

## News Media Socialisation and Ethnic Tolerance among Malaysian Youth

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### ABSTRACT

Strengthening ethnic tolerance among the youth involves educating them about the cultural differences and issues of interethnic relations through the mainstream news media. It is predicted that exposure to public affairs news would sensitize the youth to the complexity and challenges of living in a multiethnic society and accordingly enhance their level of ethnic tolerance. A total of 2,906 youths aged between 15 to 25 years participated in a survey. The survey observed varying levels of ethnic tolerance with many of the respondents in the moderate and high category. The respondents scored better in the cognitive and attitudinal component compared to the behavioural dimension of ethnic tolerance. The respondents also vary in their level of exposure to public affairs news with six in every ten being in the moderate category. Regression analysis showed that exposure to public affairs news, cognitive and attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance are significant predictors and accounted for 16.5 percent of the variance in the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. Cognitive component of ethnic tolerance is a better predictor, followed by attitudinal component, and exposure to public affairs news. This paper discusses the implication of the findings in relation to nation building.

### INTRODUCTION

Based on the premise that ethnic tolerance is a necessary (but not a sufficient) factor of harmonious interethnic relations in Malaysia, and that the news media plays an important role in nation-building, this paper addresses the question of what is the level of ethnic tolerance, measured in cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural terms, and the level of exposure to news on public affairs in the mainstream media among 15 to 25 years old youth, and examines the relationships of news on public affairs in the mainstream media with cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural component of ethnic tolerance.

While Malaysia has been highly respected as a successful multiethnic, multicultural, multi-

religion society, Malaysians should not be complacent of the achievement in light of scores of interethnic relations issues emerging as a result of development, modernization and globalization. It is important to consider that the response of Malaysians to an increasingly dynamic multiethnic society is not unchanging. It could change in either direction. It is for this reason that Malaysians have been continuously reminded to sustain the harmony and unity that has been achieved thus far which is fundamental for political and economic stability. Yong Tiam Kui (2004) in an article on Malaysia's competitiveness reported that the peaceful and harmonious feature of the Malaysian society is one of the country's strongest selling points.

Malaysia, nevertheless, needs to further strengthen its multiethnic society in order to realize the goal of becoming a fully developed harmonious civil society in 2020.

#### *Review of Literature*

Growing interdependence of economic, political and social activities, and growing competition for development resources are common features of today's modern multicultural, multiethnic societies. Larson, Wilson and Mortimer (2002) in reviewing global trends on the implications of macro-level and micro-level changes in the society noted that increased interdependency and the confluence of diverse people puts a premium on development of knowledge, attitudes and skills to relate and cooperate across boundaries of ethnicity, religions and social class. This observation means that in today's multiethnic society, ethnic tolerance, as social competency, is more important than ever before.

Within the realm of interethnic relations, different but overlapping concepts were offered to describe positive value relations between ethnic groups. Among them are concepts like ethnic tolerance and multiculturalism. In essence, they have been mostly used for describing desired states to which societies or nations should aspire. The term tolerance, in a general sense, is an ideology as well as values for dealing with diversity and differences. The theme of tolerance is very prominent in Malaysia's national unity and integration agenda. As pointed by Zainul Arif Hussain (2003), in the following excerpt of Mahathir Mohamad's speech, the former prime minister, the theme of tolerance is distinct:

"... building a nation out of a diverse people with differing historical, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds is something more than just fostering consensus on the basic character of a nation. It involves the fostering of shared historical experiences, shared values, a feeling of common identity and shared destiny that transcends ethnic bounds, without undermining ethnic identity ... p. 538"

This description means that ethnic tolerance essentially entails the idea of cultural differences, and memberships should not only be acknowledged and considered but also respected. Viewed in this sense, it is not very different from the concept of multiculturalism as conceived by Richeson and Nussbaum (2004) and Verkuyten and Martinovic (2005).

