Impact of Ethnocentrism on Interethnic Interactions among Local Students in Malaysian Universities

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Abstract: In this study, the authors examine the influence of ethnocentrism on offline and online interethnic interactions among Malaysian students at two multiethnic and multicultural Malaysian public universities. The responses of 200 Malay, 105 Chinese, and 38 Indian undergraduate students were analysed. Results reveal a significant difference between the level of offline and online interethnic interactions among respondents. It was found that students had more offline interethnic interactions compared to online interactions. This is due to the fact that interactions through online media are more dependent on a conscious choice and decision to communicate actively and to take the step for interethnic communication. Thus in situations where they could choose whether or not to interact, they presumably willingly elected to not take that step. It can be concluded that students were uninterested in making any effort in expanding their interethnic interaction in the virtual world beyond their own ethnic group due to their ethnocentric attitudes. Therefore, all hypotheses of this study were accepted.

Key words: Ethnocentrism, interethnic interaction, university, Malaysia
JEL classification: G14

1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Malaysia has been a multiethnic country, with its population consisting of several ethnic groups such as Malays and other Bumiputra (indigenous peoples), Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and others (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2013). Each ethnicity in Malaysia has its own unique culture and heritage, including but not limited to their preferred languages, belief systems, traditions and religion (Mustapha, Azman, Karim, Ahmad & Lubis, 2009). The ethnic diversity in Malaysia...
is an ancient legacy, but the presence of the large non-indigenous population can be attributed to the massive influx of Chinese and Indian immigrant laborers to meet the labor needs during the colonial period (Tamam, 2009).

The historic background of Malaysia, to a certain extent, influences people’s perceptions towards other ethnicities. Muzaffar (2010) highlighted Malaysia as one of the core example of a heterogeneous and ethnocentric society with interethnic harmony threatened by underlying currents. Ethnicity issues are as much a practical concern to the Malaysian nation as food or water supply issues; it can be argued that it is in everyone’s pragmatic self-interest to live harmoniously. Thus, harmonious interethnic interactions are strongly stressed upon in Malaysia (Tamam, 2013).

In this regard, it has been observed that institutions of higher education in Malaysia have failed to unite diverse students resulting in creeping intolerance, ethnocentrism and self-segregation on campuses (Segawa, 2007). Although self-segregation is still an issue in Malaysian multicultural university campuses (Yeoh, 2006; Aziz, Salleh & Ribu, 2010), little is known about the impact of the ethnic-related diversity experiences of Malaysian local students (Tamam, 2012).

In these modern times, particularly in a prosperous nation, interaction among people is not limited to face-to-face relationships; technology has enabled online interactions to capture a huge share of daily communication. The rise of this new media enables users to connect to a variety of people from different backgrounds and allow them to find common grounds in their beliefs and interests (Hunter, 2002). Online communication helps users to create new online norms and transfer the norms of real-life social relations into online forms.

Taking into account ethnocentrism in Malaysia and the importance of offline and online interethnic interactions among ethnic groups, the relationship between these two phenomena warrants an examination. The importance of ethnicity is highlighted by Fong and Isajiw (2000) who argued that no discussion of ethnic relations and cross-ethnic ties is complete without investigating the impact of ethnicity. Therefore, this study examines the impact of ethnocentric attitudes on face-to-face interethnic interactions and the extent of ethnocentrism undertones in online interethnic communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Offline and Online Interethnic Interactions

Offline interethnic interactions in a multiethnic campus refer to the frequency in which a student studied, dined, or roomed with peers of a different ethnicity (Hurtado, Dey & Treviño, 1994). In other words, face-to-face interethnic interaction refers to intentional and non-intentional contact among students of diverse ethnic backgrounds within academic environments (Robinson, 2012). So, multicultural higher education institutions and universities can be considered as a good platform
for students to socialise with others in order to increase positive cross-ethnic interaction.

Many studies revealed that interethnic interactions among ethnically diverse students in colleges or universities play a vital role in achieving educational benefits. These positive outcomes include an increasing commitment to democratic values (Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005; Saenz, Ngai & Hurtado, 2007), improvement in overall satisfaction, sense of belonging, and persistence (Hurtado, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman & Oseguera, 2008), a more positive academic and social self-concept (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002), improved leadership skills and cultural understanding (Antonio, 2001), and higher levels of civic interest (Gurin et al., 2002).

