

Being Kiasu isn't all bad, say experts

It reflects the fact that Singapore is a fast-paced, achievement-oriented city

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SINGAPOREANS may see their society as kiasu - meaning afraid to lose out to others - but academics say the picture is not necessarily as gloomy as it first appears.

The findings of the recent survey on social values, which also threw up terms such as materialistic and elitist, do suggest areas of concern, the experts told The Straits Times.

But they also reflect the fact that this is a fast-paced, achievement-oriented city, just like many others around the world.

Two thousand people, both Singaporeans and permanent residents, were polled by the Britain-based Barrett Values Centre and Singapore's aAdvantage Consulting. The survey, carried out in June and July, included both sexes and cut across housing types and age groups.

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the terms Singaporeans selected may not necessarily mean they view themselves negatively. "I think those terms that you see - competitive, kiasu, self-centred - are manifestations of other deeper values, such as achievement-orientation.

"Being competitive or elitist doesn't have to come with a negative connotation, and these are not unique to Singapore."

Sociologist Paulin Straughan of the National University of Singapore added: "The notion of kiasuism - all of us happily say we are kiasu - it is almost iconic. I am not sure if it is necessarily a reflection of how negative we are on ourselves."

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan felt the results showed Singaporeans could be very critical of themselves collectively. However, this came with a silver lining. "We can see ourselves, warts and all," he said. "It also signals that we are becoming more concerned with those negative traits."

He agreed that Singaporeans need not worry unduly, but added that they seem more critical of the "collective other" than themselves as individuals. "We seem to blame others for the current state of affairs, and absolve ourselves of any contributory role to the negative societal traits," he said.

Questions about the survey's methodology were raised when the results were released on Thursday. Dr Leong said he also felt the poll may have been skewed, as Singaporeans were

more willing to pick negative qualities. "Being an Asian culture, we tend to be more self-deprecating," he said.

Human resources executive Sim Wei Ling, 33, agreed that the terms were not as negative as they seemed. "Being kiasu and materialistic might not be that bad," she said. "It just shows we are forward-looking and keen to keep improving ourselves in every way."

But she added: "Many other countries in the world are also achievement-oriented - so I am not sure how we stand in being kiasu, materialistic and elitist as compared to them."