

As a nation celebrates, we ask: What makes us Singaporean?

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Singapore — After 50 years of nation building, meteoric economic growth and progress, the picture that emerges of the Singapore identity — described by Singaporeans themselves — is not exactly charming or cheerful.

For many Singaporeans, the words that come to mind are “kiasu”, “hardworking” and “stressed”. The adjectives complement one another to showcase, in a way, a nation on steroids — a competitive citizenry that is obsessed with being No 1 in all that it does.

This, at least, is according to a street poll conducted by TODAY of 525 respondents here — 354 Singaporeans and 171 foreigners — across all ages, who were asked to pick any three words to describe the Singapore identity.

While there were differing opinions, the most commonly cited attitude among the Singaporean respondents was “kiasu” — a Hokkien word that captures the uniquely Singaporean trait of being afraid to lose out.

It was mentioned by more than a third of respondents, who also used another colloquial term, “kiasi” — afraid to die or cowardly — to describe their countrymen.

In contrast, foreigners here painted a more positive picture of Singaporeans, with words such as “friendly”, “nice”, “hardworking” and “polite” cited most frequently.

As Singaporeans celebrate the Jubilee Weekend — a highlight being the anticipated National Day Parade tomorrow — the topic of national identity has come under the spotlight in recent months as policymakers and citizens look back on how far the Republic has come, and what the future holds.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has - on three occasions, no less - spoken about national identity as a long term concern in the next 50 years, as he shared what he felt were challenges facing the country over different time horizons. Among other things, the future generation will be “born in a different world”, and it remains to be seen what identity they will develop, Mr Lee said in a recent interview with Ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee.

The results of TODAY’s street poll were mirrored in the National Values Assessment study. Conducted by Barrett Values Centre and aAdvantage Consulting Group, the study found that while Singaporeans were describing society here in more positive terms such as “peace” and “educational opportunities” compared with three years ago, terms such as “kiasu”, “kiasi”, “competitive”, “materialistic” and “self-centred” were still on the list.

WHAT MAKES S’POREANS TICK

Commenting on TODAY’s street poll, Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua said: “I see this as a positive and a sign of self-awareness and ability to self-critique. (It is) not a bad thing since self-awareness is needed to check any excessive kiasu-ism.”

She added: “Every strength carried to the extreme becomes a weakness. Diligence and the drive to achieve are good attributes of a people and have led Singapore to where it is today. We are perhaps at a tipping point where if left unchecked, our strengths will become deficits that will lead us to becoming victims of our success.”

Of course, Singaporeans have redeeming qualities too, such as “hardworking”, with 14 per cent of the street poll respondents mentioning it, and also “friendly”, with 10 per cent saying so. But other words that frequently popped up were not as pleasant, including “selfish” and “rude”. It must be pointed out that TODAY’s survey is a snapshot poll that quickly captures Singaporeans’ views on what makes them tick. It is in no way a scientific survey or a reflective soul searching exercise where Singaporeans agonise over their psyche.

If respondents were given more time to think, a different consensus on the Singapore identity could have surfaced – such as descriptions of meritocracy, multiracialism and social mobility that are often mentioned in the national narrative to explain the city-state’s phenomenal success.

But to those who were surveyed by TODAY over two weeks in various parts of Singapore, their knee-jerk appraisal portrayed rather conflicting characteristics of Singaporeans.

Here is a sampling of what some respondents rattled off: Undergraduate Nicholas Chiam, 21, said Singaporeans were “cosmopolitan, driven and materialistic”; 39-year-old Prakesh Eranki, who works in IT, said “disciplined, honest, worried”; Dispatch clerk Najemudeen Mohamad Abraham, 48, went with “busy, self-centered, pampered” while cleaner Kong Tuck Cheong, 56, said Singaporeans were “well-mannered, kind and xenophobic”.

It could be said that such views from the gut are the most honest, or also the most superficial as it is only a caricature of Singaporeans that has been reinforced over the years based on impressions rather than research.

To be fair, the Singapore identity is not easy to pin point. Public intellectuals who have weighed in on the topic over the years also do not profess to know the answer.