Chang (1996) found that greater ethnic diversity among undergraduate students positively affects the occurrence of socialisation if it is related to discussions regarding ethnic issues in college, joining ethnic or cultural awareness workshops, and promoting ethnic understanding. Another study in US showed that communicating with students of another ethnic group and developing interethnic friendships helped majority students to develop cultural awareness in their colleges (Antonio, 1998).

Although interethnic interactions in university has several positive effects and students can benefit from them, some researchers claim that most educators have not intentionally tried to encourage students in make contact, therefore there is no intentional interethnic interactions among students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In Malaysian universities, no effective actions have been taken to improve ethnic integration among students. Several studies in Malaysia revealed a polarised friendship pattern visible along ethnic lines. Most public universities in Malaysia have Malay, Chinese and Indian students and despite this, very little is known about the impact of ethnic-related diversity experiences of Malaysian local students (Tamam, 2012). As such, it is critical to look into student interethnic interactions in Malaysian multiethnic campuses.

Today, online interaction takes up a much larger share in communication with face-to-face communication declining somewhat in popularity as Lin (2001) argued that user social networks increasingly rely on the electronic medium. When it comes to ethnic diversity, social network sites are considered the common communication tools to connect different users. Differences in class, religion and culture, language, lifestyle as well as social gaps have made it more difficult for ethnic communities to communicate effectively. Hence, new communication tools can be employed as an alternative way to promote social interactions between different groups of users (Jaafar, 2011).

Malaysian youths employ social network sites to socialise with friends and seek information (Abd Jalil, Abd Jalil & Abdul Latif, 2012). Malaysians spend an average of five hours in the cyber realm daily, and three out of these five hours are spent on social media (Mustafa, 2014), and 58% of Malaysians are preoccupied with the social media through their handheld devices (Ghandi, 2014). Studies reveal that almost
42% of Malaysian youths aged between 20 to 29 years old and 16.5% of children and teens below 19 are passionate Internet users (Ghandi, 2014). These statistics indicate that 15.6 million out of 19.2 million Internet users in Malaysia are active on Facebook and a total of 64% of the population have social media penetration (Mustafa, 2014). Hence, social network sites play a significant role in interethnic interactions in Malaysia.

2.2 Ethnocentrism

The theoretical notion of ethnocentrism, as introduced by Sumner (1906), suggests that in most intergroup contexts, “one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (p. 13). It explains that all cultures are so embedded in their own unique norms and value orientations and believe that their specified perceptions and interpretations of the world are the most correct one (Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey, 2001).

Ethnicity has been the most constant social problem in Malaysia and as such, living together in a harmonious society with different ethnic backgrounds, culture, language, and religion has not been easy for Malaysians (Mustapha et al., 2009). Scholars have indicated that in societies with high levels of ethnocentrism, it is more challenging to maintain cohesion and solidarity between all group members (Hooghe 2003; Sniderman, Peri, De Figueiredo & Piazza, 2002).

Before studying about ethnocentrism in a society, it is necessary to find and explore its roots. The ethnic diversity in Malaysia is attributed to the massive influx of Chinese and Indian immigrant laborers into the country by colonial rulers to meet their labor needs (Tamam, 2009).

Malaysia is considered a collectivist and large power distance country in “which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede & Bond, 1984, p. 419). During the British colonial period in Malaysia, there was little social contact among ethnic groups. Their social interactions were restricted only to the office, workplace and marketplaces. This only strengthened further ethnic-based prejudice and identities (Mahli, 1988 as cited in Aziz et al., 2010). These attitudes were barriers to developing social relations (Manaf, 2001 as cited in Aziz et al., 2010) resulting in divisions, grouping and keen competition for achieving political, economic and social advantages between the ethnic groups (Osman, 1989 as cited in Aziz et al., 2010).

