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Exploring Social Capital in Malaysian On-line Ethnic Communities

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Abstract

In 1996, Malaysia developed National Information and Communication Technology policy intended to establish online community networks amongst all citizens. As a country that has historically experienced uneasy tension between inter-ethnic social relationships, this research seeks to explore whether online social networking affects the forms of social capital and social integration found amongst diverse online ethnic communities (Malay, Chinese and Indian) in the country. Six online communities were selected as case studies and the research was carried out through interviewing eight volunteered online community administrators. The findings suggest that the six selected online communities in this study show great potential for enhancing social networks across all members. However, these are not significant enough to create social integration across all ethnic communities. Instead, three different trends of bonding and bridging social capital emerged. The first trend shows bridging social capital throughout both online and offline activities in MalaysiaMAYA.com, SARA and FamilyPlace.com. The second trend indicates that bridging networks were limited to online communication as seen in both residentially-based communities: USJ Subang Jaya and PJNet. In contrast, VirtualFriends.net only demonstrates bonding social capital developed in both online and offline social networking. Considering these diverse patterns it is argued that transferring bridging social capital from an online medium to an offline medium is challenging. Factors of cultural capital such as language use and cultural and religious observations have been highlighted as significant in shaping community's networking patterns. Overall, the issue of ethnic integration in the context of online communities in Malaysia remains, at best, a challenging factor for the formation of online/offline social capital.

Keywords: Social Capital, Malaysia, On-line Ethnic Communities

1.   Introduction

The introduction of the Internet and the growing popularity of computer mediated communication (CMC) have brought a new application in the use of social capital, particularly in looking at how the rise of online communication affects people's networks. Manuel Castells (2003) has suggested that the old concept of networks in human practice has been substituted with a new information network, powered by the Internet. Living in the information age, the Internet plays a central role in opening up social space which offers more flexibility and fluidity

in the networking process. The mode of networking can now happen faster from many people to many others, at any time and on a global scale. We are now living in a new form of society that is, "the network society" (Castells, 2003; p.2).

The network society, primarily interpreted by the emergence of online communities, has been associated with conflicting claims about the rise of new patterns of social interaction (Castell, 2003). Online communities, a new social group that emerge from interactive chat rooms and bulletin board, were said to potentially foster human social interaction and therefore, serve as an effective investment in the reproduction of social capital in community (Schuler, 1996). By definition, online community, commonly known as virtual, electronic or cyber, is described by Howard Rheingold (1994) as:

"....a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of community bulletin boards and networks." (p.57)

Influenced by this growing trend of online communities, substantial claims have been made in relation to the worth of new technology and social relationships. Optimistic commentators have asserted that online social interaction does increase face to face social interaction (Hampton & Wellman, 2001). By contrast, pessimists (Kraut et al, 1998) suggest the Internet decreases connection and undermines social relationships in the offline world. Highlighting some of the positive sides, many writers have asserted that the social interaction in virtual communications will eventually lead to social bonding (Cerulo, 1997). In addition, Jones (1999), shares the views that newsgroups and other forms of computer-mediated communication have sprung up out of the need to re-create this sense of community, where participants join and become involved with the purpose of re-establishing social bonds. Similarly, Parks and Floyd (1995), in his study of the members of 24 different newsgroups found that more than 60 percent of his subjects said they had formed a personal relationship with someone they first contacted through a newsgroup.

Furthermore, some scholars have begun to explore the interrelationship between real and virtual communities (e.g. Schuler, 1996; Cohill & Kavanaugh, 2000). In their investigation on the use of the Internet in Canada, Quan-Haase, et al. (2002) have pointed out that the local offline community is often supplemented by online interaction. They suggest that the Internet has the potential to help particularly young people increase their social contact. Similarly, Hampton and Wellman (1999), in his project on the e-neighbourhood, addresses concerns about the effects of the Internet on people's social networks and community involvement at neighbourhood level. The study indicates that the Internet has helped participants to subsequently draw on local politics and become active in changing aspects of local issues.

Several researches tend to pay attention to the issue of virtual ethnicities, including those multiethnic and multinational urban Internet communities. Ferlander (2003) examined a multiethnic community ICT, namely a cybercafé, in a disadvantaged area of Stockholm suburb, largely populated by foreign nationals and low middle income. The study suggests that online community strengthened both 'weak ties' and 'strong ties'[1]. Conversely, Merydyth et al. (2002) study in Australia of Atherton Gardens multiethnic ICT community, comprised of 64% Vietnam

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[1] 'Weak ties' refers to bridging while 'strong ties' refers to bonding social capital.

immigrants and 14% Australians, finds only bridging capital is practiced in local communication and exchange while bonding capital remains exclusive to the homogenous ethnic group.