Prominent diplomat and academic Kishore Mahbubani said in a newspaper column in 2013: “I know that I am a Singaporean. But I do not know what a Singaporean is.” Similarly, law professor Simon Tay, in a separate newspaper column also in 2013, noted: “There is a broad appeal in the idea of Singaporean-ness. Even so, we have yet to clearly identify the cluster of values, ideas and habits that constitute the Singaporean culture and identity.”

Ms Debbie Soon, a research associate at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in the National University of Singapore, noted that there are multiple sources of identity markers that would help to understand what Singaporeans value. These include friendship and family ties, belief in meritocracy and other national values such as “commitment to principles that uphold cultural diversity”.

Ms Soon added: “The Singaporean identity is also shaped by the pursuit of civic interests, as well as common experiences like living in HDB estates, eating at hawker centres and doing National Service... It is a lattice-work of social networks and interests that bind us together; they transcend the commonalities of race, language and religion.”

As Singapore continues to grapple with its identity, foreigners, however, seem to view residents here in a better light.

Among the expatriates and foreign students living here who were polled and posed the same question of using three words to describe Singaporeans, one quarter said “friendly”, compared to a mere tenth of citizens who felt that way. Many also said Singaporeans were “nice” and “helpful”.

Explaining this gap in perceptions between foreigners and Singaporeans, Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP Hri Kumar Nair pointed out that Singaporeans “measure ourselves against a higher standard of achievement”. “So examples of failure or bad conduct tend to be overly scrutinised and exaggerated. There is a sense of ‘we should be better than that’,” he said.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, an IPS senior research fellow who studies migration and intercultural relations, added that foreigners living abroad are more open to different cultures. “They chose to work and study here, so they are naturally more receptive of the people here because they have to adapt to the new environment,” he said.

But some foreigners also hold a dim view of Singaporeans, using the same choice words of “kiasu”, “rude”, “impatient” and “arrogant” to describe citizens of their host nation. Similar to Singaporeans, they also felt residents here are competitive and lead hectic lives, with more than 10 per cent using “worried” and “stressed” to describe Singaporeans.

HEALTH AND LOVED ONES, OVER WEALTH AND SUCCESS

Yet, for their supposed competitive streak, Singaporeans proved they were not as money-minded or success-oriented when push comes to shove. As part of the street poll, the respondents were also asked which of the four indicators – health, wealth, success and loved ones – they valued the most. An overwhelming majority chose loved ones (51 per cent) and health (37 per cent).

Of the indicators they valued the least, almost half (49 per cent) selected wealth and 43 per cent said success.

Naturally, more among the older respondents cherished health compared to the younger crowd, the majority of whom put loved ones as top priority.

“When we are young, many of us feel invincible. We are brimming with life and energy, and ill health is a remote consideration,” said Dr Chia Shi-Lu, MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC and Government Parliamentary Committee for Health.

“As we grow older, we can feel it in our bodies and see some of our friends and loved ones succumb to ill health, and our own mortality becomes all the more real to us, so we start paying more and more attention to keeping healthy.”

But what accounts for the intriguing incongruence in Singaporean’s attitude towards life – that while many survey respondents affirm the Singapore identity to be kiasu and competitive, strangely, their priority is not to accumulate wealth or success?

This lack of monetary ambition is also borne out in a separate online survey TODAY conducted with 665 Singaporeans to get their views on how they perceive concepts of home,

work, and play. When asked what mattered most in their jobs, two in three respondents chose job satisfaction and work-life balance over pay packages.

Are Singaporeans really not motivated by materialistic rewards? Clearly, some are driven by money. But what the survey findings reveal is Singaporeans' peculiar personality, said analysts, which could be attributed to pragmatic concerns of survival rather than simply making money.

There are two seemingly contradictory factors behind such attitudes. One, Singaporeans have grown up with a narrative of the country's vulnerabilities and hence the need to stay competitive which only worsened in recent years with the influx of foreigners. Two, growing affluence has led to Singaporeans wondering why they are striving so hard for and placing more value in non-monetary pursuits, as can be seen in calls for slower economic growth and a more relaxed pace of life.

