

## **Perception and Impact of Social Media on Unity among Minority Groups in Melaka**

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### **Abstract**

The evolution of social media over time has provided many benefits to the society. Social media plays an important role in the process of delivering diverse information to the public regardless of age, race and ethnicity. This study is a qualitative research that aims to analyze the perception of minorities regarding unity in Melaka. In addition, this study also aims to analyze the experience of using social media among minorities and to explore the views of the minorities with regard to the impact of social media on unity in Melaka. The results of this study generated three main themes related to unity, namely the activities of the Chetti community, the importance of preserving heritage and social media as a medium to promote unity. There are three sub- themes that have been derived through the first theme which includes religious ceremony and celebration activities, communal activities and the role of household clubs in relation to the program. Next, for the second theme, the results have derived only one sub-theme, which is the knowledge of the next generation related to minorities. The final result which is the third theme also obtains only one sub-theme which is social media providing exposure to community unity.

**Keyword:** Minorities, Unity, Social Media, Chetti

### **Introduction**

This research will examine the perception and impact of social media on the unity of minorities in Malacca. The main focus of the minority group in this study is the Chetti community.

There are several past researchers who found positive and negative effects of social media as the main medium of communication in strengthening unity on the community, but there is no study that clearly shows the impact of social media and its implications on racial unity in Malacca.

Based on past studies, assimilation had happened long ago among the minorities (Baba Nyonya, Serani and Chetti) in Malacca. This assimilation occurred since the time of Malacca

Sultanate as stipulated in a research by Omar et al (2016) who explains the origin of Chetti community as rich traders from a district called Panai in Tamil Nadu, India in the 15th century. These traders sailed to the Malay Archipelago to carry out trade activities with the local community. Consecutively, it is said they married the local residents such as Malay, Chinese and others and settled down in (Omar et al., 2016).

In addition, assimilation in the Portuguese community in Malacca had started since the early 16th century. They came to Malacca was mainly for trading, especially spice trading, considering that at that time, the demand for spices was very high in Europe. During the time they were in Malacca, Portuguese soldiers got married to the local people. As a result, the Portuguese Serani community was born in Malacca (Ma'alip & Omar, 2017). This is similar for the Baba Nyonya minority group in Melaka which is a unique community in Malaysia because of the lifestyle they practice that combines Malay and Chinese culture in harmony (Azmi et al., 2018). The mixing of cultures and customs between the Chinese and the Malay in the Baba and Nyonya community has proven the closeness and unity that exists in the community, and they even practice Malay culture in their life (Hisham, 2017).

In fact, the Malabari community is a Muslim minority in Malaysia that originates from Kerala, India and has been living in Malaya since the days of the Malacca Sultanate. The results of the study show that the language of the Malabar Muslim community has been increasingly losing their identity in Malaysia, and they have started to assimilate (language, education, traditional dress, marriage) Malay cultures in their daily life (Liaw & Moiden, 2019).

Therefore, this study will examine in detail the minorities in Malacca, so that they are not forgotten through time. The presence of these minorities needs to be celebrated, so that the diversity of races in Malacca becomes one of the contributing factors to tourism which ultimately has a positive impact on the economy of the state of Malacca.

### **Problem Statement**

The findings of previous studies show that the assimilation of minorities in Malacca has taken place in Malacca through marriage with local people, language, education, unity and traditional practices of the Malay community in Malacca.

However, the assimilation of ethnic minorities is not an issue in Malaysia, rather there are not many past studies that study or explore the perception and impact of social media on unity among minorities in Malacca. Previous studies (Chang & Kho, 2017; Abd Rahman et al., 2019; Abdullah, 2011; Ridzuan et al., 2016) also focus a lot on the unity between large ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia but there is less research implemented for ethnic minorities per se, especially on social media. Social media is the reality of the new generation of Malaysia's pluralistic society in this era of globalization. The emergence of this medium has various impacts across generations. Social media is easily accessible at any location and time and provides absolute freedom to the community to move actively and interactively. In fact, social media has also become an interactive medium that provides opportunities for the community to strengthen ethnic unity through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube applications. The use of social media as a medium to get to know each other and strengthen unity has either a positive or negative impact on the community as a whole and also the minorities in Malacca such as the Portuguese, Baba and Nyonya, Chetti and Punjabi. This is evident in the study done by Abd Rahman et al (2019) who found that there are a few informants who have a negative perception, which they consider