Weldon (2006) argued that tolerance, like liberty and equality, is a principle of democratic creed. It requires citizens to uphold and secure the right of groups, even those they find objectionable, to participate fully in political, social and economic life. In describing the domain of tolerance in relation to citizenship principle, Weldon (2006) proposed two dimensions of tolerance: political tolerance and social tolerance. Political tolerance involves basic political liberties. Social tolerance, on the other hand, refers to the right to express cultural differences. While there are several ways to conceptualize the ethnic tolerance construct, the present analysis argued that tolerance towards others of different ethnic groups involved cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural tolerance. In this sense, the cognitive component of ethnic tolerance refers to readiness to get at in-depth understanding of the cultural differences and of the contentious interethnic relations issues. The attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance refers to the willingness to accept the right of the other of different ethnicity and views the interethnic relations issues positively or constructively. The behavioural component of ethnic tolerance refers to practices that manifest openness, sensitivity and accommodation towards differences, divergence, and conflicts.

Ethnic tolerance among the 15 to 25 years old youth in Malaysia, as an important social phenomenon, warrants continuous attention of scholars and policy makers for four reasons. Firstly, youth in this age category make up a substantial portion of the population and they carry greater responsibility towards further progress in the country and in ensuring a progressive harmonious and united civil society, as envisioned in Vision 2020. Secondly, the public including the youth today are increasingly confronted with contentious multicultural issues. Thirdly, contemporary youth might have a different level of attitude towards multiculturalism compared to that of their parents because they were brought up in different environments. Fourthly, sustainability and future social, economic and political stability in the country depend on the degree to which present day youths show tolerance towards fellow citizens of other ethnic group. The latter point is important because national policies, development plans and activities are necessarily tempered with ethnic consideration, as pointed out by Zainul Arif Hussain (2003).

Despite the greater inter-ethnic economic cooperation among ethnic groups, the issue of distribution of resource allocation remained foremost (Jesudeson, 1997). In addition, concern over the distribution of economic and political resources, the availability of new communication technology and the appeal of increased democratic freedom, which has resulted in a greater awareness of the ethnic, religious and linguistic rights of Malaysians regardless of ethnicity, can place the current climate of ethnic accommodation at risk. Sriskandarajah (2005) noted that there are signs that ethnic accommodation is under threat or that interethnic relations are under stress. Kum Hor (2006) and Mansor Mohd Noor *et al.* (2005), based on a review of past ethnic relations studies in the country, concluded that ethnic polarization which has plagued the country for a long time, is not about to go away. Given such complexity, Malaysia clearly needs to continually foster greater ethnic tolerance.

In the context of promoting and enhancing ethnic tolerance in a multiethnic society, two communication models of interethnic relations are applicable — the information model and the meta-cognitive model. Both models assume that individuals understanding, attitudes and behaviour can be influenced or changed by providing them with relevant information that they lack. Ben-Ari (2004) asserted that the central premise of these communication approaches to inter-group relations is that ignorance and lack of information create a fertile ground for the development of inter-group prejudice and negative stereotyping.

As an agent of change and a partner to national development, the role of news media in imparting ethnic tolerance cannot be minimized. It is generally accepted that the news media define various events in society not simply by presenting the objective reality but rather through their interpretation of the events. An individual's subjective reality is contingent on the individual's dependence upon the media as a source of information. Learning and understanding about cultural differences from the media should facilitate and deepen understanding of the issues, challenges and dynamics of a multiethnic society, and in turn fosters greater ethnic tolerance and openness towards multiculturalism as argued by many, for instance, Khan *et al.* (1999) and Soen (2002).

The socialization and educational role of the news media in fostering and strengthening ethnic tolerance involves imparting the right knowledge and attitude and behaviour that are in line with the ideas of civility and harmonious coexistence. The mass media in the country ought to uphold their the social responsibility in promoting greater ethnic tolerance, meaning greater openness and acceptance towards multiculturalism. In fact, the news media regulations in the country stresses on the developmental role of the news media in strengthening unity and harmony of the various ethnic groups (Faridah Ibrahim and Mus Chairil Samani, 2000). Thus, in theory and in practice, coverage of diversity, differences and interethnic relations issues in the news media must aim at helping the public in understanding the dynamics of interethnic relations and responding to emerging interethnic relations issues accordingly. The news media is a tool for transmitting democratic messages and values, reconciliatory and integration messages, facilitating tolerance and open-mindedness and changing negative stereotypes. However, despite the obvious developmental role of the news media, in a high choice environment, news on public affairs constantly competes with entertainment.

### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Given the value of ethnic tolerance, the significance of youth in nation building, and the lack of empirical evidence on the role of news media in influencing knowledge, attitude, behaviour components of ethnic tolerance, this present study was carried out with the following three objectives: (i) to determine the level of cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural components of ethnic tolerance, (ii) to determine the level of exposure to news on public affairs in the mainstream media among youth in the 15 to 25 years age group, and (iii) to ascertain the relationship and contribution of exposure to news on public affairs in mainstream media to cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural components of ethnic tolerance.

### METHODOLOGY

The study reported here is part of a cross-sectional survey on ethnic tolerance among Malaysian youth. The study focused on the level of ethnic tolerance and the influence of exposure

to news on public affairs in local mainstream media on ethnic tolerance. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and participation was voluntary. The data were collected in the months of March-May 2005. The survey questionnaire, written in Malay, took approximately twenty-five minutes to complete.

#### *Samples*

A total of 2,906 Malay, Chinese and Indian youths participated by completing a self-administered questionnaire. An effort was made so that the samples adequately represent the ratio of Malay, Chinese and Indian population in the country. The Indian youth sample constituted about 10.0%, while the Malay and Chinese samples constituted 54.5% and 35.5% of the total samples, respectively.

Females constituted 51.6%, and 48.4% were males. Muslim respondents constituted 54.5% of the samples, while non-Muslims were 45.5%. The age of the respondents ranged from 15 to 25 years, with an average age of 18.9 years ( $SD=2.75$ ). A majority of the respondents attended national schools for their primary and secondary education, while those attending national-type and religious schools contributed 20.9% and 3.8% respectively.

#### *Instrument*

The cognitive component of ethnic tolerance scale consisted of seven items formatted as 5-point Likert items, ranging from (1) not willing to put efforts to understand cultural differences and interethnic relations issues as expressed in the statement to (5) put much efforts to understand cultural differences and interethnic relations issue as expressed in the statement. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.69. A higher score on the measure meant higher willingness to learn and understand the cultural differences and issues of interethnic relations. The attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance scale consisted of seven items formatted as 5-point Likert items, ranging from (1) not willing to accept the opinions or views on life in a multiethnic society and ways in promoting interethnic integration as expressed in the statements to (5) readily willing to accept the opinions and views as expressed in the statements. The reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.67. A higher score meant a more favourable attitude towards the cultural differences, issues

and challenges of multiethnic society. The behavioural component of ethnic tolerance scale consisted of eight items formatted as 5-point Likert items. The eight items were identified as behavioural indicators of ethnic tolerance. The respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they practiced tolerant behaviour in dealing with diversity, differences and conflicts. The response categories ranged from (1) not at all practiced to (5) very frequently practiced. A reliability analysis of the scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.77.

The respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they used television, newspaper, radio, news magazine, and internet to obtain news on a 4-point scale (1=never, 2= seldom, 3=somewhat frequently, and 4=very frequently). The respondents were also asked to indicate how much attention they paid to the news on public affairs in the media on a 3-point scale (1= not at all, 2= some attention, 3= very much attention). The news media used score was multiplied with news attention score to create an overall index of general exposure to news on public affairs. The higher the score, the greater is the exposure to the news media used.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Before moving to the multivariate analysis, we first examined the level of ethnic tolerance. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by level of ethnic tolerance across the three components of tolerance: cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural. The most obvious finding was more of the respondents were in the high category for cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance. On the contrary, for the behavioural component more respondents were in the moderate category. These findings suggest that, on the one hand, (i) the respondents seem readily willing to understand the cultural differences and the social, economic and political rights of others of different ethnic groups and the ethnicity issues, and (ii) the respondents generally had a favourable view towards others of different ethnic groups and accept the various mechanisms in placed by the government to foster harmonious interethnic relations. On the other hand, there seems to be a gap in expressing ethnic tolerance in behavioural terms, suggesting that real or full integration among the various ethnic groups studied is still much to be desired. The findings provide support for the concern

on the lack of full integration among the ethnic groups as observed in earlier studies (Hazril Jamil *et al.*, 2004; Fatimah Daud and Abdul Hadi Yaacob, 2006).