Past studies have offered various possibilities on how online communication would affect social interaction and communication between users. This study considers multiethnic online communities in Malaysia focusing on three multiethnic local groups of people Malay, Chinese and Indian; these groups have long been associated with social tension. The question is how do online communities affect social relationships in multi-ethnic society? This is the question that this study seeks to explore.

2.   Social Networks, Social Interaction and Social Capital

Social networks, social interaction and social capital are three concepts that have accumulated different meanings and explanations. However, the principle idea of these three concepts can be summarized in two simple words, "relationships matter" (Field, 2003: 1). Relationships among people in a social group begin when individuals or groups make a connection with others in or out of their own companies. By making linkages through a series of networks, people tend to share a common value with other members in these net-systems. Network chains integrate different people with different abilities and resources. With collective resources gained from the members in the networks, it is possible for people to achieve things that they could not have achieved by themselves. By sharing resources (information and knowledge) in order to accomplish a desirable task together, every member in the network is said to develop a 'social capital' (Field, 2003; Ethier, 2004).

In "Bowling Alone" Putnam (2000) defines social capital as:

"...connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue'." (p. 19)

In further discussions, Putnam introduced the notions of "bridging" and "bonding" social capitals. The former "generate broader identities and reciprocity" while the latter "bolsters our narrow selves" (p.22-23). Unlike bridging, bonding social capital is seen as an inclusive relationship that happens between kinship and homogenous group of people who come from the same ethnic background. Even though the theory of social capital remains considerably unchallenged (Greely, 1996), Putnam has been criticized for failing to include cultural minorities, class and gender (Arneil, 2006; Liu et al., 2009).

Considering the impact of computer-mediated-communications (CMC) across Western society, various studies inform new ideas of reworking the concept of social integration. Even though the issue of inter-ethnic integration was indirectly discussed in many studies conducted, it has fostered a new dialogue among scholars as to whether these cyber subcultures can potentially transform the way we define social relationships (Calhoun, 1991) and social bonding (Oldernburg, 1989). Oldenburg (1989), for example, argues that online communities may fill a social need that has long been abandoned in modern societies. Following Oldernburg (1989), every individual's movements involve three basic environments. These are: where they work,

where they live, and the place where they join with others for conviviality. The latter environment is often regarded as a place where a sense of community belonging is achieved and experienced. Cafes, barber shops, and pubs, as Oldernberg argued, once provided this environment but, in the age of shopping malls, drive-in fast food, shrinking public spaces and private residents, the need for such socialization is rather left unfulfilled. Modernity has established a culture in which the home and the workplace remain as the only two interactive spheres of existence (Oldenberg, 1989). Therefore, the spectacular growth of virtual spaces has not surprisingly attracted millions of people throughout the world to become members of this new public sphere in order to re-create and re-establish this space as a third medium of conviviality.

In recent years, Malaysian scholars have become more aware of the role of media in integrating people. Some refer to television as a vital telecommunication tool for promoting a collective sense of national identity amongst citizens (Wahab, 2002). Others claim that reading materials such as books and writing publications have a significant impact on the construction of a national identity (Anuar, 1990). However, past research (in Malaysia) has not yet empirically tested the impact of online social networking on social capital and social integration among all ethnicities, not to mention how the impacts differ by ethnicity, class or gender.

3. Research Methods

There were six online communities involved in this study: USJ Subang Jaya (USJ), PJNet, VirtualFriends.Net, MalaysiaMAYA.Com, Setia Alam Residential Association (SARA) and FamilyPlace.Com. In general, these communities fall into three different categories. MalaysiaMAYA.com and VirtualFriends.net are online communities that have been created for online social networking. These communities are identified as "Social Networking Sites" (SNS) (Gangadharbatla, 2009), similar to other electronic social networking platforms, such as Facebook. USJ and SARA, on the other hand, function as residential-based online communities. The third category is a community of interest. For this type of community, member's participation is based on shared interest and not shared locations. As for FamilyPlace.com, the community was developed based on particular interest of parenting and children.

The study explored views and experiences by online communities' administrators towards the central issue of social interaction and social capital in their respective online communities. The potential administrators have been identified right after the final selection of online communities. Following this, an invitation for participation was sent directly to them mostly through their respective email addresses. It is important to note here that this study is based on voluntary participation. Therefore, only a total of 8 administrators from six selected online communities have agreed to be interviewed. The administrators saw their positions as leaders who are responsible for most of the community management duties, including conducting and monitoring the activity of all of the members online and offline. Table 1 show the list of administrators with their respective ethnic characteristics[2].

