

The Malay social identity: A study on the Malay personality traits reflected on political and non-political *Facebook* pages

Jas Laile Jaafar
Muhammad Saiful Haq Hussin
Salinah Jaafar

Introduction

As early as the 1840s, Abdullah Munsyi used the term *Melayu* to differentiate the Malays, from the Chinese and Indians used by the colonials. The Malays are known for their Oriental traits such as courteous, polite, gentle, respect the elders, take heart, humility (Chee Beng, 1999; Shamsul, 1997; 2001; Wan Kadir, 1993), and high in agreeableness and extraversion (Mastor, Jin, Cooper, 2000; Muhamad and Jaafar, 2009; Neo, 2012). As for Western scholars, the Malays are hospitable, honest, emotional, respectful, friendly and polite (Derks, 1997; Goddard, 2005; Hewstone and Ward, 1985; Watson, 1996; Vickers, 2004). The Malays are characterized not only by adherence to Islam, but also by the presence of *bomoh* or shaman and shadow plays. There is often mention too of *adat* (custom), *halus* (refined) behavior, anxiety about reputation, dignity and status (*nama, maruah, pangkat*), shame and deference (*malu and hormat*) and running *amok* (Djamour, 1959). It is also important to note that Malays come from “tight” social structure (Provencher, 1971) and conformity in patterns of behavior is great.

Recently, the Malay Malaysian community has raised the question of what has happened to the Malays, judging from the comments being posted in the social media, particularly after the national election in 2013. The issue raised was whether the Malays

have become more Malay or less Malay, judging from offensive comments in some social media platforms.

Recent Malay studies mostly focusing on the anthropological and sociological perspective (e.g., Brennan, 2001; Chung, 2011; Goddard, 2003). In other words, most studies are anthropological in perspective and studies on the psychology of the Malays are quite scarce, especially on their social identity. Although research on the motives and usage of social networking sites is emerging (e.g., Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Fearington, 2014), questions remain regarding exactly how are Malay users presenting themselves on social media, and what are the identity of the Malay users in the social media?

Furthermore, because of the important impact on how the online communication tool could affect ones identity (Livingstone, 2008), it is important to study how the Malay users shared their thoughts or feelings, as well as their reactions toward a particular topic or issues in social media in order to get an understanding of today Malay society identity, at least from the angle of media social world. In this study, we only focus on one social networking site (SNS) which is *Facebook*. We believe that *Facebook* is appropriate for the current study as it is one of the most popular and visited social media websites in Malaysia that allow the users to being free to share their personal opinions by merely posted a comment there. In fact, the *Facebook* comments in turn might indirectly reflect the Malay users' character at least in thinking if not their behavior. Therefore, it is valid as a tool to investigate the Malay social identity.

Facebook is by far one of the most popular online social networking sites (SNS) in the modern day (Kreutz, 2009). For example, a total *Facebook* user in the Malaysia has

reached more than 13 million in 2012 (*Social Bakers*, 2012). In the past, scholars have actively explored how identity and language are manifested in online interactions. For example, research on chat rooms and newsgroup has revealed interesting trends in the way individual identity is presented, language is used, and interactions have transpired (Calvert, 2002; Crystal, 2001; Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003; Turkle, 1995). Wilder (1982) asserts that the word *bahasa* (language) can refer not just to speech but also to manners: a person “who is polite” and cultivated has a deep knowledge of adat, and as such a person’s manners and speech are *halus* (p.116-117). Meanwhile, Grasmuck et al. (2009) noticed that how a process commonly associated with identity development was reflected on respondents’ *Facebook* pages, similar to the real world. In short, the goal of the present study is to explore the traits that Malay users uses in presenting themselves on *Facebook* through theirs comments.

Study 1

The question of the continuity and sustainability of Malay identity has been raised recently as to whether the Malays remain the true Malay especially after the the national election in 2013. This issue has lead to a need of study on the Malay identity on social media where the “non-Malay” traits appeared the most. In study 1, we explore the characteristics of the Malay users that reflected through their comments posted on political *Facebook* pages. In short, our study 1 was designed to measures the ideological elements of identity.

