

Online Social Networking, Social Capital and Social Integration: An Experience of Multi-Ethnic Online Community Members in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The issue of inter-ethnic relations is of significant concern in Malaysia because it is often regarded as a threat to national unity and the welfare of the people. For a long time, the Government has been making great efforts to overcome this problem. However, tension and division remain a major concern. In 1996 the Malaysian government established the National Information and Communication Technology (NICT) policy intended to transform Malaysia into an information and knowledge society. The implementation of the policy has been interpreted as part of the policy to overcome ethnic segregation through encouraging the development of online communities. The aim of this paper is to discuss how online communities have contributed to the generation and maintenance of social capital and social integration. The research explores the experience of 162 online community members. The findings suggest that the online communities in Malaysia do have the potential to widen social networking, generate positive social capital across society and more importantly, hold the prospect of enhancing social integration between ethnicities.

Keywords: *Online communities, Online Social Networking, Inter-Ethnic Relations, Social Integration, Social Capital*

ABSTRAK

Isu hubungan antara kaum di Malaysia sangat dititikberatkan kerana ia sering dianggap sebagai ancaman kepada perpaduan Negara dan kebajikan masyarakat. Untuk sekian lama, kerajaan Malaysia telah melaksanakan pelbagai usaha untuk mengatasi masalah ini. Walau bagaimanapun, ketegangan dan perpecahan tetap menjadi kebimbangan utama. Pada tahun 1996, dasar Teknologi Maklumat dan Komunikasi (NICT) Negara telah dilancarkan bertujuan untuk mengubah Malaysia menjadi sebuah masyarakat bermaklumat dan berpengetahuan. Pelaksanaan dasar ini juga ditafsirkan sebagai sebahagian daripada usaha untuk mengatasi masalah perpecahan etnik melalui pembentukan komuniti atas talian. Tujuan kertas kerja ini adalah untuk membincangkan bagaimana komuniti atas talian telah menyumbang kepada pembentukan dan pengekalan modal sosial dan integrasi sosial. Kajian meneroka pengalaman 162 ahli komuniti atas talian berkenaan isu ini. Hasil penyelidikan menunjukkan bahawa komuniti atas talian di Malaysia

berpotensi memperluaskan rangkaian sosial, menjana modal sosial yang positif di kalangan masyarakat dan mempunyai prospek yang baik untuk meningkatkan integrasi sosial antara etnik.

Kata Kunci: Komuniti atas talian, Jaringan sosial atas talian, Hubungan etnik, Integrasi sosial, Modal sosial,

INTRODUCTION

During recent years, advances in computing technology, especially the Internet, have greatly influenced the way social networks have been defined and work to connect people. The Internet, the origin of which can be found in ARPANET (Castells, 2003), has become essential in today's society. Networking serves as an important function of the Internet. Therefore, the Internet has brought into existence a new feature of social networking structures, known as an online network. Online networking becomes more advanced in parallel with the fast developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Online networking can act as a foundation for the establishment of an online community: a group of people, who interact, communicate and perform activities in a virtual medium (Rheingold, 1994). The use of the Internet to form cyber social groups has changed the nature of community from physically confined into online social networks, which Wellman (1999), a social scientist, calls one of "networked individualism". Through online links, people are connected as individuals or groups, available for contact anywhere and at any time. According to Wellman (1999a), instead of knowing only their own neighborhood community members, each person is now becoming "an individualized switchboard, linking a unique set of ties and networks" (p.49).

Similarly, Lin (2001), a social network expert, argues in line with Wellman's work that people's social networks increasingly rely on the electronic medium. Without diminishing the importance of face-to-face contact, ICTs, according to Lin (2001), transform conventional social networks into "cyber networks" (p.212) – a new form of social contact system that are created and developed in cyberspace. The flexibility of the Internet provides an opportunity for connections to be made across different types of networks. These connections reinforce existing networks and help to build social capital, which according to Lin, are an asset in human networks.

