

New citizens from 4 core ethnicities more accepted

Chinese, Malays, Indians or Eurasians more likely to be viewed as 'truly S'porean': Survey

Yuen Sin

Singaporeans are more likely to accept new citizens as being "truly Singaporean" if they are of the country's four core ethnic groups, according to a local study.

They are, however, less accepting of people of other ethnicities, such as Korean or Filipino.

More so if these new citizens are people from less-developed regions such as Africa, said researchers of

the study on ethnic identity and inter-ethnic interactions done by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Channel NewsAsia.

The findings, based on a survey of about 2,020 Singaporeans and permanent residents conducted between May and July, was released yesterday.

The questions they were asked included how acceptable it was for a new citizen of a particular ethnic background to be viewed as "truly Singaporean".

They had to choose from four options: "unacceptable", "somewhat unacceptable", "somewhat acceptable" or "acceptable".

More than 90 per cent said it was at least somewhat acceptable for new citizens who are Malay, Chinese or Indian, while 84 per cent said the same for new citizens who are Eurasian.

About 75 per cent would at least somewhat accept those of Japanese or Korean ethnicity as being truly local, while 60 per cent said they would do the same for those of Arab or African descent.

Singapore gave citizenship to 22,102 people last year, most of whom came from Asia.

Dr Mathew Mathews, an IPS senior research fellow who led the study, said the findings show that the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others, or CMIO, framework resonates with Singaporeans.

It demonstrates that the CMIO framework has a part to play in associating national identity with the core ethnic groups in Singapore, the researchers added.

But only about half of Singaporeans say it is important to feel a connection to their ancestral heritage.

Asked to rank the importance of feeling such a connection, with four options ranging from "unimportant" to "important", just slightly more than half of Malay and

Indian respondents said it was at least somewhat important.

For the Chinese, just 38.7 per cent said that having such a connection is at least somewhat important.

On top of that, 84 per cent and 96 per cent of Chinese and Malay respondents said they felt the closest cultural affinity with Malaysia-born Chinese and Malay people, respectively.

Indian respondents, meanwhile, saw themselves as closest in culture to those from India (93 per cent), while 90 per cent cited Malaysia-born Indians.

Polytechnic student Alex Andres, 19, who became a citizen in 2008 after moving here from the Philippines, said locals had difficulty relating to her initially.

But her ethnicity became less of a barrier when she made the move to learn more about local culture and quirks, like speaking Singlish.

"As new citizens, we can try to integrate, and Singaporeans will respond by learning a little about our own culture - our cuisine, language. We somehow meet in the middle and come to an understanding."

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More identify with S'pore than their ethnicity

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Of 2,020 people surveyed, more identify with Singapore than their own ethnic lineage.

Some 35 per cent of respondents in a new study on ethnic identity by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Channel NewsAsia indicated this inclination as opposed to 14.2 per cent who chose their ethnic identity alone.

However, the data also reflected that almost half - or 49 per cent of respondents - felt they had a "simultaneous" Singaporean and ethnic identity.

On what comprised an ethnic identity, researchers noted that overall, the three major races ranked reading, writing and speaking in the community's language, and celebrating their community's main festivals, as important markers of ethnic identity.

Nearly 92 per cent of Chinese regarded the celebration of Chinese New Year as at least somewhat important, as did 95.9 per cent of Malays when it came to Hari Raya Puasa, and 88.2 per cent of Indians for Deepavali.

Respondents were also near unanimous in their agreement that the ability to read or write in an individual's ethnic language (93.3 per cent) and converse in one's ethnic language (94 per cent) is at least somewhat important to be passed down to future generations.

However, the erosion of ethnic traditions and heritage also surfaced. For instance, millennials placed less importance on the ability to cook ethnic food and enjoy ethnic art and music.

And while respondents valued their own ethnic identities, researchers found that inter-ethnic engagement was somewhat lacking.

For instance, despite interest expressed in inter-cultural exchanges, a fair number of respondents do not participate in the cultural practices of those from other races, leading researchers to say that Singapore is "still not the multicultural nirvana that some would expect".

For instance, 53 per cent of Chinese respondents said they participated in Malay festivals and 44 per cent of them took part in Indian ones.