The British practiced self-separation and polarisation to exploit the nation’s resources and to stabilise their political power in the Malaya peninsula. The various roles and status of the British government as understood by Malays, Chinese and Indians (Mahli, 1988 as cited in Aziz et al., 2010) resulted in the three groups being divided in terms of occupation, living space and education (Zainal, 1986 as cited in Aziz et al., 2010).
This segregation was manipulative in nature resulting in a ‘us’ vs “them” mentality. Feelings of ethnocentrism can affect people’s reactions and make them decide based on what they feel and imagine according to their own biased perceptions. Hooghe (2003) found that in societies with high levels of ethnocentrism, it is more challenging to maintain cohesion and keep solidarity between all group members.

Neuliep (2002) asserted that ethnocentrism is a barrier to effective and impressive intercultural communication. A study by Lin, Rancer and Trimbitas (2005) compared the relationship between ethnocentrism and their willingness to communicate among Romanian and American students. The study showed that individuals’ communication traits and predispositions affect their behaviors when communicating with other cultures. Results revealed that Romanians had significantly higher levels of ethnocentrism and lower willingness to communicate when compared with their American counterparts.

According to Chen and Starosta (2000), intercultural communication sensitivity is a precondition for intercultural communication competence. He asserted that when an individual’s intercultural communication sensitivity increases, the intercultural communication competence will also be enhanced. Therefore, ethnocentrism can be considered as a hurdle to intercultural communication competence (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997b). In other words, there is an inverse relationship between ethnocentrism and willingness to interact; if the former increases, the latter tend to decrease.

Ethnocentrism can be observed as an obstacle in multiethnic societies. Aforesaid studies indicated that more ethnocentric attitudes resulted in less racial interaction. When individuals evaluate outsiders based on their own beliefs and values, then it is not easy for them to have interactions that are free of judgment. This negative perception toward an out-group does not allow the in-group to trust and make a positive relationship with outsiders. Hence, having trust is a powerful element to create a relationship with others outside the inner cycle. According to Malaysians’ sensitive viewpoints regarding ethnicity, it is definitely required to investigate the nature of relationship between ethnocentrism and people’s interethnic interaction.

2.3 Influence of Ethnocentrism on Interethnic Interactions

People’s social behaviors in any community originate from their attitudes toward others and the flow of their attitude is visible in daily life, hence the quality of their interactions can be affected positively or negatively. People who trust outsiders can communicate and strengthen their relationship, but on the contrary, negative perception can become a hurdle for trust to be built and develop a positive relationship with outsiders. Powers and Ellison (1995) claimed positive interethnic interactions occur among individuals who have positive internal attitudes toward different ethnicities.
Neuliep (2011) believes that culture teaches individuals how to think, educates people how to feel, and instructs people how to act and interact with others. People through intercultural interactions employ their own cultural values and standards to evaluate and communicate with different ethnic groups because their internal attitudes toward others influence their interactions (Guan, 1995; Kelley, 2003).

Ethnocentrism is a barrier to effective and impressive intercultural communication (Neuliep, 2002). In an ethnocentric community, all cultures are imbedded in their own unique norms and values orientations leading people to believe that their specified perceptions and interpretations of the world are the most correct ones (Neuliep et al., 2001).

There are several studies on the role of ethnocentrism in communication and interaction among people. Lin, Rancer and Lim (2003) did a cross-cultural comparison of ethnocentrism and willingness to communicate between Korean and American college students. They found that Korean students have significantly lower scores on both ethnocentrism and intercultural willingness to communicate compared to their American ones.

Lin et al (2005) explored the relationship between Romanian and American students’ ethnocentrism and their willingness to communicate. They learned that communication behaviors and tendencies affect interactions with people from other cultures. Results revealed that Romanians have significantly higher levels of ethnocentrism and lower willingness to communicate when compared with their American counterparts. Hence, ethnocentrism can be considered a hurdle to intercultural communication competence (Neuliep, 1997a). In other words, the relationship between ethnocentric attitudes and ethnic interactions is negatively correlated and past studies have revealed that ethnocentrism is an obstacle in multiethnic communities.

An opinion poll on ethnic relations in Malaysia carried out by Merdeka Center in 2006 indicated that although Malaysians were happy with their ethnic relations, ethnocentric views, misunderstanding and mistrust is still quite prevalent among them. Scholars have highlighted that although educational benefits were related to interethnic interactions in racially-diverse campuses, many universities did not try to encourage students to interact across ethnic backgrounds (Robinson, 2012). This trend is common in Malaysian multiethnic universities bringing about disunity.