Method

Participants

Data were obtained from two separate groups of respondents. The first consists of Malay *Facebook* users who have posted comments on the fan page of “*Anti-Pakatan Rakyat*” (APR) and “*Pakatan Rakyat Supporters*” (PRS) from July to September 2013. The second group consists of 21 Malay adults that completing an open-ended question, “who is the Malay?”.

Materials

One thousand comments posted by Malay *Facebook* users on two fan pages, “*Anti-Pakatan Rakyat*” and “*Pakatan Rakyat Supporters*” were analyzed for the qualitative phase of the study. All comments were analyzed using NVivo 10 to identify the themes or characteristics of the Malay *Facebook* users. Another twenty one respondents were also asked to provide their thoughts to an open ended question, “who is the Malay?” by simply naming the characteristics.

Results

In general, the results of the Nvivo analyses indicated that there are 14 characteristics which are sarcastic, outspoken, emotional, rude and offensive, being judgmental, passionate, loyal, fatalistic (*redho*), respectful, patience, considerate, courteous and polite (*budi bahasa*), shy and obscence (see Table 1). We found that most of the comments posted on PRS and APR has indirectly reflected on more negative characteristics rather than positive. Specifically, the findings showed that 29.89% of the comments posted on PRS are sarcastic, 18.16% are outspoken, 13.97% emotional, and 11.17% are rude and offensive. As compared to APR, 28.86% of the comments are emotional, 17.07 percent are being judgemental, 14.63% outspoken, and 11.79%

sarcastic. In total, majority of the comments posted reflected sarcasm (22.52 %), followed by emotional (20.03 %) and outspoken (16.72 %). Meanwhile, in response to the question of “Who is the Malay?”, 10 characteristics have been reported by our participants, which are well-spoken, polite, respectful, helpful, kind, prejudice, lazy, close-minded, envious, and give up easily.

Table 1: The Characteristics of Malay *Facebook* Users on PRS and APR Fan Pages

Characteristics	Political <i>Facebook</i> Fan Pages				Total	
	PRS		APR			
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sarcastic	107	29.89	29	11.79	136	22.52
Outspoken	65	18.16	36	14.63	101	16.72
Emotional	50	13.97	71	28.86	121	20.03
Rude and offensive	40	11.17	22	8.94	62	10.27
Being judgemental	32	8.94	42	17.07	74	12.25
Passionate	22	6.12	4	1.63	26	4.31
Loyal	13	3.63	5	2.03	18	2.98
Fatalistic (<i>redho</i>)	7	1.96	9	3.66	16	2.65
Respectful	6	1.68	8	3.25	14	2.32
Patience	6	1.68	5	2.03	11	1.82
Considerate	4	1.12	9	3.66	13	2.15
Courteous and polite	3	0.84	0	0	3	0.50
Shy	2	0.56	0	0	2	0.33
Obscure	1	0.28	6	2.44	7	1.16
Total	358	100	246	100	604	100

Study 2

In study 2, we extended our study to explore the characteristics of the Malay users that reflected through their comments posted on non-political *Facebook* pages. It is important to explore on both, political and non-political *Facebook* page in order to understanding clearly and having a more balance picture of how the Malay users presenting themselves on *Facebook*.

Method

Participants

Data were obtained from two separate groups of respondents. The first consists of the Malay *Facebook* users who have posted a total of 1,093 comments on the page of “*Berita Harian Online*” and “*PenMerah [dot]com*” from March to May 2015. The second consists of 200 Malays’ (90 male; 110 female), having an average age of 26.14 years (SD= 7.65).

Materials

In this study, we use two different instruments. The first study materials were comments posted on *Facebook*. Two non-political *Facebook* pages were chosen (i.e., *Berita Harian Online*; *PenMerah [dot] com*). Both of the *Facebook* pages were chosen based on the criteria of most largest audience and popularity. As reported by Socialbakers (<http://www.socialbakers.com>, March, 2015), *Berita Harian Online* has estimated to be followed by 3,048,549 audience, which is the largest for the categories of social media in Malaysia. Meanwhile, *PenMerah [dot] com* has estimated to have 5,392,364 followers, which is the largest for the categories of public figure at the time. The posting of comments that reflected the *Facebook* users’ identities were taken and then assessed.