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[2] All administrators are given pseudonyms identities to protect their privacies. Each alphabet used is to represent their respective online communities, e.g: V for VirtualFriends.Net, U for USJ, F for FamilyPlace.Com, P for PJNet, M for MalaysiaMAYA.Com and S for SARA.

Table 1: The Administrators of Six Selected Online Communities

Online Communities	Administrator(s)	Ethnic Origin
VirtualFriends.Net	V1 (Founder, Webmaster, Administrator)	Malay, Male
	V2 (Founder, Advisor)	Malay, Female
USJ Subang Jaya	U1 (Administrator)	Chinese, Male
FamilyPlace.Com	F1 (Founder, Webmaster, Administrator)	Chinese, Male
	F2 (Founder, Webmaster, Administrator)	Chinese, Female
PJNet	P1 (Administrator)	Eurasian, Male
SARA	S1 (Founder, Webmaster, Administrator)	Chinese, Male
MalaysiaMAYA.Com	M1 (Founder, Webmaster, Administrator)	Malay, Male

4. Findings and Discussions

Careful analysis based on administrators' views in this current study suggests that the level of participation and the prospect of interaction amongst diverse online ethnicities have reflected multiple views on ethnicity issues. There are three distinctive patterns of inter-ethnic interaction that can be extracted based on illustrations given by the online community administrators. The first is associated with the condition where all ethnic groups are involved in online/offline interaction and participation. The second pattern refers to multi-ethnic participation online but only particular ethnic groups finding support in offline activities; the third pattern demonstrates the circumstances where there is only one particular ethnicity dominating the community online and offline.

Pattern 1: All Ethnic Groups

Three on-line communities, FamilyPlace, SARA and MalaysiaMAYA.com, are positioned in the first pattern. According to FamilyPlace.com administrators F1 and F2, the on-line community has attracted multi-ethnic participation since its early formation. Community objectives that mainly focused on family and child development were seen as a factor of attraction to keep this community constantly gathering people, regardless of ethnicities and other social backgrounds. The nature of the topics discussed, which are considered a "universal subject of interest" allows for the transition of the new information and knowledge to occur on a global scale.

FamilyPlace.com has actively functioned as a medium to organize community activities, not only in a virtual mode, but also in real-world settings. A series of conferences, talks, and numerous informal meetings were among several programs conducted by the administrators or members that provide the community with a chance to meet their online friends face-to-face. These

initiatives were made for the community to continue online activities offline in a way that reinforces the objectives of the community to build cohesiveness towards goals. Some of the programmes scheduled online, such as children's piano competitions and sports tournaments, are amongst examples of how agendas planned online were carried out offline. According to the administrators, any activities related to children were normally supported by multi-ethnic parents and this was always a successful means to integrate people compared to other organized programs. Overall, consideration for the importance of family development, children's growth, education and also other domestic issues that are the core subjects for this community have been a general concern for groups of parents, teachers and students regardless of what social background they come from. For this particular community, content and issues discussed were seen as a focal factor for bringing ethnicities together as an interest group.

"We are really proud of [ethnic participation in our community] it is really mixed! People are so open and we get such a good mix [of ethnic participation] not just the three main ethnics but also [from other ethnicities like Kadazan and Ibanese [from Sabah and Sarawak] and also overseas members from European countries and the United States."

(F1 & F2, 2008)

Another on-line community that claims successful integration of its multi-ethnic members is SARA. According to SARA's administrator S1, the key factors that help the community maintain itself as a unit are the way it is moderated and also a sense of tolerance amongst members. The proportions of ethnicities in the community that show a large percentage of ethnic Chinese (50%), compared to other ethnicities such as Malays (30%) and Indians (20%), have not had a big influence on how socialization took place either in the online medium or offline. The medium has provided an equal opportunity for all individuals (regardless of their ethnic groups) to take part in the forum discussions and get involved in activities that occur on the website. The ability to follow conducts and regulations as set up by the administrator functions as a contributing factor to the acceptance of individual differences among members, and is claimed to have been successful in helping resolve many issues arising on the website.

"We make it clear right away that we are all mature people, so we agree that we have differences but we respect the differences. So far we have not had many issues like [prejudice and racist on the web forum]."

(S1, 2008)

While networking and interaction between members of different ethnicities is thriving on the community website, many activities that were planned and organized online have also been successfully carried out offline. According to SARA's administrator S1, many programmes such as family days, sports and tournaments and various cultural festivals have been highly supported by multi-ethnic members. As a residential-based community that aims to unite its diverse ethnic members towards creating a cooperative society, SARA endeavours to facilitate face-to-face meetings rather than merely online. The administrator asserts that a real meeting is important for members to get together to discuss social issues or future plans that are not possible to discuss online. It is also essential to encouraging a sense of belonging amongst diverse ethnic members.