Interethnic interaction in a multiethnic campus refers to the frequency in which a student had studied, dined, or roomed with peers of a different ethnicity (Hurtado, Dey & Treviño, 1994). In other words, interethnic interactions refer to intentional and non-intentional contact among students of diverse ethnic backgrounds within academic environments (Robinson, 2012). So, multicultural higher education institutions and universities can be considered as a good platform for students to socialise with others in order to increase positive cross-ethnic interactions.

Bowman (2011) believed that student development depends on interactions across ethnic groups and discussion on ethnic-related issues. Positive cross-ethnic
interactions help improve ethnic relations (Sigelman & Welch, 1993; Powers & Ellison, 1995). Nesdale and Todd (1998) found in their research that cross-ethnic friendship is of great importance for students as they can learn about others, build a sense of understanding and reduce prejudicial attitudes toward different ethnic groups. Campus diversity generates an ethnically-rich atmosphere in which students are able to think more critically about ethnic-related social concerns, experience diversity through interethnic interactions, be exposed to other cultures, improve social self-confidence, as well as promote ethnic communication in the classroom (Antonio, 2001; Hurtado et al., 2003; Bowman, 2011).

Nowadays, interactions between students are not confined to face-to-face communication, as online interaction has taken up a large portion as well. The rise of new media has changed the concept of traditional communities with the emergence of online communities. Online communication enables users to connect to a variety of people from different backgrounds and allows them to find common grounds in their beliefs and interests (Hunter, 2002).

Although online communication tools may foster interactions in the virtual world, it does not play the same role in heterogeneous societies and people may follow the same communication style that they have practiced offline. Abdullah (as cited in Ridzuan, Bolong, Omar, Osman, Yusof & Abdullah, 2012) found that only 52% of Malaysian adolescents have a friend of different ethnicity. Hence, positive or negative attitudes towards different ethnic groups can also be transferred to online interactions as well.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Context

The two universities used for this study had 13,850 and 12,800 local undergraduate students in 2013 and they were among the premier multicultural public research universities in Malaysia. The campus ethnic breakdown was 6:3:1 of Malay to Chinese to Indian. These universities were not only diverse in their student population, but also amongst its faculty members.

A large majority of local undergraduate students of all ethnicities live in residential colleges. Various forms of activities throughout the year are carried out by these residential colleges in order to enhance closer relationship among students of different ethnic groups. Students are required to pass a couple of compulsory courses related to race/ethnicity, culture, and ethnic relations (Tamam, 2013). So, it is expected that these kind of activities can help students to bridge the ethnic gaps and communicate beyond ethnocentric attitudes.
3.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multicultural country where race-related issues remain an obstacle in its universities. Nevertheless, the positive attitude of students toward those outside of their ethnic group paves the way for growing interethnic interactions in campuses. Malaysia is considered an ethnocentric country whose ethnic relations are dampened by negative attitudes toward other ethnic groups. Past studies on this country have revealed that ethnicity is important for people and they prefer to identify themselves based on their own ethnicity rather than their national identity. So, this study attempts to investigate the extent of effect of local students’ ethnocentric attitudes on offline and online interethnic interactions. As such, the general questions that this study aims to answer are:

• **RQ1**: What is the relationship between ethnocentrism and offline interethnic interaction among local students?

• **RQ2**: What is the relationship between ethnocentrism and online interethnic interaction among local students?

Drawing on the discussions outlined above, the present study tested the following hypotheses.

- **H1**: There is a relationship between ethnocentrism and offline interethnic interaction among local students.

- **H2**: There is a relationship between ethnocentrism and online interethnic interaction among local students.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from 343 undergraduate students of two multicultural public universities. The respondents were selected using non-random quota sampling and based on the ethnic ratio, meaning Malay (60%), Chinese (30%) and Indian (10%). Two residential colleges with the highest number of local students were picked based on the student list in each university. The best time to have access to the highest number of respondents was during lunch and dinner times at cafes. The questionnaire was distributed to every third student who was queuing to pay for food. This approach was continued until the required number of respondent for each ethnic group was achieved. Of the 392 students approached for the survey, a total of 200 Malay, 105 Chinese, and 38 Indian students participated, resulting in a survey response rate of 87%. The respondents’ age ranged from 18 to 27 years with a mean of 21.90 (SD = 1.58). There were more female respondents (57%) than male respondents (43%). The sample represented all levels of undergraduate students: first-, second-, third-, and forth-year students, at 30.1%, 29.5%, 23.9% and 16.5%, respectively.
3.4 Measurement