On the question of level of exposure and attention to public affairs news, the findings are summarized in Table 2. The respondents varied in their level of exposure to public affairs news with a majority of the respondents (six in every ten) in the moderate category. The findings clearly indicate that the respondents were not indifferent towards news on public affairs in the country. Despite the large number of entertainment programs in the mass media, the respondents do pay attention to news on public affairs albeit not extensively.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationships and contribution of exposure to news on public affairs to ethnic tolerance. Partial correlation analysis revealed that all the variables were significantly and positively correlated. The correlation coefficients of exposure to public affairs news with cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural components of ethnic tolerance were 0.18 ( $\rho=0.000$ ), 0.10 ( $\rho=0.000$ ), and 0.23 ( $\rho=0.000$ ), respectively, as shown in Table 3. The findings suggest that the more one is exposed to news on public affairs, the more readily and willing one is to learn, understand and accept the cultural differences and the rights of other ethnic groups, the emerging ethnicity

issue, and the various strategies used in promoting interethnic harmony and unity, as well as practicing the appropriate tolerant behaviour in managing the interethnic relations challenges. The findings lend support to the previous claims (Ben-Ari, 2004; Khan *et al.*, 1999; Soen, 2002) of a positive relationship of exposure to relevant intergroup relations information with positive orientation towards intergroup relations.

A series of multiple regression analyses was performed. In the first regression analysis, cognitive component of ethnic tolerance was the dependent variables and exposure to news of public affairs was the independent variable (gender, age and attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance were included as control variables in the regression model). In the second regression analysis, the attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance was the dependent variable with exposure to news on public affairs as the independent variable (gender, age and cognitive component of ethnic tolerance were included as control variables in the regression model). In the third regression analysis, the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance was treated as the dependent variable, and cognitive and attitudinal ethnic tolerance, and exposure to news of public affairs as the predictors (gender and age were also included as control variables in the model).

TABLE 1  
Distribution of respondents by level of tolerance (N=2,906)

Level of Tolerance	Cognitive	Attitudinal	Behavioural
Low	2.5	1.0	5.3
Moderate	46.1	41.3	58.6
High	51.3	57.7	36.1

Note. All figures are percentages

TABLE 2  
Distribution of respondents by level of exposure to public affairs news (N=2906)

Level of Exposure	Percentage
Low	13.7
Moderate	63.9
High	22.4

Note. All figures are percentages

TABLE 3  
Correlation coefficients of exposure to public affairs news with cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural components of ethnic tolerance (N=2906)

	Components of Ethnic Tolerance		
	Cognitive	Attitudinal	Behavioural
Exposure to Public Affair News	0.18 (.000)	0.10 (.000)	0.23 (.000)

Note. Figures in parentheses are the level of significance.

The findings of the three regression analyses are presented in Table 4 and the theoretical linkages of the key variables studied are summarized in Fig. 1. As expected, cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance and exposure to news on public affairs are significantly and directly correlated with the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. The three predictors collectively explain 16.5 percent of the variance in the level of behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. The cognitive component of ethnic tolerance is a better predictor ( $\beta = 0.214$ ), followed by the attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance ( $\beta = 0.196$ ) and exposure to news on public affairs ( $\beta = 0.125$ ).

**CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The harmony and unity among the main ethnic groups in the country acknowledged thus far could be superficial given the findings that a majority of the respondents had a moderate level behavioural component of ethnic tolerance, although a majority scored high in the level of cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance. Nevertheless, on a positive note, a foundation for harmony and unity is there and strong since a majority of the respondents were observed to have a high level of ethnic tolerance, in terms of knowledge and attitude towards cultural differences and the issues related to interethnic relations and ethnic rights.