Social capital is an imprecise social construct that has emerged from a rather murky swamp of terminology, but it is still useful for exploring culture, society and social networks. The notion of social capital has originated from studies of conventional communities and highlights the importance of networks in building strong personal relationships that develop over time. Such relationships, it is argued,

provide a basis for trust, cooperation, and collective action. Basically, there is no explicit definition of social capital because it can be described in relatively different dimensions and points of views. However, in order to differentiate social capital from physical and human capital, Putnam (2000) has offered a useful definition. While physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to the connections among individuals, their social networks, their norms of reciprocity, and the trust that arises from these.

Since the availability of online social networks, an array of topics has emerged concerning online communities and social capital. One of the areas of interest was the impact of online social networking on social capital and community participation. It is argued that such an issue is important for helping us to better understand how and why we interact with each other, as well as how new technologies can alter people's interactions. Past research has demonstrated a huge potential for online networks in connecting individuals and groups. These connections are believed to enable and strengthen social capital and create robust social relationships among members online and also offline. Research by Pinkett (2003), for instance, illustrates how the presence and use of ICTs have subsequently helped an African-American community in Camfield Estate, Boston, to build and recreate positive inter-relationships amongst the other community members. Similarly, a study by Ferlander (2003) highlights the positive impact of online communication on social integration within local communities. Following this, the Internet has been described as a tool in providing a place for public discussion and support, as well as being a source for acquiring information. Likewise, Hampton and Wellman (1999 & 2001) in their research on the impact of ICTs' applications in the neighborhood of Netville, Toronto, have found that an online network can build strong online and off-line relationships among neighbors. It can also develop trust and a sense of belonging.

Past research demonstrates that online communication and activities may have a significant impact on uniting and recreating social relationships across communities. However, most of the research studies focus on the networks that occur within a homogenous community. Without focusing on socio-cultural factors, many studies may fail to notice various other influences which could potentially affect the way social relationships develop between members of a community. Aspects of diversity such as ethnicity, class and gender may result in different discoveries in terms of social relationship patterns and the type of social capital that emerges. Researching online networks across heterogeneous communities would give a new dimension to how technologies both reinforce and change patterns of social relations and community practices in order to grasp how these diverse groups of people manage to negotiate their relationships in both online and offline

activities. Considering these gaps, this current research aims to explore the role of online networks in developing social capital across multi-ethnic communities. More importantly, it endeavors to see whether online social capital does help to accelerate a process of social integration between different ethnic groups and thus the role it plays in the development of a plural society in Malaysia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research used six on-line communities as a case study: USJ Subang Jaya, PJNet, MalaysiaMAYA.com, VirtualFriends.net, Setia Alam Residential Association (SARA) and FamilyPlace. All on-line communities were selected based on several characteristics such as: (1) Communities that are open for public membership, regardless of ethnicity, class and gender; (2) Established on-line communities and (3) On-line communities that have similar objectives such as integrating people, sharing knowledge and sharing common goals.

An on-line survey was used as a method for collecting data from members of the six selected on-line communities. This method was chosen because it enabled quick and convenient access, allowing participants to complete and submit the survey at a time most convenient to them. As the target participants came from on-line-based groups, it was thought to be the most suitable approach to a survey. The survey was constructed using on-line survey software “Survey Monkey” which can be obtained through the official website <http://www.surveymonkey.com/Default.aspx>. The decision to choose this software over others was because SurveyMonkey allows for comprehensive logistics for both qualitative and quantitative questions. It also offers good management of data and provides initial analysis with spreadsheet downloads for further data mining (Thorns, et al., 2008). Hence the data can be organized and monitored easily and the website provides a convenient way to manage the survey at any time.

The survey was designed to provide descriptive quantitative information through the use of multi-choice questions alongside open-ended questions. These were intended to generate qualitative, reflective and interpretive responses. The multi-choices questions were designed to construct a more comprehensive quantitative data set, which would enable the identification of some macro processes, whilst the qualitative open-ended questions were constructed to provide the followings:

1. Contextual depth to the quantitative material,
2. Micro level insights into individual’s perceptions,
3. Feedback and critical evaluation of the experiences of the participants.