that unity cannot be obtained through social media and can even destroy it again due to some irresponsible parties who arbitrarily raise provocations and sensitive issues of a certain ethnicity which weakens ethnic unity in Malaysia, especially the minority groups in Malacca. Their belief that anyone can use social media as a place to slander other parties and the manipulation of facts have had an impact on attitudes and social relations as well as inter-ethnic unity. Ethnic and religious sentiments that are still firm strongly influence the attitude of social media users in Malaysia today. This negative attitude can affect the role of social media in building effective national unity (Abd Razid, 2020). This is because every issue displayed on social media brings great influence and is easily spread quickly to the entire community and can lead to various impacts in the form of suggestions, help, ideas or even negative criticism that can undermine the ethnic unity of the minority groups in Melaka in particular. However, ethnic unity in Malaysia has not yet reached the level of unity expected by the country, which is togetherness between ethnic groups in moving towards a developed country (Abu Bakar & Daud, 2019).

### **Objective**

- To analyze the perception of minorities about unity in Malacca.
- To analyze the experience of using social media among minorities.
- To explore the views of minorities about the impact of social media on unity in Malacca.

### **Research Question**

- What is the view of minorities on unity in Malacca?
- What is the experience of using social media among minorities?
- What is the view of minorities about the impact of social media on unity in Malacca?

### **Past Studies**

#### **The Influence of Social Media on Ethnic Unity in Malaysia**

One of the studies by Nordin et al (2019) is about the role of social media especially Instagram and its impact on society. Through this study, Instagram is seen as one of the communication media, educational aspects, economic aspects and political aspects. The peace and harmony of society can be affected through political matters on Instagram. Among the negative effects of the use of Instagram is creating malicious envy, cases of fraud and affecting the peace of the country. This happens due to sensitive issues that are discussed openly on social media, especially involving the sensitivity of a race. The nature of social solidarity with an emphasis on group consciousness (assabiyah) and not being able to accept criticism from other races can lead to the disunity in Malaysia.

Baharuddin (2015) stated that social media is an effective tool for sharing information but is frequently misused to spread slander and false information. As a result of the development and progress of social media in Malaysia, national security is constantly exposed to threats, and it gives space to the Malaysian community to discuss political issues openly. Malaysians need to be careful in using social media and not use it in a negative direction such as provocation, accusations and threats.

A study by Azrin et al (2019) also studied the impact of social media and current human relationships through an Islamic perspective. Social media has had many positive and negative impacts on society today. Social media is the status of relationships among the community. In

Malaysia, social media needs to be utilized wisely to maintain harmony and avoid disunity in family relationships, friendships and even inter-ethnic relationships.

In addition, the study of Mior Kamarulbaid et al (2015) discussed the role of social media in facilitating access to knowledge as well as the development of social media and its benefits to society. This study found that the use of social media can have a positive and negative impact depending on the political understanding among the Malay community in Malaysia because social media now often raises issues of ethnicity and sensitivity in the cyber world.

The theory used in this study is the Media Literacy Model by Potter (2004) which emphasizes the dimension of awareness that is more in processing information and preparing for exposure than anything found in the general model. This model emphasizes four main constructs which are knowledge structures. This construct provides information into the second construct, which is personal interest involving motivated decisions. While, the third construct is the ability and skill that is a tool to process information and the last construct is the task of processing information channels. Each construct works interactively in this theory. Samani et al (2011) stated that the information process can take place either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, individuals will indirectly be careful about the purpose, the selection of information and be able to work relatively with a high control over the influencing process. In the unconscious process, the individual is unable to exercise any control over the affective process. Media literacy influences individuals to allocate more time and effort with conscious processing.

### **The Influence of Inter-Ethnic Perception on Racial Unity in Malaysia**

Pue and Kaur (2014) conducted a study on ethnic minorities in Malaysia focusing on the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan and Punjabi Sikhs in Kuala Lumpur. This study found that these ethnic minorities have the characteristics of ethnocentrism, which means that they feel their ethnicity is superior to other ethnic cultures even though they live in areas with diverse ethnic background. These ethnic groups also have their own stereotypical differences associated with Chinese (Peranakan Chinese) and Indian (Punjabi Sikh). It is evident that Malaysians' awareness and knowledge is very shallow about ethnic minority groups in this country.