He further claimed that having durable support for multi-ethnic members is beneficial for the Setia Alam neighbourhood as a whole.

"We had a lion show last Chinese New Year organized by the [Setia Alam] [housing] developer. We told each other [about the event] and said, 'hey lets come and meet up'. We had Muslim members and Indian members all appear. So we met up."

(S1, 2008)

MalaysiaMAYA.com is another community in the group that celebrates diversity among its members. The on-line community has almost equal percentages of Malaysian multi-ethnic and International registered members, which facilitates a high possibility of networking, not only between the locals, but also with outsiders. While there is no evidence of strong networks happening between Malaysian and foreign members, the administrator believes that interaction and integration between at least three major groups in Malaysia is flourishing through the community networks. MalaysiaMAYA.com attracts mostly young people who joined the community mainly to establish relationships with their old or new friends. The group was described as open-minded and has construed friendships with others regardless of ethnicities, rather based on similar interests or hobbies. Social gatherings and parties were said to be activities that were organized mostly online and attracted members from diverse backgrounds to meet each other face-to-face. Hence, the establishment of the relationships is continuously strengthened through online conversation.

Pattern 2: Particular Ethnic Groups

All online communities selected in this study have demonstrated policies of equality in accepting every individual regardless of their social background to become members. Therefore, an approximate proportion of membership according to ethnicities as provided by administrators showed the tendency of mixed ethnic participation in every community. While FamilyPlace.com, SARA and MalaysiaMAYA.com have displayed a positive outcome of ethnic relations in the respective online and offline communities, in contrast, two online communities in this study have encountered a problem with inter-ethnic interaction offline. PJNet and USJ are residential-based online communities in two major urban localities in Klang Valley, known as the most developed and mix-populous region in the city. For the administrators, the communities have successfully verified that communication through modern technology, such as that brought about by the Internet, has helped unite the community and assist the locals in efficiently solving many topical issues. Both administrators have observed that multi-ethnic members, mainly from the three major groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians – are fully utilizing the medium to interact and share information with one other. They further argue that by supporting all activities online, the online communities could be seen as a venue for people from different ethnic backgrounds to develop greater understanding and respect for each other.

"We have been doing this since 1999. It is almost 10 years [and] it [USJ] still active. You'd be surprised! There are lots of people who post. Some of them are obviously Malays. They can put their name and you know [who they are] and yet, people will still respond. It is not like that, in my community (Chinese majority), I don't want to talk to them (the Malays). No, it does not happen. There was a Malay lady I think who was looking for accommodation, childcare and

someone came and gave her addresses. [We know that the person was Malay because] she said 'I want Halal [things]' that was obvious [that the person was Malay Muslim]."

(U1, 2008)

While administrators see the level of ethnic participation as considerably high in the online medium, they argue that the circumstances changed when it came to offline activities. PJNet and USJ arrange offline meetings amongst members on a regular basis. Informal dinners or tea together is an example of how real gatherings are planned to integrate members towards more promising relationships. Both communities, however, have had disappointing support from multi-ethnic members for such events. According to the administrators, offline gatherings have only been supported and dominated by a large proportion of ethnic Chinese and a very small percentage of ethnic Indians. The Malays were observably showing the least cooperation and at times there was no participation from them at all.

"There are a few Indians we did have. We know that there are Malays in there [participating in the community forum] but when it comes to TT (Teh Tarik/Tea) session, [the participants were] predominantly Chinese."

(U1, 2008)

"We do go for *mamak* (an Indian Muslim's food stall/restaurant). But I don't see [Malays attending]. I don't know why."

(P1, 2008)

Pattern 3: Domination of an Ethnic Group

As a plural society with long standing ethnic tensions and socio-economic inequalities, there is a higher probability that the existence of online communities in Malaysia could promote polarization if they were dominated by one ethnic group. Many factors could be an influence, including the way communities set their goals, regulate activities and design the site and/or content. For example, one out of the six online communities in this study appeared to show a homogenous pattern, where the community's registered members were approximately 99% Malay members. VirtualFriends.net, like any other social networking site, was originally formed by diverse ethnic groups to facilitate social networking amongst individuals or groups. Founded and managed by Malay administrators, this community is designed to welcome and serve every member equally, regardless of ethnicity, class or gender. However, according to the administrators, the number of registered members of Malays has increased over time, leaving behind members from other ethnicities. This has resulted in the domination of the Malays while other ethnicities were seen as secondary groups in the community, less active and inconspicuous amongst the dominant group.