As for the second group, a set of questionnaires which listed 40 Malay traits were given to 200 Malays. The questionnaires were designed in order to determine the Malay perception on their own social identity.

Results

In general, 13 characteristics are found which are, sarcastic, rude and offensive, outspoken, sensible and tactful, sympathy, being judgemental, like to gossip, emotional, caring, courteous and polite (*budi bahasa*), fatalistic (*redho*), considerate, adhere to religion and customs (see Table 2). From the comments, 68% reflected Malay negative traits as compared to 32% that are positive traits. Specifically, 20% of the comments indirectly reflected the sarcastic character, followed by 18% mentioned rude and offensive traits, and 15% of the comments mentioned Malays as outspoken. Despite of the negative traits, some of the comments reflected Malay traits, for example, 12% of the comments mentioned the Malays as being sensible and tactful, and 10% as sympathy. Taken altogether, the percentage of negative traits mentioned is higher than the positive traits. These results indicate that there are the Malays have more negative as compared to positive traits.

Table 2

The Characteristics of the Malay Users on Facebook (Non-Political *Facebook* Page)

Characteristics	N	Percentage (%)
Sarcastic	214	20.0
Rude and offensive	195	18.0
Outspoken	168	15.0
Sensible and tactful	134	12.0
Sympathy	109	10.0
Being judgemental	64	6.0
Like to gossip	53	5.0
Emotional	45	4.0
Caring	35	3.0
Courteous and polite (<i>budi bahasa</i>)	31	3.0
Fatalistic (<i>redho</i>)	20	2.0
Considerate	13	1.0
Adhere to religion and customs	12	1.0
Total	1093	100

As for the second group of 200 Malays, majority reported that the Malay as respectful and friendly (154, 77%). Meanwhile, 148 (74%) agreed that the Malay possess the characteristic of well-spoken, 145 (72.5%) agreed the Malay as helpful. Meanwhile,

146 (73%) view the Malays as kind, 140 (70%) reported the Malay as courteous and polite. However, 138 (69%) reported the Malays want to get rich quick. In our report, only 70 (35%) of the Malay views themselves negatively, for example, only 56 (28%) view their own community as close-minded, 51 (25.5%) as arrogant, 38 (19%) as rude. Overall, our study show that majority of the Malay demonstrated a more positive outlook of their own community rather than negative outlook (see Table 3).

Table 3: Score, Percentage, Mean, Standard Deviation (*Who is the Malay?*)

Characteristics	Total score (N=1000)	Mean (SD)	Whos is the Malay? (N=200)		
			Agree	Moderately agree	Disagree
Respectful	802	4.01 (.82)	154	38	8
Friendly	802	4.01(.84)	154	37	9
Well-spoken (<i>lemah lembut</i>)	792	3.96 (.82)	148	42	10
Helpful	789	3.95(.84)	145	44	11
Kind	787	3.94(.77)	146	48	6
Want to get rich quick	779	3.90(.99)	138	44	18
Courteous and polite (<i>budi bahasa</i>)	777	3.89(.79)	140	52	8
Grateful	770	3.85(.85)	126	66	8
Caring other people's feelings (<i>jaga hati</i>)	765	3.83(.87)	129	58	13
Adhere to a customs	764	3.82(.97)	131	49	20
Tolerate	764	3.82(.78)	136	55	9
Considerate	754	3.77(.87)	130	60	10
Love entertainment	752	3.76(.97)	121	61	18
Righteous	751	3.76(.84)	131	54	15
Loyal	736	3.70(.91)	118	64	17
Moderate	736	3.68(.80)	118	70	12
Humble	735	3.68(.87)	126	56	18
Responsible	732	3.66(.80)	113	77	10
Togetherness	730	3.65(.87)	111	73	16
Shy	718	3.59(.96)	109	69	22
Independent	713	3.57(.92)	108	69	23
Fatalistic	711	3.56(.84)	110	72	18
Highly sensitive	711	3.56(.96)	109	64	27
United	709	3.55(.88)	104	75	21
Creative	708	3.54(.91)	105	73	22
Careful	694	3.47(.81)	95	84	21
Sarcastic	687	3.44(1.12)	100	56	44
Open-minded	687	3.44(.94)	98	67	35
Like to complain	682	3.41(.96)	97	72	31
Prejudice	668	3.34(1.23)	94	55	51
Indifferent	672	3.36(1.03)	95	67	38

