

Furore online

Ng Kai Ling

The Straits Times, 4 September 2011

First, it was unhappiness over a Chinese student mocking the way Singaporeans speak in a video that went viral.

Then, there was online vitriol over a Filipina who implied that national servicemen were cowards who would 'pack up and run' should a war break out.

The latest episode, which had Singaporeans railing against what they saw as an attack on local culture, was the curry incident.

Have Singaporeans become increasingly defensive and less accepting of criticism?

In the curry case, an online movement quickly gathered steam after a newspaper reported that a local Indian family had agreed to refrain from cooking curry at certain times after their neighbour from China complained about the smell.

Many expressed anger at being mocked and criticised in the recent incidents. Some went as far as to ask the foreigners to return to their home countries since they did not appear to like Singapore and its people.

Psychiatrist Adrian Wang agreed that defence was a natural reaction in these circumstances but added that the online comments came from a minority and were not representative of Singaporeans in general.

'The trouble with making comments online is that people are able to do it with more venom as they can hide behind their computers.'

Indeed, Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore, noted that the topic of local-foreign relations had been in the spotlight for several years but the Internet had made it easier for issues to be debated more openly than before.

Sociologist Ho Kong Chong suggested that Singaporeans had also become more vocal because of frustration over increased competition and congestion due to the influx of foreigners.

For the two foreigners who started the online furore, things did not end well even after they had apologised. Chinese student Wang Peng Fei was expelled from the private school he was in and has returned to China. Filipina Rachele Ann Beguia was also investigated by her employer.

Professor Ho noted, however, that some good did come out from the curry controversy.

'It became an event for people to come together to embrace cultural differences over a pot of curry.'