Because of the Malay dominance, the community shows a high propensity for reinforcing the group's social culture in most of the activities performed online and offline. As claimed by the administrators, this factor has discouraged other members, from Chinese and Indians ethnic groups in particular, to join the community because they might feel inferior, uncomfortable or not accepted by the large proportion of ethnic Malay members. VirtualFriends.net members also utilize the Malay language in online conversation[3] and most of the topics discussed reflect the interests of this particular ethnic group. As for offline gatherings, the organized events were attended only by Malays and most of the activities planned were heavily influenced by the social characteristics and typical norms that belong to the ethnic group. For example, if SARA has an annual celebration for its multi-ethnic members by organizing *GongXi-Raya* or *DeepaRaya[4]*, VirtualFriends.net only celebrates *Hari Raya* for Malays because they are the majority and there are no other ethnic groups participating in the community.

Even though VirtualFriends.net can be considered an active online community, it has successfully gathered and reinforced a sense of belonging with increased civic engagement only amongst its homogenous members. Considering social relationships with other groups, i.e. the non-Malays, this on-line community failed to reflect inclusive networking that tends to bring together people across diverse social divisions. Overall, the experience of this online community can be best linked to the concept of bonding social capital rather than bridging.

Table 2: Three Patterns of Ethnic Socialization and Networks in Six Selected Online Communities

Pattern	Description	On-line Community(s)
#1	All ethnicities participate and interact in online/offline activities.	FamilyPlace.com, SARA and MalaysiaMAYA.com
#2	Multi-ethnic participation online with only particular ethnic groups supported in offline activities.	PJNet and USJ Subang Jaya
#3	Particular ethnic dominating the community activities online and offline.	VirtualFriends.net

The three above patterns have demonstrated that there are complex conditions at work when analysing relationships between different ethnicities in different kinds of online communities. Whilst online communities in Pattern 1 have shown strong promise, the remaining others suggest uncertainty in online and offline inter-ethnic relationships. Analysis that came from the online

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[3] The Malay language is an official language for the Malay ethnic group and also acts as a national language in Malaysia. Other ethnicities, such as Chinese and Indians, are observably more comfortable using their own languages or English language in daily communication, making the Malay language a second or third language for those particular ethnicities.

[4] *GongXi Raya* and *DeepaRaya* refer to annual celebrations which are celebrated together by particularly ethnic Chinese and Malays (*GongXi Raya*) and ethnic Indians and Malays (*DeepaRaya*) through the concept of sharing a social gathering called an 'open house'. During the celebration, individuals or groups will organize a social party which will be attending by multi-ethnic participants. The program was fully supported by the Malaysian government as a way to reinforce a sense of unity in Malaysia's plural society.

communities in Pattern 2 and 3 indicate that there is noticeable concern for the low degree of participation online/offline between the two groups, "Malay" and "non-Malay". Views by the administrators pointed out that several social issues such as class, culture and language-use play a significant role in shaping inter-ethnic interaction.

5. Issues Associated

Class Differences and Language Use

Inequalities exist in all types of society and have been a factor in segregating people for a long time. They can exist in many different forms such as wealth or property, or between individuals due to gender or age. From a sociological perspective, inequalities are referred to as social stratification which can be defined as "structured inequalities between different groupings of people" (Giddens, 1998; p.240). According to Giddens (1998), "stratification in the society can be distinguished as four basic systems that is; slavery, caste, estates and class" (p.240). Each system is different from another based on its establishment. Whilst the first three systems are instituted by legal or religious provisions, class systems are typically more fluid than others and depend more on economic differences between groups or individuals (Giddens, 1998).

In Malaysia, divergence between people is largely associated with class. Class differences are usually based on different patterns of economic control and resources upheld by different ethnic groups. The Chinese, for instance, have been claimed to be a group that controls the country's economy through business and trade since independence. The Malays, whilst being "sons of the soil" or so called *Bumiputra*, a majority in the total population, are referred to as a middle and/or lower class, largely involved in the state administration sector and public social services including small-scale agriculture-based activities in rural areas. The economic sector and business practices within this group are growing though under various Government support policies, but is still relatively weak compared to the Chinese. Indians and other minorities, in contrast, are more associated with mixed economic sectors, predominantly in professional fields, large-scale plantations and industrial-based economies.

Observation of class differences in Malaysian society is associated with the fraction of economic distribution and is considered as one of the contributing factors towards polarization and disintegration between ethnicities (Salleh, 1986; Embong, 1986). The different levels of achievement and status attributed to different groups have strongly influenced the type of lifestyle the groups are able to lead. These result in the way they choose their living areas and groups they are associated with, including motivation to achieve other desirable social interests like choices in education and occupation.