Participants for on-line surveys were obtained from the members of the six selected on-line communities. Getting participation from this particular group was initially challenging. This was due to an anonymity factor which prevents non-members from having direct contact with on-line community members. The process of invitation thus took place through the on-line community administrators. The community administrators were asked for permission to research their respective on-line community members. Once permission was given, the survey was then placed on the on-line community website.

The initial steps of quantitative analysis involved the exploration of the SurveyMonkey platform to gain a broad overview of the general trends of the survey. Because SurveyMonkey only provides options for descriptive statistics and basic correlation, the data was imported to a statistical software package that offered more variation of statistical techniques. For the purpose of this analysis, data gathered from SurveyMonkey was transferred to Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS) to make the data ready for a wide variety of analysis according to the initial plan.

By the time it was closed, the on-line survey had accumulated about 202 responses. Even though it shows a relatively weak percentage (only about 0.1%) compared to actual membership accumulated from all six on-line communities, the number of responses was considered good enough for a new survey method conducting research in a newly-developing technological society such as Malaysia. According to Skitka & Sargis (2005) one of the disadvantages of on-line research is that “people are less likely to positively respond to invitations to participate in web than other kinds of research” (p.11). This statement could help to explain why this current research obtained less survey responses. It is argued that actual membership for an on-line community is not necessarily true as members are not physically bonded to the community as they are in their off-line communities. There might be members who were not actively involved in the community’s activities that may have registered once and then disappeared. Therefore, the decision to place the survey link on the website forum, as mentioned earlier, was seen appropriate in order to approach only active online community members to take part in this study. Even though the number is relatively small, the quality of the responses is considered valuable for the research.

As for the 202 responses, only 162 or 80% of the data was used for the purpose of the analysis. The other 20% (or 40 responses) needed to be removed after the SPSS data screening process indicated that the particular entries (data) had more than 10% missing cases. This decision to eliminate particular survey responses was due to the missing data significantly reducing the value of analysis. According to

Hair et al. (2007), keeping a sample where a majority of important variables have missing data can impact on the validity of the findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

(A) Demographic Statistics

Majority of the survey respondents came from two main ethnic groups: Malay and Chinese. Malay respondents indicated 48.8% of the total 162 participants whilst the number of Chinese was only slightly less with a difference of 11 respondents or 6.8% fewer than that of the Malay group. Other ethnicities (such as Indian, Eurasian and European) were the least represented in the survey, with only 2.5% placing themselves in this category.

There were five categories of age prepared for the purpose of the survey ranking from under 18 to 56 and above. The majority (48.8% or 79) of the respondents were aged between 26 and 35 years old. It is followed by those who were aged 18 to 25 (29.0% or 47) and 36 to 45 years old (15.4% or 25). Only one (0.6%) respondent claimed that he/she was in the category of 56 year old and above and only a small number (6.2% or 10) of respondents were in the category of middle aged (46 to 55 years old). There were an approximately equal number of both genders of respondents. Analysis indicates that 52.5% members were female, and 47.5% were male.

Respondents were asked about their highest educational achievement level based on the standard Malaysian education system, starting from secondary to tertiary levels. There are 10 levels of education provided. More than half (58%) of the respondents claimed they hold a Bachelor degree, followed by Diploma holders (20.4%). The other 22% respondents claimed they hold various levels of educational background.

Three out of six on-line communities selected in this study were based on non-resident communities that were functioning as Social Networking Sites (SNS) communities. In Light of this it is important to identify members' locations in order to see the trends of membership distribution across the country. Over 80% of the respondents indicated that they live in a central region in Selangor state and areas surrounding Klang Valley, including Kuala Lumpur. The living locations for the remaining 19.5% were dispersed geographically throughout Malaysia.

