

**RELATIONSHIP OF EXPOSURE TO PUBLIC AFFAIRS NEWS
WITH COGNITIVE, ATTITUDINAL AND BEHAVIOURAL
DIMENSIONS OF ETHNIC TOLERANCE AMONG
MALAYSIAN YOUTHS**

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This study examined the relationship and contribution of exposure to public affairs news vis-à-vis the cognitive, and attitudinal components and the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance among Malaysian youths aged between 15 to 25 years. The survey data were collected using self-administered questionnaires. A total of 2,906 youths voluntarily participated in a survey. The results of regression analyses showed that when exposed to public affairs news, the cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance were significant predictors and accounted for 16.5% of the variance in the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. The cognitive component of ethnic tolerance was a better predictor, followed by the attitudinal component and exposure to public affairs news.

Keywords: News exposure, Media, Ethnic tolerance, Ethnic relation, Youths

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INTRODUCTION

The coverage of diversity, differences and inter-ethnic relations issues in the news media should help the public to understand the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations and accordingly promote better relations among the various ethnic groups of a multi-ethnic and multi-religion country. This study examined the relationships of exposure to news of public affairs with cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural components of ethnic tolerance in Malaysia.

THE FRAMEWORK

Growing interdependence in economic, political and social activities, and growing competition for development resources are common features of today's modern multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies. Larson, Wilson and Mortimer (2002) said that increase in interdependency and the confluence of diverse people in today's modern societies put a premium on development of knowledge, attitudes and skills to relate and cooperate across boundaries of ethnicity, religions and social class. This observation means that in today's pluralistic society, ethnic tolerance, as social competency, is more important than ever before.

Within the realm of inter-ethnic relations, different but overlapping concepts have been offered to describe positive value relations between ethnic and cultural groups. Among them are concepts like ethnic tolerance and multi-culturalism. In essence, they have been mostly used to describe desired states to which societies or nations should aspire. The term tolerance, in a general sense, is an ideology as well as values for dealing with diversity and differences. It entails the idea that cultural differences and memberships should not only be acknowledged and considered, but also respected. Viewed in this sense, it is not very different from the concept of multi-culturalism as conceived by Richeson and Nussbaum (2004) and Verkuyten and Martonovic (2005).

Weldon (2006) argued that tolerance is a principle of democratic creed. It requires citizens to uphold and secure the rights of groups, even those they find objectionable, to participate fully in political, social and economic life. In describing the domain of tolerance in relations to the

citizenship principle, Weldon (2006) proposes two dimensions of tolerance: political tolerance and social tolerance. Political tolerance involves basic political liberties. Social tolerance, on the other hand, refers to the right to express cultural differences. While there are several ways to conceptualise the ethnic tolerance construct, the present analysis argues that tolerance towards others of different ethnic groups involves cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural tolerance. In this sense, the cognitive component of ethnic tolerance refers to readiness to get an in-depth understanding of the cultural differences and of the contentious inter-ethnic relations issues. The attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance refers to the willingness to accept the rights of others of different ethnicities and views the inter-ethnic relations issues positively or constructively. The behavioural component of ethnic tolerance refers to practices that manifest openness, sensitivity and accommodativeness towards differences, divergence and conflicts.

The theme of tolerance is very prominent in Malaysia's national unity and integration agenda. As pointed by Zainul Arif Hussain (2003: 538), in the following excerpt of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's speech, the theme of tolerance is distinct:

"... building a nation out of a diverse people with differing historical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural backgrounds is something more than just fostering consensus on the basic character of a nation. It involves the fostering of shared historical experiences, shared values, a feeling of common identity and shared destiny that transcends ethnic bounds, without undermining ethnic identity."

While Malaysia has been highly respected as a successful multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious society, Malaysians should not be complacent of the achievement in the light of scores of inter-ethnic relations issues emerging as a result of development, modernisation and globalisation. It is important to note that the Malaysian response to an increasingly dynamic multi-ethnic society is not unchanging but it could change in either direction. It is for this reason that Malaysians have been continuously reminded to sustain the harmony and unity that have been achieved thus far which is fundamental for political and economic stability.