3.4.1 Ethnocentrism

This study employed Neuliep and McCroskey’s (1997b) generalised ethnocentrism (GENE) scale for measuring ethnocentric attitudes. The questionnaire’s five items with five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) indicated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$) (Table 1). The GENE scale has demonstrated acceptable reliability in previous studies (Dong, Day & Colloço, 2008; Justen, 2009; Swenson & Visgatis, 2012).

3.4.2 Interethnic interactions

This refers to any online and offline interethnic interactions that occur among the respondents.

Offline interethnic interaction was assessed using eight questions that looked at the respondents’ experiences of interacting with students of other ethnic groups. The first question in this part was designed to determine the frequency of interaction. The rest was extracted from the Your First College Year (YFCY) survey instrument (2013) and modified to assess respondents’ interethnic interaction since entering the university. The original survey measured students’ experience on campus with students from a racial or ethnic group other than their own. This survey was developed in 2000 to assess the academic and personal development of students. The section that was related to the relationship of students with other ethnic groups was extracted to be used in this study.

For instance, the first question in the original scale was *I dined or shared a meal with students from a racial/ethnic other than my own* and in this study, it was modified to *I dined with peers or friends of a different ethnicity in this campus in a semester*. Offline interaction among students was the main point in this part, so face-to-face phrase was added to every item to ensure the respondents were aware of the type of interaction that was being measured. The last question [*I partied with students from an ethnic group other than my own*] in this scale was deleted as it did not match with the Malaysian culture. So, seven items with a five-point Likert scale from very often (4) to never (0) were employed to measure positive and negative interethnic interactions among students in and off the campus (Table 1). The Alpha Coefficient for the scale was quite high ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Online interethnic interaction refers to any communication through Internet, emails, chat rooms, social network sites and any web platform. The first question in this section on respondents’ online interethnic interactions asked which online communication tools were employed to interact with students of other ethnicities and the next question looked at the frequency of interactions. The items in this part were adopted from the earlier part that looked at offline interethnic interactions. A five-point Likert scale ranging from (4) very often to (0) never was used to analyse this section as well.
3.6 Analysis Procedure

The details of the properties measured for each construct are shown in Table 1. First, we ran the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) which revealed that standardised factor loadings are greater than 0.5 and all of them are significant at the 95% confidence level (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Although Chi-square goodness of fit test is significant (p-value < 0.05) due to the large sample size (Hair et al., 2010), by referring to other model fit indices, the model fit is considered good (Table 1). Then we assessed construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2010). As shown in Table 1, the three constructs were reliable (composite reliability range = 0.014 - 0.919). For convergent and discriminant validity, this study followed Hair et al.’s (2010) guideline and assessed average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared squared variance (MSV), and average shared square variance (ASV). As shown in Table 1, AVE for all constructs are greater than 0.5 and CR is greater than AVE for each construct. Thus, all constructs have convergent validity. For discriminant validity, AVE should be greater than MSV and ASV. As indicated in Table 1, the AVE measure for each construct is greater than its MSV and ASV and as such, there is no discriminant validity issue.

Table 1. Measurement of item properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct / Measure (composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared squared variance (MSV), average shared square variance (ASV))</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentrism (CR = 0.914, AVE = 0.680, MSV = 0.184, ASV = 0.134)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I do not cooperate with people who are from different ethnicities.</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I do not trust people who are from different ethnicities.</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I dislike interacting with people from different ethnicities.</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I have little respect for the values of other ethnicities.</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I have little respect for the customs of other ethnicities.</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline Interethnic Interaction (CR = 0.898, AVE = 0.596, MSV = 0.323, ASV = 0.116)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I had meaningful and honest face-to-face discussions about ethnic relations with peers and friends of different ethnicities.</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I had satisfactory face-to-face interactions with peers or friends of different ethnicities on campus.</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I had friendly face-to-face interactions with peers or friends of different ethnicities on campus.</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I had face-to-face intellectual discussions with peers or friends of different ethnicities outside the class.</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (con’t)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct / Measure (composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared squared variance (MSV), average shared square variance (ASV))</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I felt secure during face-to-face interactions with peers or friends of different ethnicities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I studied or prepared for class with students of different ethnicities through face-to-face discussions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Online Interethnic Interaction** (CR = 0.919, AVE = 0.531, MSV = 0.277, ASV = 0.181)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All factor loadings are more than 0.5.