Whilst a group of people are normally recognized by class differences based on economic and social status, these indicators are almost unidentifiable when these different ethnic groups are brought together in a virtual context. Online community members are anonymous as long as they do not reveal their real identities. Class differences disappear between members in virtual conditions because social structures based on levels of income or property no longer exists in such circumstances. When there is an opportunity for them to disclose their social status as in SNS online communities, the information given is not necessarily true, and rather depends on the level of trust among members towards the information given. Yet, in a virtual medium where

relationships among users or members are only dependent on text communication, other indicators such as language use might help identify someone of a different ethnic group across the invisible members. The language used in communication often acts as an alternative symbol to identify online groups and their original social class.

Bahasa Malaysia or the Malaysian language has been constituted as the national language. Initially, it was known as *Bahasa Melayu* or the Malay language, referring to the language spoken by the majority of ethnic Malays. The change made to *Bahasa Malaysia* or the Malaysian language was to encourage the nation to use the national language for everyday conversation, as a way to enforce social integration through a concept of "one language" for the purpose of national unity. Despite these efforts, the use of *Bahasa Malaysia* has been met with resistance amongst non-Malays, especially Chinese and Indians. These groups prefer speaking either their mother tongues, (Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien for Chinese and Tamil for Indians) or English. A study supporting this (Jamil, et al., 2004), which examines ethnic interaction between school students in Malaysia, has indicated that language has been a barrier in improving a high social interaction levels among students of different ethnic groups. Chinese students tend to face difficulties in interacting and communicating confidently with Malay students because they cannot speak *Bahasa Malaysia* fluently.

The problem of language use in online communication is seen as a factor in shaping inter-ethnic interaction. This trend is clearly shown in the three online communities (USJ, PJNet and VirtualFriends.net) where language is claimed to be a major contributor to the lack of participation and interaction between Malay and non-Malay members. Both Malay and non-Malay administrators agree that communicating in English has been a problem for most of the Malay members whose language abilities remain inadequate. However, they do have different views when explaining the issue based on their own experiences and observations of their respective online communities.

For the non-Malay administrators, using the English language in online communication should not be an issue because they believe that most Malaysians understand the language very well due to the status of the English language as the second most widely spoken in the country. They also agree that the majority of ethnic Chinese and Indians can communicate in English better than in Malay and prefer to use the language in everyday conversation. However, by doing so, they did not see the language as a factor for social closure[5] of others who were unable to communicate in English. Instead, they speak the language because they are used to it and feel more comfortable doing so. The non-Malay administrators also suggest that not all members in the on-line communities speak proper English and therefore, they refuse to associate with those speaking poor English; language here becomes a form of social segregation. Nonetheless, members were encouraged to take part in English-based conversation because the information and knowledge shared amongst members is more important than the language.

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[5] Social closure can be defined as any process whereby groups try to maintain exclusive control over resources (Koch, 2003). Frank Parkin (cited in Koch, 2003), a British author, has agreed with Max Weber that the ownership of property and the means of production is a basic foundation of class structure. However, property, according to Parkin, is only one form of social closure which can be monopolized by a minority and used as a basis of power over others. Beside property or wealth, most of the characteristics that may be used to create social closure are ethnic origin, language and religion.

"Not everybody can speak English. Some Chinese do not even speak English well. You can see the way they write, some purposely but some are just really poor. But nonetheless they do come [in and join the community forum]. But actually the groups that come and meet are likely to be very comfortable with English, then we become friends and we [start getting to] know each other."

(U1, 2008)

"We are not grammar teachers. In fact it is not only the Malays [who cannot speak and write proper English] we have some that I can see in the forum. They are Chinese speaking people. Their posts sometimes cannot be understood either. But we do not laugh at the person's language or what they posted [in] [instead] we try to help. Most importantly we look at it and [try to] understand it. We always tell ourselves that this is about being together and [we just need to] accept the differences."

(S1, 2008)

"Yes, maybe because they (the non-Malays) talk more in English. But we don't care actually. If you want to use broken English, then use it!"

(P1, 2008)

The Malay administrators rather oppose the views of the non-Malays by arguing that the English language was a major issue for most of the Malays due to incompetency in speaking and understanding the language. In a medium of online communities where text communication is dominant, the use of language was seen by the administrators as an important vehicle in both expressing ideas and emotional support. Based on their observation of social conditions that appear on VirtualFriends.net, the community's administrators V1 and V2 have suggested that Malay members are more comfortable communicating in the Malay language than English because they can easily use the language to express their feelings, thus expending of what Ibarra (1993) and Gersick et al. (2000) call "soft social capital", referring to expressive emotional ties that involve the exchange of friendship and support characterized by high levels of closeness and trust (Ibrarra, 1993).