While some Singaporeans yearn for a more chill-out environment, they will never shake off the kiasu spirit – a trait that some say the Government evidently encourages as it fears citizens, if not hungry enough, will result in the economy being overtaken or swallowed by rivals. Good is not good enough, one has to be extraordinary to excel.

The fear of being left behind in this globalised world where the city state, as an open economy that is welcoming of foreigners, could also be spurring Singaporeans to keep pace with the competition or risk losing out in schools or jobs and eventually their lifestyle and even homes once incomes are lost.

This concept of exceptionalism to compensate for Singapore's vulnerability due to its small size and lack of natural resources has been reiterated by Singapore leaders time and again, which could explain why the kiasu mentality is deeply ingrained among Singaporeans.

Some observers also note that domestic concerns such as the high cost of living is not helping, as it causes constant anxiety among Singaporeans who worry if they have enough. In fact, pricey goods and services is among the top peeves of the respondents in the street poll.

Asked what they disliked most about Singapore, many said the city was becoming too expensive and too crowded due to the surge in the number of foreigners recently. Many were also unhappy with the stressful lifestyle and the hot, humid weather.

Mr Hri Kumar could empathise with concerns of over-population. "It is natural to want more space, whether at home, at work, on the roads or places of leisure. But crowdedness is a feature of a vibrant city-state. It is wishful thinking that you can have fewer people and expect everything else to remain the same."

As for the rising cost of living, he noted that this is a common concern in countries all over the world. "Costs will inevitably increase as living standards improve, and in Singapore, we have seen a dramatic improvement in a single generation," he said. "The more important question therefore is how Singaporeans can best deal with the impact of these increases in the short, medium and long term, while still ensuring that our children will be better off than we are."

In the short term, policymakers need to pay particular attention to elderly Singaporeans, “who worked when wages were low and now find that their savings cannot keep up with inflation”, he added.

WHAT S’POREANS LIKE ABOUT THEIR COUNTRY

But for all of the gripes, there are several things which Singaporeans like about their country. Among those polled, the oft-cited attractions were safety (almost one-third) and the wide variety of good food (17 per cent).

It is no surprise that Singaporeans were appreciative of the city’s safe environment, said Dr Damien Cheong, research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies whose area of expertise lies in homeland defence and security studies.

“As Singaporeans are well-travelled, they know that in many countries, they have to be extremely careful about personal safety, which can ultimately restrict activities. Here, the fact that one can walk, jog and cycle along the streets after dark anywhere one pleases, gives one much more autonomy,” he said.

As Singapore continues its journey as an economic powerhouse, the country seems forever tied together by a curious combination of its “scared to lose” mentality and stress, dislike of escalating population and prices, and love of security and food.

What does it actually say about the Singapore identity? Nobody can quite tell, except for a simplistic perspective that Singaporeans are high-strung foodies who dislike crowds. But it does explain their top choices to kick back and unwind.

UNWIND THE S’POREAN WAY - SLEEPING AND SURFING THE INTERNET

In the online poll with over 600 Singaporeans, among the top leisure activities enjoyed the most are sleeping, hanging out with friends and family (typically to eat) and going online – two out of three are solo and passive activities.

The fact that sleeping and surfing the Internet rank so highly did not surprise National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser.

“Singaporeans may be tired out from having to balance family responsibilities and work commitments, particularly if they have young children and/or elderly parents to look after. I reckon sleeping is a good way to recharge...while going online involves no additional running around and therefore highly accessible,” said Dr Tan.

Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng, an avid Internet user, felt that online surfing is a phenomenon that is not unique to Singapore. “Going online allows anyone to escape into a different world - be it connecting with friends, shopping or watching videos and playing games. It is an avenue for immediate gratification,” he says.

“But it may be more popular for Singaporeans as an avenue in dealing with stress and frustrations due to our pace of life, high smart phone penetration and our sophisticated telecommunication infrastructure which all make it easy to go online anytime.”

Mr Baey could not have said it clearer, confirming the poll results that Singaporeans are stressed-out individuals who require sleep and online therapy to loosen up. At least they can

seek solace in Singapore's food paradise – but rising prices could lead to another bout of stress.