Lazy	652	3.26(1.18)	88	62	50
Flattery (<i>bodek</i>)	649	3.25(1.16)	98	49	53
Envious	642	3.21(1.18)	79	68	53
Bear a grudge	636	3.18(1.03)	70	79	51
Sulking	613	3.07(1.02)	70	76	54
Give up easily	593	2.97(1.10)	70	67	63
Close-minded	576	2.88(1.13)	56	77	67
Arrogant	555	2.78(1.08)	51	68	81
Rude	541	2.71(1.05)	38	83	79

Factor Analyses

The results from the explorative factor analysis showed that eight factors explained 68.61% of the total variance (see Table 4). These factors had eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Factor 1 explained 30.35% (eigenvalue: 12.14) of the variation with the characteristics of prejudice, lazy, close-minded, envy, give up easily, flattery, sulking, indifferent, sarcastic, and like to complain. The second factor explained 14.42% (eigenvalue: 5.76) of the variation with the characteristics of well-spoken, courteous and polite, respectful, helpful, and kind. The third factor explained 5.54% (eigenvalue: 2.21) of the variation with the characteristics of loyal, friendly, tolerate, open-minded, togetherness, righteous, and united. The fourth factor explained 4.56% (eigenvalue: 1.82) of the variation with the characteristics of grateful, moderate, responsible, creative, independent, and considerate. The fifth factor explained 3.90% (eigenvalue: 1.56) of the variation with the characteristics of highly sensitive, like to entertain, want to get rich quick, and bear a grudge. The sixth factor explained 3.64% (eigenvalue: 1.45) of the variation with the characteristics of rude and arrogant. The seventh factor explained 3.27% (eigenvalue: 1.30) of the variation with the characteristics of caring other people's feelings, humble, fatalistic, and shy. Lastly, the eighth factor explained 2.93%

(eigenvalue: 1.17) of the variation with the characteristics of adhere to religion and customs and careful.

Table 4: Rotated Factor Pattern for Who is the Malay?

Who is the Malay?	Eigenvalue	characteristics
Factor 1	12.14	Prejudice, lazy, colse-minded, envy, give up easily, flattery, sulking, indifferent, sarcastic, like to complain
Factor 2	5.76	Well-spoken, courteous and polite, respectful, helpful, kind
Factor 3	2.21	Loyal, friendly, tolerate, open-minded, togetherness, rightheous, united
Factor 4	1.82	Grateful, moderate, responsible, creative, independent, considerate
Factor 5	1.56	Highly sensitive, like to entertain, want to get rich quick, bear a grudge
Factor 6	1.45	Rude, arrogant
Factor 7	1.30	Caring other people's feelings, humble, fatalistic, shy
Factor 8	1.17	Adhre to religion and customs, careful

Discussion

The main objective of this study is to explore the social identity representations among Malay users on *Facebook*. We intend to find out what are the social traits that Malay users present themselves on *Facebook* through their languages and type of comments on *Facebook*. This study is one of the very first studies which attempts to analyse whether the Malay community today have becoming less Malay or vice versa, particularly in the context of media social as modern society nowadays has become more dependent on social networking sites in their everyday life.