In the situation where members joined the online community to seek new friends and share information and knowledge, speaking in the Malay language, according to Malay administrators, is friendlier and can more easily create a sense of belonging among other members without creating ethnic boundaries. Whilst the non-Malay administrators encouraged members to use even broken English in chat or discussion, the idea is rather unacceptable from the Malay administrators' (V1 & V2) perspectives because they felt that the action would negatively influence relationships and members' images. They claimed that inadequate language use could lead to misinterpretation that could further cause misunderstanding towards content. Inability to express ideas in a proper way could also lead to false ideas and messages.

"I don't think that [the on-line community] would enhance inter-ethnic integration. It is because of the language barrier. Other ethnics like Chinese and Indians prefer communicating in English, whilst the Malays cannot speak English fluently. Most of the VirtualFriends.net members are teenagers and they obviously cannot speak and write in English confidently. [When they utilized mostly Malay language in the community forum] it naturally attracted only Malays participation."

(V1, 2008)

Overall, the Malay administrators believed that the language barrier does play a role in determining social relationships between Malays and non-Malays which, at times, constructs ethnic boundaries between those groups. Both ethnic groups are said to have a strong determination to use their own, or select comfortable languages and this has much influence in a way members select a group of online communities to join. By observing common language use in the community forum, they would know the status of the majority of members, eventually affecting their decision of whether or not to participate. Considering this situation, language becomes a vehicle for both inclusionary and exclusionary practices.

Culture and Religion

Other aspects associated with the challenges in integrating both Malay and non-Malay groups through online communities are the cultural and religious differences. Composed primarily of Malays, Chinese and Indians, Malaysia's cultures and religions are best described as hugely varied. Even though each ethnic group is identified by their different cultural and religious backgrounds, they are able to freely practice their beliefs and ways of life as long as they respect each other and show tolerance by accepting differences (Abdullah & Asmuni, 2005). In regards to Malaysia's cultural and religious affiliations, every ethnic group possesses its own distinct values and norms that they perform in their daily routines. This includes the kinds of food they eat, their dress codes, taboos and many more which may or may not be understood by those from other groups.

The matter of certain ethnic groups participating less frequently in offline gatherings, as observed in USJ, PJNet and VirtualFriends.net online communities, has attracted different feedback from the administrators. Both Malay and non-Malay administrators have highlighted that cultural and religious influences are key factors. Online communication is seen by the administrators as a potential medium that can help to improve the way people interact with each other and open up opportunities for the community to unite, share ideas and knowledge towards mutual benefits. However, the healthy practices that happen in the online medium do not mirror those in the real world. In practice, the different ways that cultural and religious systems are being performed by different groups of people become more intrusive in the offline setting. And, since most people live offline, the fact remains that religious and cultural practices reinforce strong bonding with the same ethnic group. In a real situation, people are dealing with each other and bonding to cultural and religious institutions, which in turn, regulate the way they interact, including those who do not share the same values and belief. By contrast, in the online medium, people are able to communicate and interact without seeing each other or having any physical contact. In fact, they do not need to reveal their true identities, use body language or perform any other tangible things associated with their daily life. This means that the virtual self is able to suppress

differences and therefore better able to communicate across culture rather than in a real life setting.

Overall, the points being discussed here mainly relate to issues concerning Malay cultural and religious practices, rather than those of non-Malays. In Malaysia, the Malay group is normally referred to as Muslim people whereby under Article 160 of the Constitution (Constitution of Malaysia, 2009), all Malays are considered Muslim or "Islamic" by religion.[6] Malay people tend to follow their cultural and religious practices more than other ethnic groups. Unlike other ethnicities, the Malays have intertwined their cultural and religious beliefs as one following the Islamic regulations. Regarding social relations, Islam has not opposed its members from making connections with those who are non-Muslims. However, some of the Islamic components that have been instituted as traditional values and norms in the Malay Muslim community for generations have physically differentiated various groups from others.

One of the issues raised by the Malay administrators which related to cultural and religious barriers was the matter of *Halal* food. Being Muslims, the Malays only eat *Halal* food, that is, food prepared in accordance with the Islamic method. Alcohol and pork, which are common amongst non-Malays, are strictly forbidden in Islamic regulations. This includes any preparation and ingredient of cooking that could possibly involve those non-*Halal* components. Amongst everyone, the food issue is considered a very sensitive aspect in the Malay-Muslim perspective. Accordingly, the Malay administrators have asserted that food scepticism has been the factor that discourages Malays from attending social gatherings organized and presented by predominantly non-Malay members.