Furthermore, the study of Chua et al (2016) also found that the main ethnic groups in Sabah, namely Kadazan-dusun, Bajau, Murut and Chinese, were able to give views and comments regarding their own ethnicity. However, their knowledge about other ethnicities is less due to the limited locality of ethnic settlements, causing them to socialize less. This study also states that individual relationships with other ethnicities only occur at work, at school or in school dormitories. The results of this qualitative study found that there is a negative perception between the ethnic groups in Sabah and other ethnic groups. For example, the Bajau people are labeled as hot-tempered and confrontational, the Chinese are considered a stingy ethnic group and do not like to help people, the Kadazan-Dusun people are seen as an ethnic group that likes to drink alcohol and is envious while the Murut people are considered less confident and lazy to work. Although there are many negative perceptions between ethnic groups in Sabah, there are not many inter-ethnic statements that are linked to discrimination between them.

Mokhatar (2015) examined the inter-ethnic perceptions and impact on ethnic relations among Malay and Chinese youth in Peninsular Malaysia. This study states that inter-ethnic perceptions can change from negative to positive when having positive experiences and events. This quantitative study involving a total of 231 Malay youth and 230 Chinese youth also found that although they have a negative perception of one another, it does not affect their daily interactions. It was also found that Chinese youth in Terengganu respect other ethnic groups and can cooperate with other Chinese ethnic groups in Kota Bharu and Kuala Lumpur. However, the Malays in Kota Bharu are found to be the only ones to look up to other ethnicities, and most Malays enjoy socializing with the same ethnic group.

A study by Yunus et al (2019) found that the level of trust between different ethnicities is low. Most ethnic groups are doubtful of each other and the level of trust in different ethnic groups affects the level of social interaction to the point where it affects relationships and social distance in a community. This study was conducted quantitatively involving ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians living in the same apartment.

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes qualitative study design with a case study strategy. The type of case study chosen based on the objective of the study is the intrinsic case study. Case studies of this nature are intended to obtain a clear understanding from the study subject of a case based on individual experience (Lebar, 2017). The data was collected through face-to-face interviews using seven interview questions through a semi-structured interview instrument. The findings of the study were analyzed using thematic analysis to obtain themes and sub-themes based on the research questions. This study, using five randomly selected research subjects representing the population of Kampung Chetti in Malacca to answer the research questions on the perception and impact of social media on unity among minorities in Malacca. Research interviews were carried out in the area of village.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Factors on Perception Against Unity Among Minorities**

Unity is an effort to unite the entire community to form an identity as well as shared values and a feeling of love and pride toward the togetherness achieved. This can be seen among the Chetti community who always try to preserve their traditional practices so that they are not lost in time and can even be practiced and even inherited by the next generation.

#### **Theme 1: Chetti Community Activities**

There are three sub-themes in the activity theme of the Chetti community. The first sub-theme is celebration and communal activities which are among the cultural activities they often do to preserve their traditions. In addition, the third sub-theme is the role of the household club which also plays an important role in the success of all planned activities.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Religious Ceremony and Festival Activities**

Sub-theme 1 found that the activities of the Chetti group in Malacca are festive activities. Among the festivals they celebrate are Deepavali, Vithu Ponggal, Mathu Ponggal and Kanni Ponggal. In addition, festival activities in Kampung Chetti are often celebrated with enthusiasm and even become the focus of various other races to attend every event

(Transcript R2, Transcript R5). It is clear that festival activities are among the activities that can strengthen unity because they can gather and socialize to celebrate the festival (Borneo Messenger, 2019).

For example, Deepavali is one of the festivals that is celebrated socially because it is not centered in temples (Transcript R3). In general, this festival is celebrated to eliminate all ignorance and evil and strengthen moral values. In addition, Purana stories, which are stories about Hindu gods and goddesses, are depicted during this festival. Therefore, celebrating the festival can foster awareness of the importance of celebrating the festival. In addition to being able to strengthen family ties, the history of the festival can also be remembered and cherished by generations. Through this activity, the community can cultivate respect and understand the wishes of other races (Transcript R4).

"Unity in Kampung Chetti is achieved through holding an activity every three months. Among the big celebrations are taking milk and putting it in the temple in the front part. This festival only happens once a year. If it's like a daily activity like Pongal. And all these activities do not involve other races".

(Transcript R2)

"Every festival will be celebrated together. Festival ceremonies are also celebrated together. For example, the Raju Caca festival (Malays come to eat together, Chinese come to be a volunteer).

(Transcript R5)

"If you want to involve other races, like the Deepavali festival, other friends will come. Malays, Indians, Chinese also come to celebrate. It's just that during the PKP that day, less people came to celebrate."