In our first study, 14 characteristics reflected by the Malay users through their comments on two political *Facebook* pages (see Table 1). Overall, the Malay users seem

to represent themselves more negatively on political *Facebook* pages. The findings show that majority of the Malay users were more outspoken and blunt when expressing their thoughts and opinions on *Facebook*. Also, the Malay users tend to be vocal in their comments if they are disagreed with certain opinions posted on the *Facebook* timeline, such as insulting, harsh scolding, name-calling, and ridiculing the authorities or politicians. Other negative characters, such as blaming others and anger also clearly mentioned in their comments. Does this result indicate that the Malays are less Malay than the previous generation (who are well known for their gentle and *halus* attitude)? Probably not, as apparently the results are somehow or rather expected since all the comments analyzed were from the period of the 2013 post-election. It has been suggested that Malays' identity and values are well-represented through Malay language, such as, the word *sabar* (patience), *jujur* (sincere), and *taat* (loyal) (Goddard, 2001). Therefore, it is only natural for the political *Facebook* fan to show a strong reaction particularly after the election, to expressed strong opinions or delivered criticism in the comments. In the other words, the negative characters that reflected in the comments, probably as result of post-election reaction and might not be the real representation of the Malay social identity. Besides, we also intend to explore how the Malays perceive themselves generally, whether in a positive or negative light. The result show that most participants tend to view themselves as positive when asked about who is the Malay, such as courteous, respectful, and kind. Meanwhile, some participants tend to view themselves in both sides, positive and negative. Among the negative self are prejudice, lazy, close-minded, and envious.

In our second study, the traits of the Malays were further analysed in two non-political *Facebook* pages. In this case, we chose two categories of *Facebook* page, Public Figure Page and General Social Media page. Responding to the question of “who is the Malay?”, we found 13 characteristics of the Malay users on non-political *Facebook* Page, which are sarcastic, rude and offensive, outspoken, sensible and tactful, sympathy, being judgemental, like to gossip, emotional, considerate, caring, adhere to religion and customs, courteous and polite. This result is consistent with our first study which revealed that more negative traits were reflected on the comments as compared to positive comments. Therefore, it seems that our results are in contrast to the traditional Malays being described in past literatures. In other words, the characters that used to regard to the Malay identity are not evident in social media world particularly, in this case on *Facebook*. Although, it is well-known that in Malay culture, the concepts such as toleration, respect the elderly, well-spoken and well-mannered are among the Malay cultural values and norms that well-described the Malay social identity, particularly during their interaction with other people and direct verbal are considered as impolite among Malays (Goddard, 2001), but however, questions remain regarding exactly how the Malay constantly presenting themselves in the online context. One possible reason making it difficult to find the Malay users to portray their cultural identity on media social particularly the social networking sites may due to an effect known as online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). He suggest that there are six factors that creating this effect that are, dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. Suler argues that it is not surprised to see the online users showing unusual behavior, such as the use of rude

language, harsh criticisms, anger, or hatred. According to Suler, this type of disinhibition may know as toxic disinhibition which the online users may not act on in the real world. In this case, it is no surprise if the awareness of cultural sensitivities is low among Malay users because of the potential to be undetectable online.

In addition, the sense of anonymity among the users may lead them to feel open to express their hidden emotions either positively or negatively without worried about what other users would think because the person that they interacting online may not be identified in real life (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Suler, 2004; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). Moreover, in certain online environments such as *Facebook*, the users remain physically invisible even with their identity known. Therefore, it may decrease the fear or worries of the users to make any comment because they know people are unable to see their face (Suler, 2004). Regarding the self-report, unsurprisingly, we found that majority of the Malays view themselves in more positive ways rather than negative. These are what we have been expected (see Table 4). Besides, we also suggest that there are 8 factors that could be used to explain the Malay characters (see Table 4). Nevertheless, further study is needed in order to verify all these factors.

Taken all together, the identity that the Malay users portrayed on *Facebook* may not necessarily reflected the true identity of the Malay, rather than there are merely online identities. Despite the escalate concern on the disappearing Malay traditional social identity, it is important to note that most of the Malays are still having their positive traits. These social identities are something that we need to continually cultivate especially in our young generation, both in the real social world and online world. We hope that our study at least could provide a better picture of the Malay identity in the

context of online world in order to understand the pervasive impact of social media on the Malay identity in the real social interaction.

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