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Ethnic tolerance among Malaysian youths of 15 to 25 years of age is an important social phenomenon; it warrants the continuous attention of scholars and policy makers for four reasons. First, youths in this age category make up a substantial portion of the population and they carry greater responsibility towards further progress in the country and in ensuring a progressive harmonious and united civil society, as envisioned in Vision 2020. Second, the public including the youths of today is increasingly confronted with contentious multi-culturalism issues. Third, contemporary youths might have a different level of attitude towards multi-culturalism compared to that of their parents because they were brought up in a different environment. Finally, sustainability and future social, economic and political stability in the country depend on the degree to which present youths show tolerance towards fellow citizens of other ethnic groups. The last point is important because national policies, development plans and activities are necessarily tempered with ethnic consideration, as pointed out by Zainul Arif Hussain (2003).

Despite greater inter-ethnic economic cooperation among the ethnic groups, the issue of the distribution of resource allocation remained foremost (Jesudeson, 1997). In addition to concern over the distribution of economic resources and political power, the availability of new communication technology and the appeal of greater democratic freedom, which has resulted in a greater awareness of the ethnic, religious and language rights of Malaysians regardless of ethnic origin, can place the current climate of ethnic accommodation at risk. Sriskandarajah (2005) observed that there are signs that ethnic accommodation is under threat or that inter-ethnic relations are under stress. Kum Hor (2006) and Mansor Mohd Noor, et al. (2005), based on a review of past ethnic relations studies in the country, concluded that ethnic polarisation which has plagued the country for a long time, is not decreasing. Given such complexity, Malaysia clearly needs to continually foster greater ethnic tolerance.

In the context of promoting and enhancing ethnic tolerance in a multi-ethnic society, two communication models of inter-ethnic relations are applicable—the information model and the meta-cognitive model. Both models assume that the understanding, attitudes and behaviour of individuals can be influenced or changed by providing them with relevant information that they lack. Ben-Ari (2004) asserted that the

central premise of these communication approaches to inter-group relations is that ignorance and lack of information create fertile ground for the development of inter-group prejudice and negative stereotyping.

As an agent of change and a partner to national development, the role of the news media in imparting ethnic tolerance cannot be underestimated. It is generally accepted that the news media define various events in society not simply by presenting objective reality but rather through their interpretation of events. Also, an individual's subjective reality is contingent on the individual's dependence upon the media as a source of information. Learning and understanding about cultural differences from the media should facilitate and deepen understanding of the issues, challenges and dynamics of a multi-ethnic society, and in turn foster greater ethnic tolerance and openness towards multi-culturalism as argued by many (Khan et al., 1999; Soen, 2002).

The socialisation and educational role of the news media in fostering and strengthening ethnic tolerance involves imparting right knowledge, attitudes and behaviour that are in line with the ideas of civility and harmonious coexistence. The mass media in the country ought to carry the social responsibility in promoting greater ethnic tolerance, meaning a greater openness and acceptance towards multi-culturalism. In fact, the news media regulations in the country stress the developmental role of the news media in strengthening unity and harmony of the various ethnic groups (see Faridah Ibrahim and Mus Chairil Samani, 2000). Thus, in theory and in practice, the coverage of diversity, differences and inter-ethnic relations issues in the news media is aimed at helping the public to understand the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations and responding to emerging inter-ethnic relations issues accordingly. The news media are a tool for transmitting democratic messages and values, reconciliatory and integration messages, facilitating tolerance and open-mindedness and changing negative stereotypes. However, despite the obvious developmental role of the news media, in a high choice environment, news of public affairs constantly compete with entertainment.