(B) On-line Social Networks

One of the variables that were considered useful to test network activities among members was to get their views about direct communication with other online

members. Direct communication here means interactive contact through chat room or forum debate. When asked about the frequency of direct communication with online community members, most (47.5%) chose to answer that their frequency of communication was based on their interest or mood rather than of a regular nature. By contrast, 19.1% of the total reflected the number of truly active members. This group said they would directly communicate with other members in the community every time they enter website. However, almost the same percentage (17.9%) claimed that they have never chatted or have had direct communication with others. On the other hand, 15.4% or 25 of 162 revealed that they were keen to have direct communication if they saw members they already knew online. This shows that online communities not only have the potential to expose members to new friends, but also encourage them to establish and strengthen relationships with people they have previously known.

Almost all (94.4%) of the online community members found that their online communities provide an easy and convenient place to communicate with each other. Only 9 of them opposed the idea and this probably applied to those who were not really interested in making connections and interacting with other members. 77.2% admitted they have made new friends since participating in the respective communities, whilst only 22.7% (37) revealed that becoming an online community member did not help them expand their networks at all. The large proportion of members who successfully made new friends in the new medium of the online community indicated that online communities in Malaysia did enhance social networks because there was the possibility of different ethnicities mixing and thus making new friends. The probability of generating social integration among people is also thought to be higher. Furthermore, more than half (74.7%) of members agreed that their online communities are the best places to connect to people from various social and ethnic groups.

(C) Social Capital

Through the online survey, members were asked questions intended to reflect their attitudes and experiences of social capital within their communities. This was to examine whether social capital was generated and/or was maintained through community activities. Analysis of data indicated that the majority (85.2%) of 162 respondents sought information from other members in their communities. Only a small percentage (14.8%) of the group claimed that they had never asked for any information or questions about anything through the online communities they belong to. Among those who did ask, only 6.8% of the 138 respondents stated they did not get a reply about the information they asked for, whilst a large proportion (78.4%) of the group claimed they did normally get responses about the information they searched for from other community members. Two respondents have shared their valuable experiences in this matter:

"I have shared my opinions by writing up in the online communities and other members do give their responses." (Male)

"I made new friends and found out that people cared for each other and most people generally are polite and answered questions posted." (Male)

Analysis of the online community members indicated that almost 71.6% of those who get responses from other members say that they trust the information given. Only a small number (10.5%) were skeptical about the answers they got from others, saying that they did not fully trust the information given by unknown people. Of the total population studied, 17.9% (29) chose not to answer this question. Considering the percentage of 14.4% (24) of those who never asked for anything from their communities, the other 5 (13.1% of 29) may or may not get the information they asked for, but were reluctant to share their views about information on trust.

Respondents were also asked whether they ever provided any information or answered any questions posted by other members. This was to examine whether an element of reciprocity existed among online members in terms of information exchanged in the community. Again, there was a high number of replies (73.5%) stating that they do contribute to the community by helping people with questions and information. However, there was also a significant percentage (25.9%) of members (even though they are not as high as those who say "Yes") who admitted that they never provided information to others through their online community. Only one member chose not to answer this question.

Based on the above-mentioned data analysis, it is argued that the six online communities in this study do provide a medium for generating and maintaining social capital. Online members reflect a positive attitude towards knowledge and information sharing with other community members when almost all respondents (98.8%) show their agreement with the idea. A number of them have also highlighted this as valuable experiences:

"Being an on-line community has shown me that there are so many helpful people around who would not think twice in giving good advice and information to unknown individuals, who they may have not met before. There is a wealth of knowledge and experiences that can be gained." (Male)

"We regularly discuss community security and setting up of a security back-lane gate, organizing 'qurban' and social activities for Muslims in mosque." (Male)

"I got so much information about a medical condition that I find more informed about the condition than a doctor." (Female)