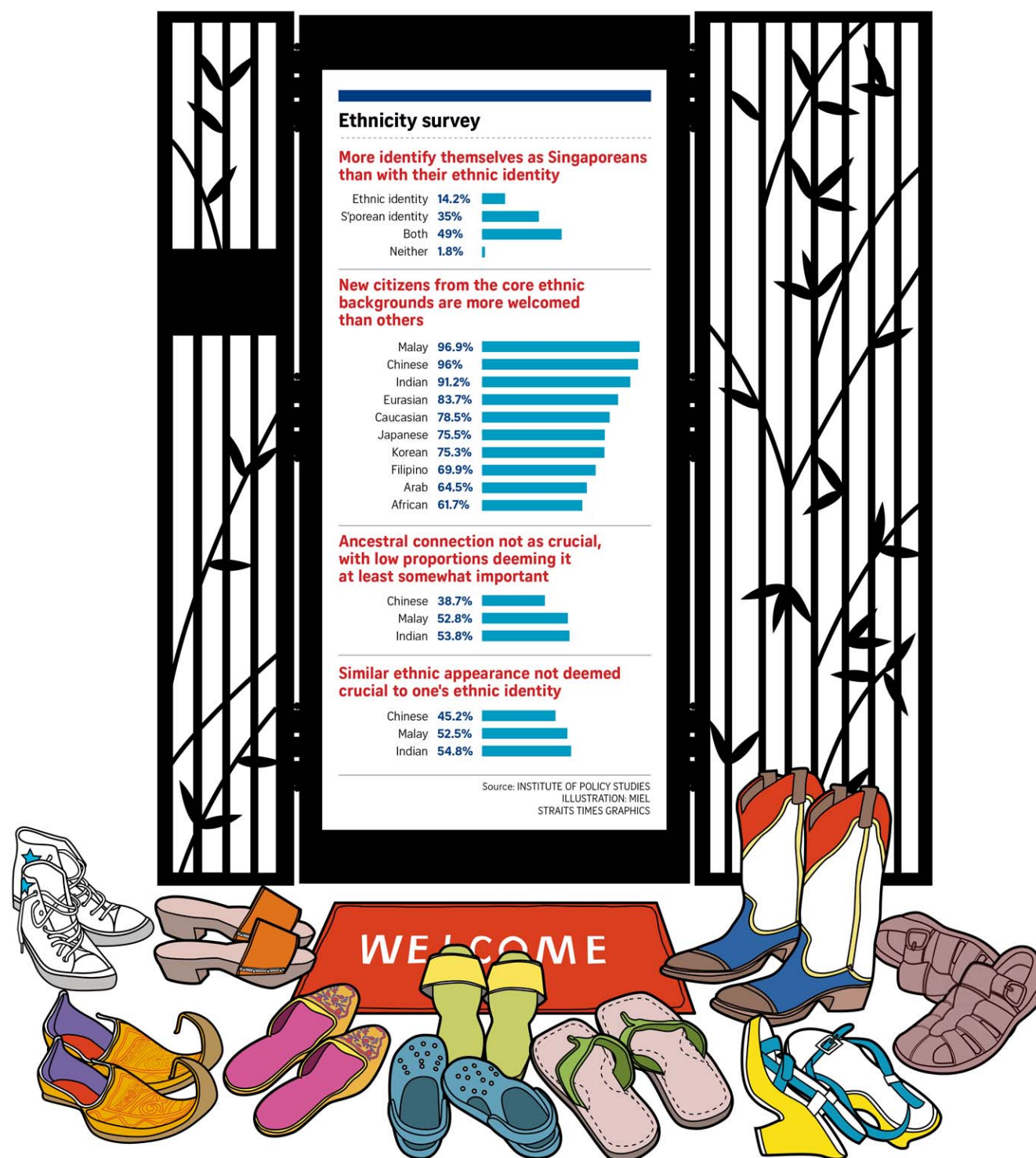
Similarly, more than half of the Malay respondents said that they participated in Chinese and Indian festivals.

In the case of Indian respondents, more than 60 per cent said they took part in Chinese and Malay festivals.

IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said that given the current levels of inter-cultural exchange, "it is worth considering if more can be done to promote greater interaction, engagement and learning across the racial groups".

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Young Chinese, Indians less likely to understand key Malay traits

Eating halal food, wearing the tudung as well as avoiding alcohol and not touching dogs are perceived as important traits of being a Malay in Singapore.

But when it comes to understanding these key facets of the community, younger Chinese and Indian respondents of a recent study were found to be less likely to understand their importance.

For instance, on the point of not touching dogs, just 49 per cent of Chinese and 46 per cent of Indians aged

21 to 25 said it was important for the Malay community, compared with 74 per cent of Malays in the same age group. The new study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Channel NewsAsia included 440 Malays out of 2,020 respondents.

Researchers said this lack of inter-cultural understanding among young Singaporeans may be a result of fewer interactions and friendships across racial lines, adding that it is a trend that "bears watching".

Mathew Mathews said: "One takeaway is that while we care about our own ethnic identities, we need to learn how to respect and understand the important (ethnic) markers of other groups."

The study also showed that younger Malay respondents felt less strongly about some of these ethnic markers compared to their seniors.

For instance, 72 per cent of Malay respondents aged 21 to 25 indicated that wearing the tudung is "somewhat important" or "important",

compared with 93 per cent of their counterparts aged 56 to 65.

In addition, and almost unanimously, 93 per cent of the Malays surveyed perceived being Muslim as at least somewhat important to their ethnic identity.

This sentiment towards religion was stronger among the Malays polled, compared with the 70.6 per cent of Indian respondents in the case of Hinduism, and the 37.4 per cent of Chinese respondents in the case of Buddhism or Taoism.

And when it came to inter-cultural romances and dating outside their ethnic groups, Malays indicated that they were comfortable with their offspring going out with Chinese and Caucasians. This opinion was mirrored by the Indian community. For instance, 91.2 per cent of Malays in the 26 to 35 age group were comfortable with their offspring dating Chinese, compared with 85.7 per cent for dating Caucasians and 81.3 per cent for dating Indians.

Among Indians in the same age

category, 89.3 per cent were comfortable with their offspring dating Chinese, compared with 87.5 per cent for Caucasians and 75.4 per cent for Malays.

However, the converse was true for the Chinese, with 74 per cent saying they were more comfortable with their offspring dating Caucasians, compared with 59 per cent and 54 per cent for Malays and Indians, respectively.

Melody Zaccheus