Living as part of a plural society, the non-Malays in Malaysia are aware of Malay-Muslim sensitivity in the *Halal* matter. At gatherings, they might cook or prepare separate food for the Malay guests and also serve non-alcoholic drinks. However, it is not enough to convince the Malay-Muslims to eat the food because they also consider how the food is prepared. For instance, they would question whether the food was cooked in the same pot that was used to cook other non-*Halal* foods or whether the same plate or other dishes have been used to serve a pork dish before.[7] Thus, despite being acquainted with the matter of non-*Halal* food, this is an example of how other hidden norms and values in the Malay-Muslim world may not be understood by other groups.

"I think the most important thing [which obstructs inter-ethnic interaction] is religious consideration. Chinese people may be aware of the *Halal* matter for Muslims and they [the Chinese] know that pork cannot be consumed by the Malay-Muslims. But for us, it was not enough. There are so many things about the *Halal* matter that must be taken into account such as the way the food is cooked, the other ingredients used and many more. It is very detailed and complicated!"

(V1 & V2, 2008)

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[6] This is different from other Malay people in other countries such as in Indonesia. In Indonesia, Malay people have embraced other religions such as Hinduism or Christianity.

[7] According to Islamic regulations, any dish which has been used to serve non-*Halal* food must be cleaned according to certain Islamic methods before it can be reused by Muslims.

Because of its sensitivity, the *Halal* issue has not only set apart the Malay-Muslims from others but in some cases the group itself has also been excluded by the non-Malays to pay respects for this group. The following quote illustrates the perception of a non-Malay administrator towards the issue:

"I met the [on-line] group [off-line]. We have hung out a few times. We have a mixture [of members] but for a dinner, most of the time we do not include Muslim members, but there are [some] Indians. [The reason was] partly because of [food constraints]. Normally, among our members we [do have a session] called 'the beers session'. It is not necessarily a dinner but just a quick drink usually [held] in a pub. So it is not suitable [to invite or include Muslim friends]."

(S1, 2008)

Other than the food issue, the administrators have noticed other things that are also considered negative in Islamic conviction such as gambling, social gatherings in a nightclub, free contact between men and women and even having pet dogs[8]. The Malay administrators believe that being in a group that shares the same attitudes, beliefs and culture can save the customs through collective reinforcement and thought.

"I think the non-Malays find it hard to get along with the Malays because we do not share the same way of thinking, the way we present ourselves and the way we make friends. We also consider the way they [the non-Malays] interact and socialize with each other. As administrators, we do not want to be responsible for organizing events for these people if they to do things that oppose our culture and religious belief."

(V1 & V2, 2008)

Overall, views by the Malay administrators emphasize that both culture and religion play an important role in identifying the Malay community in Malaysia. While it was seen as a focal factor for strengthening social relationships among Muslims, it is also considered an aspect that causes the Malay-Muslim to not get along with, or find it hard to build personal relationships with other non-Malays, particularly the non-Muslim group.[9]

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[8] Dogs and pigs are two animals that are strictly forbidden in Islamic conviction. This includes touching and eating.
[9] There are also non-Malay Muslim groups in Malaysia, for instance, a group of Tamil-Muslims who were originally Indian by ethnicity but Islam by religion. Another group is a converted people known as 'Muallaf'. This group may originally be ethnically Chinese, Indian or others but have chosen Islam as their new religion particularly, when marrying Malay-Muslims.

6.   Conclusion

The analysis suggests that the six selected online communities in this study show potential for enhancing social networks and enforcing social integration and social capital across all members of different ethnicities. However, these are not significant enough to create integration across all communities. Administrators' views reflect tensions around developing social integration among inter-ethnic members in three selected online communities (USJ, PJNet and VirtualFriends.net), whereby online activities failed to translate into actual offline communities. While the existence of online communities may possibly change the landscape of community practices in Malaysia, the possibilities for ethnic integration, including mutual trust and reciprocity, as advanced by Putnam (2000), are not sufficient to guarantee "social capital" through the virtual medium alone. Considering the patterns of bridging and bonding social capital, it is argued that the non-Malay groups (Chinese and Indians) have potentially benefited from bridging social capital, which at large underpins inter-ethnic social activities and information sharing. Malays, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in bonding social capital amongst themselves. For this group, online communities serve as a medium whereby a set of opportunities to generate durable ethnic identities and reinforce a sense of solidarity amongst their own community are found. Just as mere contact between different ethnic groups does not automatically reduce prejudices, as proposed by the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1958), neither does online/offline contact between ethnicities as illustrated in this analysis. The findings have clearly shown that the introduction of online communities may even increase ethnic division and prejudices due to differential policies, language barriers, culture and/or religious differences.

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