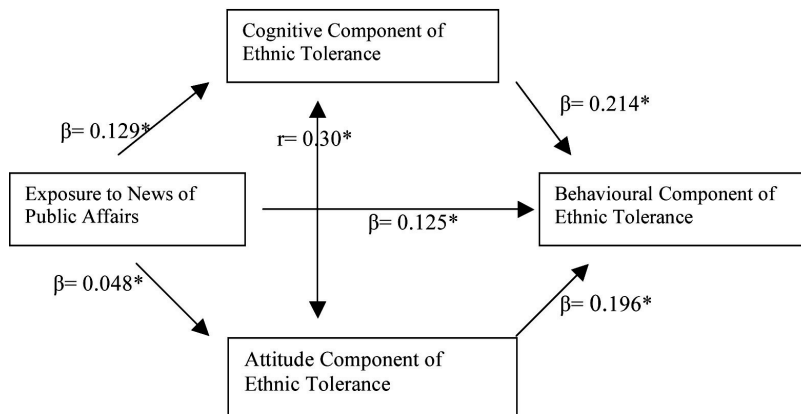


Fig. 1: Summary of the multiple regression analyses for variables Predicting the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance

Note: \* = Significant at  $p = 0.05$ ;  $\beta$  = Standardize Beta

Regression 1. Dependent variable= Cognitive component of ethnic tolerance; Independent variable= exposure to news on public affairs, with attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance, gender and age as control variables.  $R^2 = 0.124$ ,  $F = 137.162$ ,  $p = 0.000$

Regression 2. Dependent variable= Attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance; Independent variable= exposure to news on public affairs, with cognitive component of ethnic tolerance, gender and age as control variables.  $R^2 = 0.114$ ,  $F = 93.621$ ,  $p = 0.000$

Regression 3. Dependent variable= Behavioural component of ethnic tolerance; Independent variables= exposure to news on public affairs, cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic

TABLE 4  
Results of regression analysis predicting cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural dimension of ethnic tolerance

Predictor	Cognitive			Attitudinal			Behavioural		
	r	$\beta$	t-value	r	$\beta$	t-value	r	$\beta$	t-value
Cognitive	-	-	-	0.30	0.313	17.542*	0.31	0.214	11.412*
Attitudinal	0.30	0.313	17.542*	-	-	-	0.28	0.196	11.260*
Exposure to Public Affairs News	0.18	0.129	7.945*	0.11	0.048	2.669*	0.23	0.125	3.386*
Age	0.14	0.066	3.790*	0.10	0.069	3.880*	0.09	0.073	4.510*
Male (dummy)	0.05	0.015	0.858	0.13	0.118	6.913*	0.14	0.069	4.243*
R-square	0.124			0.114			0.165		
F-value	137.162			93.620			143.24		
$\rho$	0.000			0.000			0.000		

Note. r = correlation coefficient;  $\beta$  = standardized beta; \* significance at  $\rho = 0.05$  level.

The findings support the assumption that knowledge and attitude directly influence the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance, as purported by Ben-Ari (2004). Accordingly, the study provides empirical support on the importance of learning and understanding the culture of others of different ethnic group and developing positive attitude towards the differences and challenges associated with ethnicity. Attitude towards and knowledge of cultural difference and interethnic relations issues are significant predictors of the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance with knowledge as a better predictor compared to attitudinal factor.

The level of ethnic tolerance in terms of practicing tolerant behaviour in dealing with ethnic difference and its related issues could also be predicted from the level of exposure to news on public affairs. The findings are consistent with those provided by previous studies (Khan *et al.*, 1999; Soen, 2002), and provide support for the premise of the information model and meta-cognitive model in explaining inter-group relations advocated by Ben-Ari (2004). As observed in the present analysis, those who are more exposed to news on public affairs had a higher level of behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. Thus, it could be inferred that the mainstream news media in the country to some extent had played their role in inculcating tolerant behaviour in relating with others of different ethnic through its coverage of interethnic relations news. Assuming this is right, one implication is the relevant institutions responsible for citizenship education and in promoting national integration should use news reports in their educational activities to educate the young people about ethnicity, ethnic differences and interethnic relations issues with the agenda of further strengthening unity and harmony among the various ethnic groups in the country.

While acknowledging the contribution of this study, some conceptual and methodological limitations in this study need to be highlighted. Firstly, the study employed one-short cross-sectional survey. Thus the findings on the influence of exposure to news on public affairs on ethnic tolerance are not very conclusive. A longitudinal research design is required to strengthen the validity of the claim. Secondly, the present study overlooked the possible

confounding influence of interpersonal communication sources and interethnic contact in predicting ethnic tolerance. Thus, it is unclear to what extent exposure to news in the mainstream news media explains ethnic tolerance if the influence of interpersonal sources and interethnic contact is accounted for.

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