(Transcript R3)

"The relationship is going well. Everyone respects each other and understands every wish of every race. For example, if there is a program, they will respect and be sensitive to the food of each race".

(Transcript R4)

### **Sub-theme 2: Communal Activities**

Communal activity can be described as an activity carried out by community members in cooperation and helping each other in solving tasks and problems voluntarily. Communal activity is done without coercion and the feeling of wanting to do so exists as a result of the high awareness and responsibility possessed by each member of the community (Gurniwan, 1987). In fact, this attitude of mutual cooperation has been ingrained in the Chetti village community and is a habit passed down from generation to generation from their ancestors. This cooperative attitude plays a very important role in initiating practical development and supporting each other even if they are of different races (Transcript R4). The communal activities that exist, grow and develop in the life of the Chetti community all this time, need to be directed and built in such a way to ensure that this heritage remains for posterity and does not get lost in time.

Cultural heritage around the world is now something very valuable and shows the national identity. The formation of national identity is closely related to cultural heritage such as culture and arts produced by the community itself (Omar et al., 2016).

### **Sub-theme 1 : Knowledge of Future Generations**

Multiracial society has formed a diversity of cultures, arts and beliefs gathered in one mould which eventually produces a harmonious and stable form of life. When everyone respects and tolerates the heritage they have, then a sense of shared responsibility within this multiracial community becomes a factor that can preserve the heritage of each race in Malaysia, so that future generations can recognize the diversity of these races (Transcript R2 and Transcript R3).

In addition, the next generation needs to know the customs and culture of each race in order to foster mutual respect in all matters (Transcript R4 and Transcript R5) to ensure the harmony of each race is maintained (Abdullah et al., 2016).

"It is necessary to preserve the heritage so that future generations can be aware of the minority group of Chetti"  
(Transcript R2)

"Agreed. In the old days, we knew about Malay customs, such as having to respect and say a prayer when passing by a grave. In the old days, friends did not care about religion and were of one mind in all matters".  
(Transcript R4)

"Agreed. Unity must start from oneself. Making friends and respecting religions are very important. Need to always set a good example".  
(Transcript R5)

### **Theme 3 : Social Media as a Medium to Promote Unity**

Social media is a medium that is being exploited online by making it easier for users to join the virtual world that is provided in this century. In this post-modern era, social applications such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Telegram and others are examples of the most prominent form of social media used by people all over the world (Abdul Halim et al., 2019).

#### **Sub-theme 1 : Social Media Give Exposure About Unity**

In this era of globalization, people use social media to fill their free time and search for information. This situation occurs because social media applications such as Facebook and Instagram are very sophisticated and can attract the attention of people from various countries. This is due to the fact that a lot of information can be obtained through social media and can even connect with friends and relatives who are far away and even those who have been separated for a long time. In addition, using of social media can strengthen unity and spread the information regarding a race (Transcript R1, Transcript R2 and Transcript R5). In fact, there are research subjects that state the role of politicians who are displayed in social media plays an important role in ensuring racial unity is preserved (Transcript R3 and Transcript R4) (Jali & Besar, 2012).

Communication within social media will influence attitudes, world views, social organization, human behavior, activity orientation, self-perception and other people. The pros and cons of using social media in society today are closely related to human relationships (Khairuni, 2016). In our eagerness to celebrate the existence of this social media, there are many advantages and disadvantages that sometimes we ourselves have not identified and are not aware of.

Human relationships mentioned earlier include multi-racial relationships such as those that have existed in Malaysia since the ancient times. Pluralism in Malaysia is undeniable and a legacy that needs to be preserved. Through social media, unity can also be maintained, but disputes can also occur if it is not controlled, and roles are not played well by all parties.

"The media can encourage unity, for example, our race that others don't know about. So, if we share it on social media, other people can be aware of our customs, the festivals we celebrate".

(Transcript R1)

"Nowadays, everyone uses social media, so with social media, you can spread the word about the Chetti community".

(Transcript R2)

"Political parties need to set the best example and not be the cause of division".

(Transcript R3)

"Media is very important nowadays because it can strengthen the relationship between races. Now, the majority of people have a phone as early as during their school days".

(Transcript R5)

"An example of Indian customs, ghost prayers that go viral are not good and are then looked at as bad by other races. Things like this shouldn't happen. This can cause division between races".

