

Challenges in the Social Environment Landscape: Readiness of Youth in Embracing Diversity

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the readiness of youth of various races in Malaysia to celebrate diversity in the daily social landscape of society. Youth are at the forefront in facing the challenges of addressing diversity in a multicultural community. The readiness of youth to face diversity is measured using questionnaires. This study involves a total of 600 respondents from secondary schools and higher education institutions. The results showed that generally, the level of respondents' readiness to accept diversity was high. There were significant differences found in terms of gender, ethnicity and residential locations in which the respondents had their upbringing. The findings were consistent with findings from earlier studies.

Keywords: Diversity, social environment, youth readiness

INTRODUCTION

The social landscape of the Malaysian society is facing challenges, especially when viewed from the perspective of young people's readiness to accept diversity. Youth forms the largest entity in any society.

The ethnic relations incidents in Malaysia have so far been much dominated by the younger generation. Who can determine the stability of ethnic relations in Malaysia in the future, if a younger generation who does not celebrate diversity is to inherit the country? This question needs to be considered because Malaysia consists of a multi-ethnic society.

Multi-ethnicity often leads to diverse ethnic differences. The manner by which

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differences are addressed often escalates into polemics because considerations on diversity can sometimes lead to a reasonable level of skepticism from members of the community. The underlying rationale for celebrating diversity can certainly be questioned, if cynical views of the community surface, due to the fact that a diverse society is laden with religious and cultural sensitivities. What is it in a diverse community that can lead to the 'allowing and condoning of views' that can lead to religious and cultural tensions such as insulting the sanctity of places of worship and questioning the purpose of religious and cultural activities of other ethnic groups?

In celebrating diversity, the range of manifestations of the fundamental should not be confused by having the differences highlighted (Abdul Latif, 2005). In reality, the various ethnic groups of Malaysia have differences. Like it or not, such differences cannot be avoided. However, Abdul Latif explains, this fact does not mean that all differences should be celebrated. He adds that we can vary accordingly, even physically, but should not differ in the choice, knowledge, preferences and cooperation in activities that contribute to national integration.

According to Hroch, there is a significant difference between the awareness of ethnic identity and nationalism (Hroch, 2000). Anderson (1983) found that only the identity of the ideology of nationalism is seen as the organising framework of the concept of race as well as of important political value, while ethnic identity is a vague concept in terms

of "imagined community." Thus, celebrating diversity needs to be characterised as constructive for strengthening national integration. It is not a "concession" that can be handed over as a governing tool to a party. Malaysia has chosen accommodation instead of assimilation as the basis of nationalism; this practice according to Shamsul Amri (2008) widens the gap in separation or ethnic segregation more significantly in Malaysia.

YOUTH'S READINESS LEVEL TO CELEBRATE DIVERSITY: POST REVIEW

In principle the authors view the level of inter-ethnic relations as a possible predictor of the willingness to celebrate diversity. Weak inter-ethnic relations have an impact on readiness to celebrate diversity. Therefore, we can interpret the readiness of youth in Malaysia in accepting diversity by studying research into ethnic relations and national integration. Until May 2007, there were 133 studies on ethnic relations and national integration that had been carried out in Malaysia (Abdul Rahman & Nor Hayati, 2009). In the context of youth, studies on the readiness of youth to accept diversity involves many categories of samples of high school students as well as those in institutions of higher education.

In the context of youth in higher learning institutions (IHL) in Malaysia, gaps and ethnic polarisation, according to Abdullah (1984), are likely to exist if the student does not use existing opportunities to communicate with fellow students from

other ethnic groups. Abdullah (1984) found that the degree of interaction among students is high and exists across ethnic groups. He found that university students tended to ask less for advice or help from other ethnic groups because it involved a high emotive value other than feeling it was difficult to engage in discussion. This study found that real ethnic polarisation existed among youth pursuing higher education in Malaysia.

A study by Sanusi (1989) found that closer interaction among university students through activities did not lead to better communication or cross-ethnic relations. His research found a number of situations that led to ethnic polarization among students in higher education centers, such as the low degree of interaction between various ethnic groups of students, the tendency of choosing the same ethnic friends, lack of discussion on political, economic and social issues, prejudices and stereotypes, and student activities across ethnic groups.