4. **RESULTS**

4.1 **Offline Interethnic Interaction**

As shown in Table 2, the students were asked about the frequency of their interaction with students of other ethnicities on campus. The findings showed that students had interethnic interaction almost every day (46.6%), 3 to 5 days in a week (25.4%), followed by 1 to 2 days in a week (15.2%), once a week (7.6%), rarely (5.2%) and never (0%). Interethnic interaction on a daily basis had the highest score compared with other items with almost half of the respondents admitting to communicating with students of other ethnicities. This shows that students are not able to avoid campus interethnic interactions and most have experienced such interactions. There was no respondent who had not been exposed to offline interethnic interaction. Therefore, a university campus can be considered a good place for students to increase their interethnic interactions.
Table 2. Descriptive statistic regarding respondents’ offline interethnic interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 days in a week</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 days in a week</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>343</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Online Interethnic Interaction

As indicated in Table 3, the students were asked about the frequency of their online interaction with students of different ethnicities. The findings show that the frequencies of interaction were 3 to 5 days in a week (24.2%), 1 to 2 days in a week (20.4%), followed by every day (19.8%), once a week and rarely (16.9%), while six of the respondents had never experienced any online interaction with peers or students from different ethnicities.

The result indicates that when it comes to online interethnic interactions, respondents preferred to reduce their interaction with peers of different ethnicities compared to offline communication. Students can choose and decide their contacts in cyber realm. The findings show that students’ online interethnic interaction was decreased and did not mirror their offline communication style. Although almost half of the respondents had daily face-to-face interethnic interaction on campus, this number decreased to less than 20% when it came to online interethnic interaction. In addition, there were six students who have never had online interethnic interaction. In other words, although all the respondents had offline interaction with peers of other ethnicities, some of them decided to have no online interethnic interaction.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics regarding respondents’ online interethnic interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-5 days in a week</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 days in a week</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>343</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Type of Online Media

The respondents were also asked the type of online media that they employed for online interaction. As shown in Table 4, the results reveal that the majority of the respondents used social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Myspace (85.7%). The findings also showed that 10% of the respondents used chat rooms for interaction with peers and students from different ethnicities followed by emails (2.9%) and instant messaging like Yahoo messenger, Google talk, Skype and Oovoo (1.2%). The findings reveal that Malaysian students are very attached to social media for their interethnic communication. More than two-thirds of the respondents preferred to employ social networking sites for their online communication underscoring the importance of social media in interethnic interaction among Malaysian students.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics regarding type of online media usage for interethnic interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social networks</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat rooms</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant messaging</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

A structural equation model (SEM) was developed to test the hypotheses that have been identified earlier. To test the hypothesis, the relationship between ethnocentrism and offline and online interethnic interactions were measured. As shown in Table 5, ethnocentrism has a significant negative effect on offline interethnic interaction ($\beta = -0.27, p = 0.001$). Squared multiple correlations for offline interethnic interaction was measured at 7% and this indicates that 7% of this construct is explained by this model. So, the finding indicates that the first hypothesis of this study is supported. The results indicate that ethnocentrism has a negative relationship with face-to-face interethnic interaction among students. In other words, students with ethnocentric attitudes had less interaction with peers and students of other ethnic groups.

As indicated in Table 5, ethnocentrism had a significant negative effect on online interethnic interaction ($\beta = -0.25, p = 0.001$). Squared multiple correlations for online interethnic interaction is 6% and indicates that 6% of this construct is explained by this model. So, the result indicates that the second hypothesis of this study is supported too. The findings show that ethnocentrism attitudes regenerated in cyber realm among respondents.
Table 5. Hypotheses test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Standardised Effect (β)</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Explained Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Ethnocentrism → Offline Interethnic Interaction</td>
<td>-0.27*</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Ethnocentrism → Online Interethnic Interaction</td>
<td>-0.25*</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sig. denotes a significant direct effect at 0.05.