These high responses for knowledge and information exchange and the ability to trust each other in online communication indicate that the culture of virtual interaction and sharing things through the online medium increasingly takes place in the Eastern cultural community of Malaysia. This kind of behaviour, referred by Sproull and Colleagues (2005) as "prosocial behavior", is defined as "voluntary intentional behaviour that results in benefits for another" (p.139), could help to demolish the sentiments of chauvinism among Malaysia's multi-cultures, at least amongst on-line groups. According to Sproull et al. (2005), physical appearance plays an important role in influencing people's actions to seek or give help. They suggested that "in the online world, people reading a request for help have no information about the requestor's physical appearance or social similarity that is conveyed by visible attributes such as age, gender or race" (Ibid: p.143). Even though this advantage may be applied to those who are online community members, it is argued that the trend will grow and may slowly take place in the offline community. It is hoped that eventually the value they hold in the online medium could be presented in the real world. The two following statements by participants might help confirm this argument:

"I met many people through this online community, we sharing opinion and mostly, I can generate new ideas from their opinion and part of them now became my best friends which I really trust." (Female)

"Since I became an on-line community member, I found it is easier to get to know my neighbours and understand them better as sometimes expressing in words could be easier than talking out face to face. Other than that, I could get to know a lot of information about the community as well as the place we live in. In addition to that, I am able to know some members who are actually from the same hometown which I never come across." (Male)

D) Ethnic Integration

Analysis of data has been run across several variables related to respondents' views and experiences of relationship with other ethnic members who participated in the online communities. Firstly, the analysis intended to find the percentage of online members who made friends through online activities. This was followed by examining relationships between groups and their actions concerning interaction and communication offline with multi-ethnic friends made online. All analyses involved correlation and Chi-square tests to compare the frequencies observed in certain categories (for example ethnicities) to the expected frequencies (for example offline communication) in those categories (Fielding, 2008).

Making Friends On-line

Table 1 shows the relationship between the two variables; ethnicity and making friends through online communities. The results indicated from a total of 125 members 77.2% said that they did make friends in this way but 58.4% (73) of these were Malay and 40% (50) were non-Malay. Two respondents (1.6%) from unknown ethnic backgrounds have also claimed they do have friends they met online. 22.8% (37) admitted they did not make any friends since joining the online communities. Of those who did not, the majority were non-Malay (83.8%), whilst the rest were Malay.

Table 1: Ethnicity*Making Friends Online

			Ethnicity			Total
			Malay	Non-Malay	99	
Have you made friends since participating?	Yes	Count	73	50	2	125
		Expected Count	61.0	62.5	1.5	125.0
		% within Have you made friends since participating?	58.4%	40.0%	1.6%	100.0%
		% within Ethnicities	92.4%	61.7%	100.0%	77.2%
		% of Total	45.1%	30.9%	1.2%	77.2%
	No	Count	6	31	0	37
		Expected Count	18.0	18.5	.5	37.0
		% within Have you made friends since participating?	16.2%	83.8%	.0	100.0%
		% within Ethnicities	7.6%	38.3%	.0%	22.8%
		% of Total	3.7%	19.1%	.0%	22.8%
Total	Count	79	81	2	162	
	Expected Count	79.0	81.0	2.0	162.0	
	% within Have you made friends since participating?	48.8%	50.0%	1.2%	100.0%	
	% within Ethnicities	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	48.8%	50.0%	1.2%	100.0%	

A Chi-square test was then run to examine whether there is an association between the two categorical variables (in this case ethnicity and making friends on-line). Based on Table 1.1, the value of Chi-square statistics for this test is 21.956. This value is highly significant ($p < .005$), indicating that respondents with different ethnic backgrounds had a significantly different experience in making friends on-line. The results indicate that there is an association between ethnic group and having online friends.

Table 1.1: Chi-Square Test-Ethnicity*Making Friends Online

	Value	df	Asymp.Sig. (2-sided)
Chi-Square	21.956a	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	23.839	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.312	1	.576
N of Valid Cases	162		

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .46.

Online Meetings and Offline Gatherings

The analysis aimed to look at the relationship between ethnicity and interaction, including communicating offline with friends met through online communities. The results reveal that there were considerably more people who claim they do interact and communicate offline with friends they make online (69.8%) compared to those who did not (30.2%) (Table2). Of the total who said “they do” (113), 57.5%, (65) are ethnic Malay and the others 46.7% (46) are from non-Malay groups. The Chi-square test confirmed the association between the two categorical variables (in this case ethnicity and communication offline with multi-ethnic friends made online). Based on Table 2.1, the value of Chi-square statistic for this test is 19.129. This value is highly significant ($p < .005$), indicating that different ethnic groups of respondents had a significantly different experience in face-to-face meetings with their multi-ethnic friends made online.