Mohd Rizal and Thay's study (2008) on samples of university students in Malaysia showed that inter-ethnic relations in the daily lives of students were not that satisfactory. Their study found that 63% of respondents surveyed indicated that they preferred to eat at their own tables with friends of the same ethnicity. The study also showed that respondents were not ready to discuss problems with partners from other ethnic groups. Mansor (2001) stated that the degree of individual ethnicity would determine the behaviour of a person, whether influenced by ethnic background or not. Individuals with deep feelings for their

ethnicity would manifest ethnic inclinations in their behaviour.

According to the literature reviewed, one could argue that ethnic polarisation does occur among youth in Malaysia. Such polarisation results in poor ethnic relations among youth. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, during the opening of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in 2002, expressed concern over ethnic polarisation, especially among the younger generation, and noted that Malaysia was still not united in the real sense (Lee, 2004). Indeed, inter-ethnic relations are fundamental for the individual to be able to celebrate diversity and to strengthen integration.

Youth represent a major segment of the Malaysian population (Mohd. Jamil, 1994), and therefore their willingness to celebrate diversity is crucial to integration and is an appropriate requirement. Asnarulkhadi (2009) stated that in demographics, youth are significant in forming the political (electoral), social (cohesion) and economic (human capital) sectors. In reality, a state of "stable tension" (Shamsul Amri, 2008) is apparent in Malaysian society. This situation also carries the meaning of 'agreeing to disagree', which often becomes the default consensus in difficult situations; in Malaysia, it is necessary if ethnic diversity is to be celebrated, especially among the youth.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised quantitative methods. Data was collected via questionnaires that

the respondents themselves administered. A total of 600 respondents were selected via purposive sampling. The sampling involved two categories of youth i.e. secondary school students and students from selected higher education institutions around the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The sample selection criteria took into account demographic factors such as the location of the educational institutions. The field studies took six months, from October 2010 to March 2011. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean scores and standard deviations measured the readiness of youth to celebrate diversity. Based on selected demographic factors, independent t-tests were used to see whether there were significant differences in the readiness of youth to celebrate diversity.

SURVEY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Respondents

Table 1 summarises selected demographic profiles of the respondents. Forty point two percent of the respondents were males while the rest (59.8%) were females. The respondents were grouped into three age categories. A majority of the respondents (52.5%) were early youth (13-19 years old), 46.8% were middle youth (20-25 years old) and the rest (0.7%) were in the category of end of youth (26 years old). The percentage of ethnic sample by categories of *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* were nearly of equal proportions, where *Bumiputera* representation was 58.0% while non-*Bumiputera* representation was 42.0%. Respondents who reported their

religion as Islam made up (58.0%) of the total group, Buddhism (19.7%), Hinduism (10.3%), Christian (9.0%) and other (3.0%). Accommodation response showed that 55.3% of the respondents grew up in urban areas while 44.7% were raised in rural areas.

TABLE 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents (n=600)

Background	Percent
Gender	
Male	40.2
Female	59.8
Age	
Early youth (13-19 years)	52.5
Middle youth (20-25)	46.8
The end of youth (26 years)	0.7
Ethnic	
<i>Bumiputera</i>	58.0
Non- <i>Bumiputera</i>	42.0
Religion	
Islam	58.0
Buddhism	19.7
Hinduism	10.3
Christian	9.0
Other	3.0
Place grew up	
City	55.3
Rural	44.7

Readiness to Celebrate Diversity

A 5-point Likert Scale measured the readiness of respondents to celebrate diversity as follows: (5) Very unsuitable, (4) Not suitable, (3) Not sure, (2) Ideal and (1) Very suitable. The respondents' level of preparedness as a whole was determined by calculating the mean and the total divided by the total social environment variables that were developed to produce the overall mean. Results showed that respondents have a high willingness [$M=4.1841$, $SD=.62683$]

to celebrate diversity in the landscape of everyday social parameters. Table 2 refers to determination of mean readiness level based on the overall mean score reported for the respondents' level of readiness.

TABLE 2
Determination of Mean Readiness Level (n=600)

Stage	Mean
Low	1.00-2.33
Moderate	2.34-3.66
High	3.67-5.00

Descriptive analysis (Table 3) showed that all the respondents had higher mean levels of willingness to celebrate diversity

in the landscape of social parameters. The most commonly reported variables were "Appreciating the contribution of each regardless of ethnic background in national development" [$M=4.3500$]; "Helping those in need regardless of ethnicity" [$M=4.3000$] and "Respect for other ethnic cultural taboos" [$M=4.2367$]. The findings showed a positive response on the readiness to celebrate diversity in the social parameters of multi-racial Malaysian society.

