

The Big Read: Are S'poreans anti-foreigner? Not in the real world
Over the past few years, the Singaporean-foreigner divide has come under sharp focus, with high profile flare-ups occurring from time to time, grabbing headlines and prompting political leaders — including the Prime Minister himself — to weigh in on several occasions.

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TODAY, 11 April 2015

OVER the past few years, the Singaporean-foreigner divide has come under sharp focus, with high profile flare-ups occurring from time to time, grabbing headlines and prompting political leaders — including the Prime Minister himself — to weigh in on several occasions.

More often than not, the incidents can be traced to insensitive or offensive comments made on the Internet by one side or the other. Anti-foreigner sentiments dominate Internet chatter, so much so that “foreign trash Singapore” has become a Google auto-fill option.

But based on TODAY’s interviews with 15 foreigners from a range of occupations and who have spent some time here, the real-world experience is out of sync with the prevalent online sentiment.

Overall, they spoke positively about their daily interactions with Singaporeans at work or other social settings. Tellingly, however, while they were happy to share their views on the topic, several did not want to give their full names out of concern that they would get flamed online.

Mr Anjan, a senior manager at a media company, has been living here for 14 years. He said he has never had any negative encounters with Singaporeans. “I think (the negative sentiments are) all in the online space ... there’s no translation of it into the physical world,” said the 45-year-old Indian national who is a Permanent Resident (PR) here.

Filipino pharmacist technician Gina, 31, said she had a lot to learn when she first joined a hospital here, and the support from her bosses and colleagues helped her carve out a 14-year long career.

Ms Angela, a British director at a multi-national company who moved to Singapore in 2008, added that she rarely encountered “any open frustrations with foreigners” from her colleagues or Singaporeans running local businesses.

Nevertheless, it is not a bed of roses, given that fault lines between locals and foreigners exist in societies all over the world.

A British director of a technology company, who wanted to be known only by his initials T S, felt that foreigners here are being tolerated rather than welcomed.

“And because of that ... a great deal of us tend to put our heads down, take our salary, pay our taxes, and we’re grateful for our lifestyles and we tend not to try and create ripples,” said the 43-year-old.

Asked whether he has had any negative encounters with Singaporeans, Australian Harry (not his real name) could only recount an incident that happened five years ago: He had noticed that a parked car along the street in the estate where he had stayed was blocking traffic. He asked the couple sitting in the car if they could move the vehicle. What greeted him next was a string of vulgarities from the car owner, telling him to go back to his own country. “The funny thing is, that was my home. So he came into my (estate) and was blocking the traffic for dozens of people, yet he was abusing me,” said the 52-year-old PR.

Filipino domestic worker Cecille, who has been here for the past decade, said that she sometimes get dirty looks and does not feel welcomed. “(Singaporeans) don’t like to talk to us, maybe it’s because I am a domestic worker,” she said.

The inflow of foreigners was a hot topic during the 2011 General Election. After the GE, the Government moved to tighten immigration and foreign labour policies.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Paulin Straughan said: “Since the 2011 GE, we have dangerously walked very close to the safety boundary ... using economic setbacks as an excuse, many Singaporeans blamed foreigners for taking their jobs so they drew the line between foreigners and Singaporeans.”

Earlier this week, former nurse Ello Ed Mundsel Bello, 28, who is from the Philippines, was arrested and charged in court for making offensive online comments about Singaporeans and religion. He faces two charges of promoting feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes in Singapore, which is an offence under the Sedition Act.

Xenophobia online

IN his National Day rally in 2012, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke at length on the Singaporean-foreigner divide. Noting how foreign publications were picking up on stories of anti-foreign sentiment here, Mr Lee said: “It speaks poorly of what sort of people we are, what sort of people we want to be.”

Last year, some Singaporeans’ opposition against a planned Philippine independence celebration escalated online, prompting strong words from Mr Lee who wrote on Facebook that he was “appalled to read about those who harassed the organisers ... and spammed their Facebook page”. He added: “They are a disgrace to Singapore.” Separately, Mr Lee had also spoken about how social media complicates society’s fault lines, including the foreigner-Singaporean divide.