OBJECTIVES

Given the value of ethnic tolerance, the significance of nation building in youths and the lack of empirical evidence on the role of news media

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in influencing cognitive, attitudinal, behavioural components of ethnic tolerance, the present study was carried out to ascertain the relationships and contribution of exposure to news of public affairs in mainstream media as well as the cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance on behavioural components of ethnic tolerance.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a cross-sectional survey on ethnic tolerance among Malaysian youths. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and participation was voluntary. The data were collected in the months of March-May 2005. The survey questionnaire, written in Malay, took approximately twenty-five minutes to complete.

Sample

A total of 2,906 Malay, Chinese and Indian youths participated in the survey. Attempt was made to ensure that the sample adequately represented the ratio of Malay, Chinese and Indian population in the country. The Indian youth sample constitutes about 10.0%, while the Malay and Chinese samples constitute 54.5% and 35.5% of the total samples, respectively.

The sample comprised 51% females and 48.4% males. Muslim respondents constituted 54.5% of the samples, while 45.5% were non-Muslims. The age of the respondents ranged from 15 to 25 years, with an average age of 18.9 years. The majority (65.3%) of the sample attended national schools for their primary and secondary education, while those attending national-type and religious schools made up 20.9% and 3.8%, respectively.

Instrument

The respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they used the television, newspapers, radio, newsmagazines, and the Internet to obtain news on a 4-point scale, 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = somewhat frequently, and 4 = very frequently). They were also asked to indicate how much attention they paid to news on public affairs in the media on a 3-point scale (1 = not at all, 2 = some attention, 3 = very much

attention). The score for the news media used was multiplied with the news attention score to create an overall index of overall exposure to news of public affairs. The higher the score, the greater was the exposure to the news media used.

The cognitive component of ethnic tolerance scale also consisted of seven items formatted on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) not willing to put efforts to understand cultural differences and inter-ethnic relations issues as expressed in the statement to (5) put much effort to understand cultural differences and inter-ethnic relations issues as expressed in the statement. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of the scale was .69. A higher score on the measure meant higher willingness to learn and understand the cultural differences and issues of inter-ethnic relations.

The attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance scale also consisted of seven items formulated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) not willing to accept the opinions or views on life in a multi-ethnic society and ways in promoting inter-ethnic integration as expressed in the statements to (5) readily willing to accept the opinions and views as expressed in the statements. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of the scale was .67. A higher score meant a more favourable attitude towards the cultural differences, issues and challenges of a multi-ethnic society.

The behavioural component of ethnic tolerance scale consisted of eight items formulated on a 5-point Likert scale. The eight items were identified as behavioural indicators of ethnic tolerance. The respondents were asked to indicate the degree they practised tolerant behaviour in dealing with diversity, differences and conflicts. The response categories ranging from (1) not at all practised to (5) very frequently practised. A reliability analysis of the scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .77.

RESULTS

In the univariate analysis, we first examined the level of ethnic tolerance. The analysis revealed that more of the respondents were in the high category for cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance. On the contrary, for the behavioural component, more

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respondents were in the moderate category. These findings suggested that, on the one hand, (i) the respondents seemed readily willing to understand the cultural differences and the social, economic and political right of other ethnic groups and the ethnicity issues, and (ii) the respondents generally had a favourable view towards other ethnic groups and accepted the various mechanisms put in place by the government to foster harmonious inter-ethnic relations. On the other hand, there seemed to be a gap in expressing ethnic tolerance in behavioural terms, suggesting that real or full integration among the various ethnic groups studied is still much to be desired. The findings provide support for the concern on the lack of full integration among the ethnic groups as observed in earlier studies (e.g., Hazril Jamil et al., 2004; Fatimah Daud & Abdul Hadi Yaacob, 2006).

