondents (84.4 percent) do not view Muslims as threatening.

How did other religious groups fare?

But in comparison, significantly larger number of Singaporeans viewed Muslims as threatening compared to the perceived threat of other religious groups, such as Buddhists (2.8 percent), Hindus (4.2 percent) and Christians (6.5 percent).

Christians, Catholics, atheists' perception of Muslims

The study surveyed a random sample of 1,800 Singaporean residents that closely resembled the overall demographics of Singapore.

For example, there were about 48 percent male respondents to 52 percent female, while the racial background of the respondents was also similar to Singapore's overall racial composition.

The study further broke down the perceived threat of Muslims according to the various religious groups in Singapore.

Table 82: Respondents' perceived threat of Muslims, by religious background

		Very threatening	Somewhat threatening	Not very threatening	Not at all threatening
Religion (%)	Buddhism	1.6	12.5	24.8	61.1
	Taoism	1.6	13.7	20.9	63.7
	Islam	0.4	1.3	12.4	85.9
	Hinduism	1.1	13.0	19.6	66.3
	Catholicism	0.8	21.8	31.5	46.0
	Christianity	4.7	17.6	29.4	48.2
	No Religion	2.6	17.7	27.7	51.9

About one in five Catholics (22.6 percent), Christians (22.1 percent), and those who professed no religion (20.3 percent) viewed Muslims as a threat.

Muslims' view of Christians and atheists

However, Muslims seemed to have a more positive view of those religious groups in turn.

A negligible number of Muslims viewed Christians as "very threatening", while only 3.4 percent of Muslims viewed Christians as "somewhat threatening".

Similarly, just 6.2 percent of Muslims viewed atheists and people with no religion as either very or somewhat threatening.

Private housing vs public housing

The study also noted that people who lived in private housing (i.e. condominiums, private apartments or landed properties) were more likely to view Muslims as threats, as compared to those who lived in public HDB flats.

And those who placed strong trust in secular institutions were less likely to view Muslims as a threat.

These were people who scored highly on questions like, "How much confidence do you have in the Parliament of Singapore?", and "How much confidence do you have in the courts and the legal system?".

What is this survey for?

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews told The Straits Times: "There is little question that global terror and how it has often been associated with Muslims has fed into the minds of a small group of Singaporeans, who thus feel that Muslims are threatening."

"The lack of exposure to and opportunities for learning about Muslims might have left some of their fears unchallenged."

Irony of the survey results

The irony of this survey is evident: It is supposed to highlight the potential fault line in Singapore society due to the fact that 15.6 percent of Singaporeans felt Muslims were threatening.

Nominated MP Mohamed Irshad, who founded inter-religious group Roses of Peace, told ST he felt the 15 percent who found Muslims threatening "is still a significant number".

"It is big enough to rile up anti-Muslim sentiments. We need to figure out how we can improve social mixing," he said.

But this survey itself is being seen as entrenching the narrative that Muslims are threatening because the results of the survey said so.

Part of global study

The findings from the survey are part of a global study.

The findings were captured in a report (PDF document) published by IPS, part of the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

It was written by Mathews, research associate Leonard Lim and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan.

What are Singaporeans angry about?

Singaporeans who took issue with the finding, particularly that some 15.6 percent of Singaporeans find Muslims threatening, were angry by a lot of things.

These issues stemmed from

– questioning the purpose of the study,

– how it is reported, i.e. what part of the report got highlighted

– and what takeaways one should go away with.

Here's a sampling of what the disagreements and disputes are from commenters on ST's Facebook page:

The findings and the way it is reported was taken as being provocative, which was one of the most prevalent sentiments out of the first 1,000 comments posted:

Oli Mohamed

I find the title and the photo of a congregation praying friday jumma prayers disturbing, since today is a Friday, this article is totally uncalled for, hope the editor pulls it down soon

👍 8

1 hr   Like   Reply   More

Danjel Lim

How come I feel like this news trying to stir racial harmony and discrimination? Is this piece of news even allowed?

👍❤️😂 118

Jackie Ng

100% of respondents find this article threatening.

👍😂❤️ 417

3 hrs   Like   Reply   More

Peng Boon Ong

This article is very dangerous, hope the police visit the author tonight

👍😂❤️ 208

4 hrs   Like   Reply   More

ツォー ジュディー

isn't this research divisive ???? where's ISA ... sleeping ah. Shame on u ST

👍 6

Keith Lin

I find this post offensive to begin with.

I don't find the makcik that sells me mee robus a threat.

Look at the intended pun: "Dr Mathews noted that Islamophobia can lead to varying levels of hatred, which can be explosive."

32

4 hrs   Like   Reply   More

Some questioned whether the method of the survey would yield results that are representative:

Ashtalaxmi Dinakaran

What the... This is ridiculous **The Straits Times**Times. There better be an apology. Headline is terrible and so is the article. Not sure what you are trying to stir up Straits Times. How did this even be allowed to be published???

1. Bad headline
2. Sample size of 1800 out of a population of 5 Mil seriously??

I grew up in private housing and never had this view! How come never ask me ah?

If you want to educate people on the racial issues in SG there are better ways of doing so.

26

While others tried to explain that maybe the finding of Muslims being threatening is not that significant:

Zhi Wei

Outrage aside, it is worth understanding the findings presented by this paper. For eg, the p values for the private housing indicator in this regression model are between 0.01 and 0.05. This is less significant when compared to results from other models showing much better p values at <0.001. Also the coefficient of this variable is quite low compared to results of other models.

A far more significant finding in the paper that was not reported is that "Chinese respondents were more likely to be ambivalent or distant towards other religions, compared to the non-Chinese." This had p values of <0.001 and much larger coefficient than the Muslim threat model.

The full paper can be found here:
https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/news-events/news/details/ips-working-paper-no.-33---religion-in-singapore-the-private-and-public-spheres

Nelson Ng

I question the intention of this study. Who actually endorse such study and allow its result to be published publicly...

22 mins Like Reply More

Zhi Wei

Nelson Ng it is an extensive study with other objectives. ST has cherry picked a less significant finding in the study to publish. In any case, any problem starts from awareness so it makes sense to find out and understand what is status quo.

19 mins Like Reply More

Nelson Ng

Zhi Wei I see. After reading the comments, I am happy to see that our country is more mature than the paper. Already, I feel safe growing up and old in this country.

17 mins Like Reply More

While others pointed out there are other aspects of the study to highlight:

Edmund Choi

Really hate the misleading headline. It was a study comparing several religions with less than significant differences in results, yet only one religion was singled out by the headline.

4 hrs Like Reply More

Some also construed the study to be making inferences about the socio-economic status of Muslims in Singapore:

Tiew Chong Yi

Scan through the article... First off, author assume our muslim brothers and sisters are all from HDB, little does he or she knows, many had since upgraded to private properties too, so are the author saying that these muslims find themselves a threat 🙄, secondly, the author mentioned researchers, who r the researchers, from which organization (straitstime?) ? Then the author started stirring hatred among different religions, what is his motive? Straits time, if this author worked for u, i hope you deal some disciplinary action on him.

9

Li Yan McCurdy

All the comments here indicate that us Singaporeans are much more accepting and inclusive than the article suggests :) But maybe is because all of us here "dwell in HDBs" haha.

2 hrs   Like   Reply   More

But what is certain is that the survey has become a talking point among Singaporeans instantly.

Prepare for more debate to come.