Independent t-test was used to see whether there were significant differences in the level of preparedness to celebrate diversity among the respondents based on gender. The analysis showed no

TABLE 3
Distribution of Mean and Standard Deviation
Readiness Level of Youth to Celebrate Diversity (n=600)

No.	Variables	Mean	S.D
1.	Discuss issues of inter-ethnic relations with individuals of other ethnicity	4.0233	0.90967
2.	Taking into account the views of all ethnic groups in decisions that involve the interests of all ethnic groups	4.2337	0.83734
3.	Help the poor regardless of ethnicity	4.3350	0.83503
4.	Allow family members to participate in programmes that involve multi-ethnic groups	4.0933	0.94840
5.	Inculcate positive attitude towards the welfare of cross-ethnic groups	4.1983	0.81860
6.	Strive to know the basics of how to live with other ethnic groups	4.0783	0.92752
7.	Shopping at stores run by other ethnic groups	4.1033	0.99212
8.	Create opportunities that encourage interaction to help each other across ethnic groups	4.1683	0.87632
9.	Respecting the cultural taboos of other ethnic groups	4.2367	0.84371
10.	Encouraging the potential of various ethnic groups to strengthen solidarity	4.1750	0.86349
11.	Help those in need regardless of ethnicity	4.3000	0.84332
12.	Championing a variety of issues without choosing ethnic communities	4.0735	0.97868
13.	Eating together with friends of different ethnic groups	4.1467	0.92552
14.	Can tolerate neighbours/friends of other faiths without compromising own religious principles	4.2600	0.90946
15.	Appreciate the contribution of each, regardless of ethnic background, in national development	4.3500	0.76713

significant differences in readiness and celebration of diversity based on gender: male [$M=4.1397$, $SD=.66437$]; female [$M=4.2139$, $SD=.59941$; $t(600)=-1423$ $p=.155$]. Table 4 summarises the findings on differences in respondents' willingness to celebrate diversity by gender using independent t-test.

TABLE 4
Comparison of Respondents' Willingness to Celebrate Diversity by Gender (n=600)

Profile	N	Mean	S.D	t	p
Gender					
Male	241	4.1397	.66437	-1423	.155
Female	359	4.2139	.59941		

This study, however, found that there were significant differences in readiness to celebrate diversity in the social parameters between *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* ethnic groups. The findings indicate that the readiness of *Bumiputera* to celebrate ethnic diversity was higher [$M=4.2322$, $SD=.55790$] compared with non-*Bumiputera* ethnic groups [$M=4.1177$, $SD=.70693$; $t(600)=2215$ $p=.027$]. Table 5 summarises the findings on differences in respondents' willingness to celebrate diversity based on ethnicity using independent t-test.

TABLE 5
Comparison of Respondents' Readiness to Celebrate Diversity Based on Ethnicity (n=600)

Profile	N	Mean	S.D	t	p
Ethnic					
<i>Bumiputera</i>	348	4.2322	.55790	2215	.027
Non- <i>Bumiputera</i>	252	4.1177	.70693		

The findings of the study (Table 6) also revealed that *Bumiputera* readiness to celebrate diversity of the majority is high (60.8%), while non-*Bumiputera* showed the scores on the readiness to celebrate diversity of the majority is low (66.7%). The findings are consistent with the findings by Nobaya *et al.* (2008), who concluded that there were early signs that indicate youth in Malaysia, especially Malay *Bumiputera*, were more than ready to celebrate the ethnic diversity than non-*Bumiputera* youth. In studies that measured the implications of youth involvement with the campaign on solidarity via television channels, Nobaya *et al.* (2008) found that the implications of involvement are much higher among *Bumiputera* youth compared with non-*Bumiputera* youth in terms of level of thinking and feeling.

During interaction between ethnic groups, there are times when individuals may emphasise the objectivity of their own ethnic identity as a symbol of race, religion, language and origin (Vera *et al.*, 1996). The implication is that, ethnicity becomes a feature, quality and condition of inter-ethnic interaction. According Girdles and Johnson (1986), if the individual feels strongly about an issue and the issue as something that is important for his/her ethnic identity, then the individual will interact based on ethnic norms and not be guided by the social norms of the general public.