Table 2: Ethnicity*Interact and Communicate Off-line with Multi-ethnic Friends Made Online

			Ethnicity			Total
			Malay	Non-Malay	99	
Do you interact and communicate offline with multi-ethnic friends made online?	Yes	Count	65	46	2	113
		Expected Count	55.1	56.5	1.4	113.0
		% within Do you interact and communicate off-line with multi-ethnic friends made online?	82.3%	56.8%	1.8%	100.0%
		% within Ethnicities	82.3%	56.8%	100.0%	69.8%
		% of Total	40.1%	28.4%	1.2%	69.8%
		No	Count	14	35	0
	Expected Count	23.9	24.5	.6	49.0	
	% within Have you made friends since participating?	28.6%	71.4%	.0	100.0%	
	% within Ethnicities	17.7%	43.2%	.0%	30.2%	
	% of Total	8.6%	21.6%	.0%	30.2%	
	Total		Count	79	81	2
		Expected Count	79.0	81.0	2.0	162.0
		% within Do you interact and communicate offline with multi-ethnic friends made online?	48.8%	50.0%	1.2%	100.0%
		% within Ethnicities	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	48.8%	50.0%	1.2%	100.0%

Table 2.1: Chi-Square Test-Ethnicity*Interact and Communicate Offline with Multi-ethnic Friends Made Online

	Value	df	Asymp.Sig. (2-sided)
Chi-Square	13.193a	2	.001
Likelihood Ratio	13.993	2	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	.596	1	.440
N of Valid Cases	162		

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .60.

Language Used and Inter-ethnic Communication

Further analysis of the relationship between language use and inter-ethnic communication offline has been done to explore whether this may influence the amount of interaction and integration between ethnic groups. The analysis shows that among 113 respondents who said “Yes” for interaction and communication offline with multi-ethnic friends made online, 78.8% of them used non-Malay languages or at least a combination of Malay and English. In comparison, only 21.2% of Malay language speakers show the same use. However, correlation results show that among those who only speak Malay for communication online, the numbers who made friends were much higher (82.8 %) than those who did not (17.2%). This indicated that among those who made friends online and do meet their multi-ethnic online friends offline, the majority are those who can speak languages other than Malay. This could be a combination of Malay and English, or merely English, Chinese or Chinese and English. Yet, it is hard to say that members who communicate in Malay are not able to make friends with others because of the language they use. This is because the correlation has proven that within the Malay group, a majority claimed that they do make friends online and do communicate with them offline. The Chi-Squared test supports this situation by giving insignificant value ($\chi^2(1) = 2.832, p > .005$), which suggests that there was no significant relationship between language used and the likelihood of communication with multi-ethnic friends online and offline.

The analysis clearly indicates that different language use has not significantly influenced social relationships between ethnicity in the selected online communities. However, the results may suggest that members who can speak various languages have benefited more in terms of making friends and having relationships with others from outside of their ethnic backgrounds, since the majority of non-Malay group

are obviously comfortable using the English language for everyday conversation. Consider one of the respondent who clearly reflects this idea:

“Interacting with different ethnicities online has giving me confidence in communicating and making friends with different ethnicities offline. When we communicate with different ethnic people, we are keen on interacting and having a conversation in English. Thus, it helps enhance our English communication skill and gives us more confidence in communicating with other friends from different ethnicity in the future.”(Malay, Male)

Cultural and Religious Observations

More than half, 53% or 85 of 162, of the respondents in the survey claimed that they had never experienced difficulties in social relationships with other ethnic groups online and offline. In most of the statements they made, respondents clearly show their stand on how they perceive others as equal and less-disruptive. Factors such as sharing the same interests, schooling and work backgrounds and inter-marriage have been most associated with the way respondents see connections with those outside of their ethnic group. This has been influenced by their networks and socialization across groups and accordingly, inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia, from their points of view, were seen as relatively stable and established high tolerance towards each other. For this particular group, becoming an on-line community member has not changed their circumstances in terms of personal relationships with other ethnic communities.