While anti-foreigner comments make for uncomfortable reading, the foreigners interviewed said they tend not to take these too seriously, attributing them to a vocal minority.

Mike, a Permanent Resident (PR) from the United Kingdom who has been living here for 13 years, said: “I don’t think xenophobia appears today in the way people interact with each other. Other than online stuff, I don’t think it’s there. I think online is just an easy forum to make noise.”

Experts cited a variety of factors why the animosity shown online by Singaporeans towards foreigners — which tends to be amplified over the more rational discourse on the Internet — is largely non-existent in real life.

NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: “Most Singaporeans are quite civil when engaging in face-to-face interactions with others, local or foreign. They would tend to be more responsible, when they know that they can be held accountable, even if informally. In the virtual world ... they see foreigners through the lens of prejudice, rather than possibly as fellow human beings, who happen to be foreigners.”

Dr Carol Soon, a research fellow on new media at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), pointed out that an IPS study on xenophobic speech conducted in 2012 found blog posts, forum comments and Facebook pages which denounce xenophobia.

Sentiments expressed online may reflect how some people feel about foreigners and immigration issues but it does not mean that these views are widespread, she said.

“The Internet creates the illusion of many when there could just be a few because of the ease and speed of replication, especially when it comes to provocative material.”

The Internet has a “disinhibition effect”, she said. “When people communicate online, they sometimes behave in ways they do not behave in the real world due to the mediated nature of communication,” said Dr Soon.

“In the real world, we are more sensitive to others’ feelings and responses because we have visual cues to guide us. As such, we are more careful with our speech.”

Assoc Prof Straughan said the people who perpetuate anti-foreigner comments are “not necessarily a minority but these are the cowards”.

She said: “They know they cannot say it in public because there are very strong laws and normative stance against xenophobia. So what they do then is take to the anonymity of the Internet and there, they believe they can sprout whatever they want ... It is an act of cowardice.”

She reiterated that there are always a few “bad eggs” in every society. “They have become more visible simply because technology has facilitated that with social media. The Internet has magnified their lone voices,” she said.

Blending in

DOING his grocery shopping at a neighbourhood supermarket and having his daily breakfast at a hawker centre, Australian Paul Hutton said he feels almost Singaporean. A PR since 2003, he has been living in the Housing and Development Board heartlands for most of the 17 years he has spent here.

“As a long-time resident of Singapore, I feel very much affected by the same things, and I’m very much concerned about the same things as Singaporeans ... like governance or the cost of living,” said the 48-year-old, who is fluent in Malay and has picked up a bit of Mandarin.

Mr Vikram, a senior executive at a multinational corporation here, said that some foreigners may stick to their own cliques and as a result, are less integrated into society. He pointed out that foreigners coming into Singapore are usually from extreme ends of the economic strata — transient workers in lower wage jobs or expatriates with high incomes.

“If (they) come in as richer foreigners, they have their own set of people who move around in their own places ... the elites move in a very different circle,” he added.

The National Integration Council (NIC) was set up in April 2009. Among other objectives, it seeks to help new citizens “adapt to the Singaporean way of life, including helping them better understand local cultures and social norms”, according to the council’s website. It administers a fund which supports organisations in implementing integration initiatives.

Dr Tan said regulating the numbers of foreigners and promoting integration are not mutually exclusive efforts. “Regulating numbers reduce competition for jobs, space, amenities, infrastructures, and thereby tension, prejudice, and unhappiness,” he said.

He added: “We can promote integration by ensuring that we bring in the kind of foreigners for jobs which Singaporeans cannot or do not want to take up. At the workplace and neighbourhood, we should promote interaction and collaboration in mutually satisfying projects.”

Assoc Prof Straughan reiterated that successful integration requires efforts from both Singaporeans and foreigners.

“Everything in a city state like Singapore is magnified. All it takes is a handful of Singaporeans and foreigners to act poorly, and immediately there’s an impact because visually it’s observable,” she said.