TABLE 6
Distribution of Readiness to Celebrate Ethnic
Diversity (n=600)

Readiness	Ethnicity (%)	
	Bumiputera	Non-Bumiputera
Low	33.3	66.7
Simple	44.4	55.6
High	60.8	39.2

The findings of this study as summarised of Table 7 tend to explain that there is a significant difference in the respondents' level of preparedness and acceptance of diversity in society based on the social environment in which the respondents grew up. The study found significant differences between the respondents who grew up in rural areas [$M=4.2522$, $SD=.55606$] as having a higher level of preparedness in accepting diversity compared to respondents who grew up in the city [$M=4.1291$, $SD=.67441$; $t(600)=-2401$ $p=.017$].

We can deduce that youth who grew up in rural areas are more willing to celebrate diversity compared to youth raised in the cities. Ibrahim (1980) studied the appreciation level of national identity among students of various races in Malaysia. Based on selected secondary school students in urban and rural areas, he developed items that he classified as indicators of national identity. Ibrahim (1980) found that for youth in rural areas, commitment to national identity tended to be higher than for youth in urban areas.

However, most research shows that ethnic relations are closely related to the level of integration (Abdullah, 1984). Interaction factors as mentioned by Abdullah

(1984) can also be understood from the point of celebrating diversity. This is because integration in a community is determined by whether the community members have the opportunity to interact with members of other races (Abdullah, 1984).

The writers are of the opinion that the factor of where youth grew up should relate to other environmental conditions that exist in determining readiness to celebrate diversity. Moreover, it is sometimes quite difficult to measure the celebration of diversity in a particular time or situation. According to Mohamad Zaini (2005), unity among members of the community is an abstract and elusive concept that is also too sensitive to changes in value transformation, norms and interests in the environment.

In fact, there are other studies that show that there is a combination of several factors that may contribute to unity but bear a negative relationship probability with regards to celebrating diversity. Yew *et al.* (1990) found that inter-ethnic communication and mass media exposure does not contribute to unity. According to them, factors such as education, language ability and the perception of ethnicity also have a negative impact on cohesion.

There are views that consider communication as a key mechanism to manage ethnic differences and conflicts in a constructive manner (Kim, 1986); however, previous studies still show that the level of preparedness to celebrate diversity depends on how the data were collected. In this study, although the opportunity to interact with other ethnic groups among the

TABLE 7
Comparison of Respondents' Willingness to Celebrate Diversity by Location (n=600)

Profile		n	Mean	S.D	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Place in which respondents grew up	City	332	4.1291	.67441	-2401	.017
	Rural	268	4.2522	.55606		

respondents who grew up in rural areas was less than with the respondents who were raised in the city, yet findings show that rural youth's readiness to accept diversity is high. However, the findings do not conclusively suggest that respondents who grew up in urban areas are not ready to celebrate diversity.

CONCLUSION

Celebrating diversity is the foundation of harmonious ethnic relations. This study found that there was still a gap in the availability of diversity celebration, especially among the younger generations in Malaysia. The findings clearly showed *Bumiputera* youth did have a high level of readiness to celebrate diversity compared to non-*Bumiputera* youth. Different levels of readiness were also closely related to the study findings; the level of readiness of youth who grew up in rural areas was higher than that of youth who grew up in the city. The relationship is due to the geographical factors in Malaysia's population in that rural areas are more dominated by indigenous people, especially ethnic Malays. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to say that the findings are consistent with past studies on celebrating diversity. A study of ethnic relations in Peninsular Malaysia by Yew *et al.* (1990) found that unity between ethnic

Malays and Chinese is low. The question that arises is which are the main ethnic groups that contribute to this low-level unity? Simply put, which ethnic group is not ready to contribute to celebrate diversity and enhance the level of unity? Perhaps more appropriately, the high level readiness among *Bumiputeras* to celebrate ethnic diversity should be simultaneously supported by non-*Bumiputera* ethnic groups in Malaysia. Evidently, research has shown that early signs do exist that describe the readiness gap in celebrating diversity among youth of various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Therefore, more should be done to see the integration of increased diversity in Malaysia. If Malaysia takes no concrete measure, the country can be confronted with a youth group that has problems in celebrating diversity.

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