The survey also found that the respondents vary in their level of exposure to public affairs news with a majority of the respondents (six in every ten) was in the moderate category. The findings clearly indicate that the respondents are not indifferent towards news of public affairs in the country. Despite the profuse entertainment programmes in the mass media, the respondents do pay attention to news of public affairs albeit not extensively.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationships and contribution of exposure to news of public affairs vis-à-vis ethnic tolerance. The partial correlation analysis found that all the variables were significantly and positively correlated. The correlation coefficients of exposure to public affairs news with cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural components of ethnic tolerance were .18 ($\rho = .000$), .10 ($\rho = .000$), and .23 ($\rho = .000$), respectively. The findings suggested that the more one is exposed to news of public affairs, the more readily and willingly one is to understand and accept the cultural differences and the rights of other ethnic groups, the emerging ethnicity issue and the various strategies used in promoting inter-ethnic harmony and unity, as well as practising appropriate tolerant behaviour in managing inter-ethnic relations situations. The findings support the previous claims (e.g., Ben-Ari, 2004; Khan et al., 1999; Soen, 2002) of the existence of a positive relationship between exposure to relevant inter-group relations information with positive orientation towards inter-group relations.

Relationship of Exposure to Public Affairs News

A series of multiple regressions was performed. In the first regression analysis, the cognitive component of ethnic tolerance was the dependent variable and exposure to news of public affairs was the independent variable (gender, age and attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance were included as control variables in the regression model). In the second regression analysis, the attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance was the dependent variable with exposure to news of public affairs as the independent variable (gender, age and cognitive component of ethnic tolerance were included as control variables in the regression model). In the third regression analysis, the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance was treated as the dependent variable, and cognitive and attitudinal ethnic tolerance, and exposure to news of public affairs as the predictors (gender and age were also included as control variables in the model).

Table 1: Results of Regression Analyses Predicting the Cognitive, Attitudinal and Behavioural Dimensions of Ethnic Tolerance

Predictor	Cognitive			Attitudinal			Behavioural		
	r	β	t-value	r	B	t-value	r	β	t-value
Cognitive	-	-	-	.30	.313	17.542*	.31	.214	11.412*
Attitudinal	.30	.313	17.542*	-	-	-	.28	.196	11.260*
Exposure to Public Affairs News	.18	.129	7.945*	.11	.048	2.669*	.23	.125	3.386*
Age	.14	.066	3.790*	.10	.069	3.880*	.09	.073	4.510*
Male (dummy)	.05	.015	.858	.13	.118	6.913*	.14	.069	4.243*
R-square	.124			.114			.165		
F-value	137.162			93.621			143.494		
P	.000			.000			.000		

Note: r = correlation coefficient; β = standardised beta; * significance at $\rho = .05$ level.

The findings of the three regression analyses are presented in Table 1 and the theoretical linkages of the key variable studies are summarised in Figure 1. As expected, the cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance and exposure to news of public affairs are significantly and directly correlated with the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. The three predictors collectively explain 16.5 percent of the variance in the level of behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. The cognitive component of ethnic tolerance was a better predictor ($\beta = .214$), followed by the attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance ($\beta = .196$) and exposure to news of public affairs ($\beta = .125$).