“Err...ethnic isn't important as long as we get along well, with the same interest, that's fine.”

“I never have any problem interacting with any person from the same or different ethnic groups, online or offline.”

“No. Race doesn't matter.”

Despite a high percentage of respondents choosing to stand on the neutral side of scrutiny, about 35% (56) offered relatively different points of view. Careful analysis indicated some important comments reflect some tension surrounding inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia, for instance, statements like “Yes, because in the real world, we might not really interact with other ethnic groups”; “Yes, we might have bias [towards others before this]. Interacting with others [from different ethnic backgrounds] [in online communities] changed this and brings about awareness [of how to respect other people].” Interestingly enough, several constructive comments suggest that participating in an on-line community has

helped them change their perceptions towards others. Overall, the responses indicate that not having connections with other ethnic groups develops a sense of doubt, lack of confidence, prejudice and mistrust between groups. Lack of experience with people from different ethnic backgrounds, class, cultures and religions affect the way everyday social relationships develop throughout the community. Limited opportunities for individuals or even groups to get connected were seen as part of the problem. By having a virtual community as a means of interaction, people become exposed to opportunities for getting to know each other better, which in turn, helps improve the way they manage their social relationships in off-line settings.

“During online, words are being exchanged and relationship could be enhanced before meeting in person or even could understand their characteristics via online interaction. As for offline, we have to look at their facial expressions before saying anything. Therefore, interacting online before meeting up could change the feelings in a definite way.”

*“It is easier to communicate off-line once you have met the person online.”
“I do not have any problem interacting with those groups (off different ethnicity). In fact I really enjoyed it because I got to know different people with different belief and background. Hence, it also expands my networks and information.”*

“Yes. [Having communication with other ethnic online] makes it easier to communicate with them offline.”

“Communicate online led me to interact confidently with people from other ethnic offline.”

In terms of cultural and religious concerns, none of the respondents commented on any significant constraints with other ethnicities. In fact, many of them believe that through online communities they are able to learn more about their new friends, including their culture and religion which they might not have been aware of before.

“I feel more comfortable and respect each other culture.”

“Yes, it helps me to know other ethnicity better.”

“Yes, at least it makes me understand other ethnic groups more.”

Gender Issues

The survey of members sought to explore personal experiences as a way to identify issues concerning male-female participation in the selected online communities. The analysis indicates that more than half (68.5%) of the respondents chose to be unresponsive whilst the rest have noticeably addressed several issues ranging from friendship to personal matters. Findings (based on 31.5% responses) show both male and female members commonly expressed pleasure in finding new friends and considered establishing social networks amongst peers as truly rewarding. Compared to the males, the number of female respondents was noticeably higher with respect to making online friends. This result supports earlier studies showing that women were found to positively relate to the use of the Internet because of its protected environment (Hamburger, 2005) and also be more likely to use social networks for support. According to Hamburger (2005) the anonymity factor of the Internet, with no physical proximity or contact with the person with whom he/she interacts, offers the users complete control of the interaction. Therefore, this makes he/she feel him/herself to be in a protected environment, which allows them to express themselves more freely on the net than they feel able to in an offline relationship. This clearly suggests that the development of online communities in Malaysia has created a relatively new and pleasant environment for women to build relationships with others and thus, increase the prospect of creating their own personal networks. On the other hand, online communities offer relatively equal opportunities for women to participate and be involved in social engagements as much as men can possibly do.