(Transcript R4)

## **The Impact of Social Media on Unity Among Minority Groups**

### **Sub-theme 1 : Media That Discuss Unity**

The use of social media in the Malaysian community increased during the peak of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020 with "the percentage of household access to the internet showing an increase to 95.5 percent in 2021 compared to 91.7 percent in 2020. In 2021, access by households to mobile phones and computers also increased to 99.6 percent and 88.3 percent respectively" (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). This is because social media plays an important role in delivering information, searching for information and interacting between other ethnicities to get to know each other while strengthening unity in Malaysia, especially the minority groups. In fact, the space to meet and interact between different ethnicities in Malaysia is wide open for them to find information related to other ethnicities and exchange opinions and views through Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, TikTok, blog and WhatsApp applications (Abd Rahman et al., 2019) and this is supported by the statement by the informant below:

“For me, most blogs talk about unity. Like me, at the university I study, if they do research, they will use blogs. On the blog they will know more details. There are two blogs or Google Scholar.”

(Transcript R1)

“Blogs. Because the blog will tell a little more in depth. Because if FB or IG will tell a little story. If forum is also possible, because the forum will give lectures. So, through the talk, people will know more about something in more detail. An example of forum is interview, right?”

(Transcript R2)

Indeed, social media can foster unity in Malaysia through a borderless internet network to learn and understand the culture of an ethnic group even better. Abd Rahman et al (2019) also stated that the government can also make social media an effective medium in disseminating information regarding an ethnic group in Malaysia, and this is an initiative to unite the community, especially the young generation, as an intermediary medium compared to face-to-face.

### **Issues in Social Media Involving Unity**

There are various issues in social media that involve unity. The acceptance of the new generation of Malaysia's pluralistic society towards unity through social media is based on two perspectives: The perspective of the informants and Perspective 10. The informants' perspectives, from positive informants' observation, involve those who reject the idea of misusing social media due to less sensitivity to issues of integration and lack of control and monitoring. This statement illustrates the idea that social media is becoming an obstacle towards ethnic unity in Malaysia. On the other hand, Perspective 10 is those who accepts that if social media is used wisely will be an effective medium for unity. Research shows that informants expressed that political factor is the primary factor for social cohesion. Additionally, other factors such as education, religion and culture are also considered as the factors for social cohesion for society in Malaysia.

### **Recommendation**

This study is expected to help certain parties, especially those who care about unity among minorities in Malacca. This is important to understand the impact of social media and its implications on the Chetti people in Malacca.

The government needs to be the main pillar in highlighting these minorities. Among the actions that the government needs to take are planning and monitoring activities that can promote inter-racial interaction. When all parties such as leaders and communities of various races play their respective roles, the unification process can be maintained. These activities, planning and monitoring can be implemented either in social media or in minority target villages.

In addition, the government can also hold a campaign to help preserve the traditional and cultural activities of minority communities such as the Chetti, so that all communities can approach and understand their cultural traditions. The tradition of visiting and celebrating all activities such as festival celebrations should be encouraged so that all races can equally participate in enlivening the event.

In fact, it can provide guidance to strengthen the management of social media by the government or private agencies, so that the use of social media becomes a medium for racial unity in Malaysia, especially for minorities. In addition, the results of this study can also contribute ideas to the government to always emphasize the use of social media in society and not have a negative impact on any minority groups in Malaysia.

Next, this the unity of this minority group can be utilized as one of the tourist attractions in Malacca. This is because these minorities are difficult to find in other states in Malaysia. Among them is the re-establishment of the Ministry of National Unity which shows that the government is serious in dealing with various problems related to inter-racial relations.

### **Conclusion**

Social media plays an important role in racial unity among the people in Malaysia, especially the minorities. A variety of important information can be obtained on social media such as the latest news. Social media also acts as a medium for users to build on their networks from various races, states and countries. If good relations can be maintained by all connections from different races, unity will also be established. Good communication through social media can also maintain unity. Users need to reduce any form of communication that can lead to arguments and disagreements with each other. All Malaysian communities need to play a role together to maintain unity and further maintain the well-being of each other's lives.

Through social media access according by Media Literacy Theory (Potter, 2004) which emphasizes the construction of knowledge structure, personal interests, abilities and skills as well as the task of processing communication channels among minorities in Melaka especially Chetti allows them to easily access information or unity information in Malaysia. This is important because in this study because without the indicators of the four constructs of Media Literacy Theory, the findings of the study by focusing on the search for unity information on social media for the minority group will not be significant with the objective of this study.

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