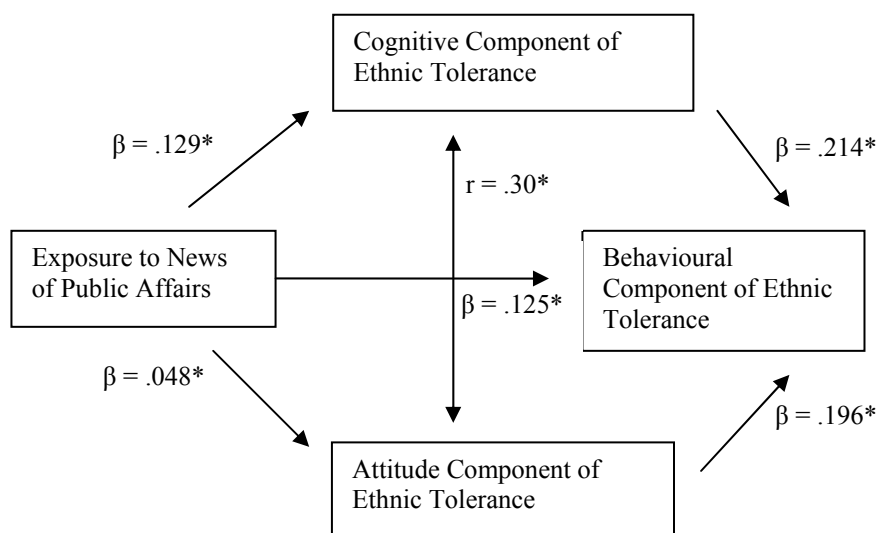


Figure 1: Summary of the Multiple Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting the Behavioural Component of Ethnic Tolerance

Note: * = Significance at $\rho = .05$; β = Standardised Beta

Regression 1. Dependent variable = Cognitive component of ethnic tolerance; Independent variable = exposure to news of public affairs, with attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance, gender and age as control variables. $R^2 = .124$, $F = 137.162$, $\rho = .000$

Regression 2. Dependent variable = Attitudinal component of ethnic tolerance; Independent variable = exposure to news of public affairs, with cognitive component of ethnic tolerance, gender and age as control variables. $R^2 = .114$, $F = 93.621$, $\rho = .000$

Regression 3. Dependent variable = Behavioural component of ethnic tolerance; Independent variables = exposure to news of public affairs,

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In addition to providing information on the status of level of exposure to news of public affairs and level of ethnic tolerance among the youths in the country at the time of the study, the present analysis yields insight into the role of exposure to news of public affairs in inculcating ethnic

tolerance. First, it is important to note that the harmony and unity among the main ethnic groups acknowledged thus far could be superficial given the findings that a majority of the respondents had a moderate level in the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance, although a majority scored high on the level of cognitive and attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance. Nevertheless, on a positive note, a foundation for harmony and unity exist and is strong since a majority of the respondents were observed to have a high level of ethnic tolerance in terms of knowledge and attitude towards cultural differences and the issues related to inter-ethnic relations and ethnic rights.

The findings support the assumption that knowledge and attitude directly influence the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance, as purported by Ben-Ari (2004). Accordingly, the study provides empirical support on the importance of learning and understanding the culture of other ethnic groups and developing positive attitudes towards the differences and challenges associated with ethnicity. Attitude towards and knowledge of cultural difference and inter-ethnic relations issues are significant predictors of the behavioural component of ethnic tolerance with knowledge as a better predictor compared to the attitudinal factor.

The level of ethnic tolerance in terms of practicing tolerant behaviour in dealing with ethnic differences and their related issues could also be predicted from the level of exposure to news of public affairs. The findings are consistent with those provided by previous studies (e.g., Khan et al., 1999; Soen, 2002), and provide support for the premise of the information model and the meta-cognitive model in explaining inter-group relations advocated by Ben-Ari (2004). As observed in the present analysis, youths who are more exposed to news of public affairs have a higher level of behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. Thus, it could be inferred that the mainstream news media in the country have, to some extent, played their role in inculcating tolerant behaviour in interactions among different ethnic groups through its coverage of inter-ethnic relations news. If this argument is accepted, one implication is that the relevant institutions responsible for citizenship education and promoting national integration should use news reports in their educational activities to educate young people about ethnicity, ethnic differences and inter-ethnic relations issues with the agenda of further strengthening unity and harmony among the various ethnic groups in the country.

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While acknowledging the contribution of this study, some conceptual and methodological limitations have to be discussed. First, the study employed a short cross-sectional survey. Thus the findings on the influence of exposure to news of public affairs on ethnic tolerance may not be conclusive. A longitudinal research design is required to strengthen the validity of the claim. Second, the present study did not take into consideration the possible confounding influence of interpersonal communication sources and inter-ethnic contacts in predicting ethnic tolerance. Thus, it is unclear to what extent exposure to news in the mainstream news media explain ethnic tolerance if the influence of interpersonal sources and inter-ethnic contact is included.

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