* $p < 0.001.$

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to determine the nature of relationships between ethnocentrism and offline and online interethnic interactions among Malay, Chinese, and Indian undergraduate students at two local multiethnic universities. The motivation of the study came from the gap in the local literature regarding the direct effect of ethnocentrism on interethnic interactions. The first hypothesis of this study was: There is a relationship between ethnocentrism and offline interethnic interaction among local students.

The results show that there is a significant and negative relationship which confirmed that ethnocentric attitudes still existed among local students. These findings indicate that Malaysian students are not so much interested in getting involved with other ethnic students. The findings clearly show that ethnocentrism is negatively correlated with face-to-face interethnic interaction. Although local students had different group activities in campus, their ethnocentrism tendency prevented them from mingling with other ethnicities easily. This negative attitude deterred students to trust and cooperate with peers of different ethnics. So, the first hypothesis is fully supported. The findings of the present study confirmed the lack of ethnical integration in Malaysia (Merdeka Center, 2006; Yeoh, 2006; Tamam, 2013). In addition, this finding supported previous studies that demonstrated ethnocentrism was a barrier to effective intercultural communication (Lin et al., 2005).

A study in 2007 showed that the level of unity and ethnic relations in Malaysia has declined (Aziz et al., 2007 as cited in Ridzuan et al., 2012). Similar studies have shown that the lack of unity among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia is due to the ethnocentric attitude (Isman & Hanafi, 2008 as cited in Ridzuan et al., 2012). Whether or not ethnocentrism is identical to outright racism, ethnocentric attitudes certainly encourage the negative manifestations of ethnic discrimination.

The second hypothesis of this study was that there is a relationship between ethnocentrism and online interethnic interaction among local students. The students’
ethnical attitudes prevented them from interacting with different ethnic groups especially when it came to online interaction. The students did not even follow their offline communication style. Although almost half of the respondents had daily interethnic interaction, they preferred to decrease their contacts with students of other ethnicities on online communication. In other words, they were not much interested in enhancing their online interaction with their peers of other ethnic groups and they preferred to communicate with in-group peers rather than out-group ones. It showed ethnocentric people stayed away from outsiders and they did not communicate with them on their own will.

Malaysian students who were more open to other ethnic peers could have stronger communication and interact with them regardless of their negative perception. This ethnocentric attitude which hampers intercultural communication can decrease racial interaction in the whole community. These findings shed light on ethnic issues in Malaysian universities and also showed that ethnicity had become more important for Malaysian students than before. So, more effort should be directed towards the Malaysian young generation to bring them closer despite these fundamental differences.

As shown in this study, students had more offline interethnic interaction compared to online interaction. Possibly this is due to the fact that they had classes regularly, and thus had to interact and communicate with other ethnic groups whether they liked it or not. However, online interaction is not just based on unavoidable physical presence, but is a medium that is more dependent on conscious choice and decisions to communicate actively in partaking in interethnic communication. Thus in situations where they could choose whether or not to interact, they presumably willing elected to not take that step.

Critical factors that facilitate or constrain interethnic interaction among students need to be identified and should be dealt with accordingly. It is necessary to identify which factors work better for each ethnic group in decreasing the level of ethnocentrism. The present analysis did not provide the differential level of ethnocentrism in each ethnic group. Hence, this can be considered as a shortcoming of the present study.

The analysis in this study provided further evidence on the lack of unity and cooperation among university students. Hence, universities need to shape and boost interethnic interaction among students beyond the classroom. In addition, multiethnic universities should encourage different strategies for cross-racial interaction amongst students both online and in the campus.

Universities should reform their education systems and play an important role to persuade students to engage in interethnic interaction. Group activities and specific intervention programs need to be designed in order to raise students’ interethnic interaction competencies. People in heterogeneous communities must know that they cannot avoid interethnic interaction and need to break their racial shell and
interact more with different races to build strong communication bridges for the future.

It is recommended for future studies to investigate whether there is any other reason rather than ethnocentrism that prevents students to interact with peers of different ethnicities. Future studies can also expand this research in private universities with minority Malay students to see whether the findings are the same or not.

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References


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