“I met many people through this community, sharing opinions and mostly I can generate new ideas from their opinion and some of them now are my best friends whom I trust.”(Female)

I met my ‘sister’ here in VirtualFriends.net, I met my ex-boyfriend here in VirtualFriends.net, I met some foreigners here in VirtualFriends.net and we became friends until now. I met various people here in VirtualFriends.net. I obtained lots of knowledge here in VirtualFriends.net as well as having lots of friends here in VirtualFriends.net. I love VirtualFriends.net as a medium of knowledge gaining place and a place for friendship.”(Female)

“Sometimes we can know how other people behave and we can learn some new information and sharing ideas with others. My experience in online communities, like facebook, myspace, VirtualFriends.net and blogger, is that sometimes we can tell others about ourselves and sharing information with friends. When we trust each other, we can meet them and friendship last forever.”(Female)

Meeting new friends through an online medium could be a common thing that happened to people involved in online communities. Through communication and regular interaction, people manage to find connections and similarities in various ways, such as sharing similar hobbies, interests and thoughts. Usually, the chemistry that slowly develops could bring other levels of “online romantic relationship” (Ben-Ze’ev, 2005). A high tendency for female members in the survey to search for and make new friends online was actually not limited to having “a regular friend”. A number of female respondents were found enthusiastically expressing their joy of either using the medium to find companions or to meet their significant other by chance. Consider the following statements by these two female respondents:

“Briefly, I would like to say that I managed to find my significant other on an online community website and we have been together for a year now and hope to get married soon.”(Female)

“I get more friends and know more information about anything. Also it can create relationship with others. I think this community is the best source to get lovers.”(Female)

Additional factors have been suggested in other research studies. For example, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (2005) contends that what drives people to look for and have personal relationships on-line is that the medium enables them to get to know each other without having to cope with the heavy burden of stereotypes that are always associated with physical appearance. In his article entitled “Detachment: the unique nature of on-line romantic relationships” (2005) Ben-Ze’ev views online relationships as different from offline relationships because they attach less weight to external appearances, which are revealed by vision, but more weight to positive appraisal of the other’s characteristics, such as emotional attitudes towards each other, which are revealed by verbal communication. Accordingly, online relationships prevent people from relying mainly on physical attributes when evaluating other people, and hence they avoid the unjustified advantages that are usually granted to attractive people.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to explore networking activities in the six selected o-line communities and to discover attitudes and experiences of members towards inter-ethnic relationships online and also offline. There are 3 preliminary conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis. Firstly, as a relatively new phenomenon in Malaysia, the demographic structure of the six online communities involved in this study reflect a pattern of domination by young educated and career oriented

persons with the majority residing in the most developed region of the country. In other words, this clearly explains how education levels, knowledge and availability of ICT facilities all play an important role in supporting the growth of online communities in a developing country, such as Malaysia. In terms of ethnicity and gender, the Malay group as the ethnic majority contributes a larger number of participants, which supports the view that the existence of on-line communities in Malaysia has been attractive to this ethnic group. As indicated in the analysis, the number of female participants was noticeably higher in comparison to their male counterparts; this indicates gender equality in accessing modern communication technology. This also shows that whilst many women in the 'third world' have been seen as technologically deprived, Malaysian women, on the other hand, tend to have greater opportunities to participate and experience a variety of social activities in a comprehensive environment offered by the Internet.

The second conclusion is that there is a great potential waiting for further development of online communities in Malaysia. Based on positive trends in the use of the Internet for networking activities, the numbers of online members is predicted to grow and thus, could increase the possibility of the formation of a variety of new online communities. Concerning the visits and time spent by the members in their respective online communities, the new medium, without doubt, will become a regular forum for social interaction and one that is increasingly being used by a significant portion of society, especially the youth.

The third conclusion is that the findings concerning social capital and inter-ethnic integration through online communities suggest that online communities in Malaysia do have the potential to widen social networking, generate positive social capital across society and, more importantly, hold the prospect of enhancing social integration between ethnicities. Responses concerning social activities show that members enjoy getting to know new multi-ethnic friends online and many of them have managed to extend their relationships offline. Issues such as class, language use, culture and religion were seen as less significant between ethnicities. Rather, online communities offer a medium for members to come to issues with differences as well as being a place for members to build high tolerance towards better integration.

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