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A preliminary study of kiasu behaviour - is it unique to Singapore?

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Abstract (Summary)

Kiasuism (from the adjective, kiasu; meaning "the fear of losing out") is a much talked-about topic in Singapore. This study seeks to assess the situation in Singapore and in a major city in Australia, define this cultural concept and explore the possible repercussions on society. Data collected from undergraduates in Singapore and Australia by using a questionnaire survey were analyzed using statistical techniques such as multiple regression analysis and t-tests of sample means. Qualitative methods such as content analyses and critical incident technique for instrument development were also employed. The study consisted of two phases: a phase one pilot study and a phase two questionnaire designed to determine the degree of kiasuism in the two samples and its effect on general well-being, academic performance and satisfaction with performance. Results indicated that kiasuism is not unique to Singapore.

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Introduction

Kiasu is a word of Hokkien (a Chinese dialect) origin, the literal translation being "the fear of losing out". The 1997 edition of the Australian Macquarie Dictionary defines kiasuism (a concocted noun of the adjective "kiasu") as "an obsessive desire for value for money - hailed as a national fixation in Singapore." Kagda (1993) stated that kiasuism has been dubbed the "negative complement of competitiveness". Competition breeds a sense of drive and commitment, while kiasuism stems from greed and promotes envy and selfishness. Where competition encourages calculated risk taking, kiasuism calls for conformity.

The extensive coverage in the local press between the years of 1992 to 1996 has led to much dispute and concern over the image that Singaporeans are projecting to foreigners. Numerous horror stories of the atrocities Singaporeans are capable of have time and again surfaced in press articles and other publications. The epic proportions to which matters have developed, delivered a warning sign to the Singapore government to the extent that persuasive measures have been earnestly employed in a seemingly ineffectual attempt to curb the kiasu attitude. The 1993 National Courtesy Campaign in Singapore, in fact, had centered around this theme with its slogan being "If we could only see ourselves sometimes".

Hence, the ugly image that Singaporeans are alleged to be portraying, both locally and overseas, is of utmost concern not only to Singaporeans in general, but also to the Singapore government. Being a country which thrives on tourism, the implications of being labelled a kiasu society would be immense with adverse effects on business partnerships, foreign investment, the economy, organization management and development, the travel industry, just to name a few. Internally, should kiasuism be a solely Singaporean trait carried to an extreme, it may well be a reason for the lack of entrepreneurial spirit in Singaporeans which is also a concern for the Singapore government. There is therefore a need to ascertain the extent of the kiasu behaviour in Singapore, before it takes root and dictates local thinking (The Straits Times, 1990).

This study, being a pioneer study in this area, attempts to first, stream-line the definition of kiasuism, and to determine whether or not the behaviour is enclosed within the confines of Singapore. Secondly, the effects of kiasuism on wellbeing, academic performance and grade-satisfaction are also examined.

Kiasuism in Singapore

The Report of the Advisory Council on Youths (February 1989) stated that the kiasu mentality underlies Singapore youth's attitude towards education, work and other aspects of their lives. In education, our youth are reportedly examination-oriented. There is a general lack of curiosity for intellectual pursuit. Many are of the opinion that our education environment is not conducive for critical and creative thinking. There is high pressure, mainly from parents, to perform well. In a society that emphasizes elitism, success is perceived to be narrowly defined in terms of school performance. Many have been brought up with most of their major decisions made on their behalf - resulting in the lack of vision and/or initiative.

There is a distinct lack of idealism and enthusiasm in work. Job security is considered important by many. Working youth are generally not prepared to take risks. Not many are prepared to become entrepreneurs nor venture beyond the boundaries of the island, symptomatic of the kiasu mentality.

Parents have often been named as the agents of the education system propagating such kiasu behaviour. In recent years, private tuition has, as a result, become a multi-billion dollar industry. Ahmad (1992), in an article entitled "slaves to education", reported that in the early 1980s, 19 percent of the student population received private tuition. A decade later, the figure has risen to more than 32 percent with students from pre-primary to university level, paying more than S\$200 million to private tutors. An interviewee noted that "parents feared that their children will lose out if they do not receive private tuition". In another report, Yeo (1995) observed that parents have admitted to going to great lengths in order to secure places for their children in some of the more prestigious schools. Moves such as joining affiliated churches, falsifying residential addresses and offering large donations are not uncommon.

Koh (1995) pointed out that Singaporeans being "descendants of migrant coolies, traders and merchants and never the cultured scholar class, are obvious delegates for boorish, kiasu behaviour". The report reflected how parents, even the financially well-to-do, were "grabbing freebies meant for the needy".

Thomas (1993) cited several scenarios of Singaporeans' kiasu behaviour including the common piling of food at buffet tables. The stories painted an embarrassing picture of the extremes to which Singaporeans go to get maximum value for their money and, perhaps even, to get something for nothing. Other commonly cited kiasu behaviour include the hogging of library books, refusal to give way on the roads and in elevators or trains, and making "souvenirs" out of airline cutlery.

"Mr Kiasu", the infamous, locally created comic strip character, who possesses the kiasu traits at their extremes, stormed the nation at one time, attempting to look at the humorous side of kiasuism. Similarly, Lim (1995) stated that the "kiasu tag merely adds to the global treasury of humour" whilst Seah (1995) illustrated the kind of light-heartedness that has often been associated with the topic. Wong (1993), the then foreign minister in Singapore, however, warned that being kiasu should not be an excuse for rudeness, dishonesty and boorish behaviours.

Despite the generally negative connotation of kiasu behaviour, there is also a positive side to it, one which surfaces as diligence and hard work in order to be on top of any situation (Chua, 1989). This side of the kiasu attitude generally leads students to put in extra effort in their work and to check out library resources other than what is required of them for class assignments. In a study by Ng and Ang (1997), this was labelled the "kiasu-positive" attitude which was found to lead students to more feedback seeking behaviours as it is believed to enable them to get ahead of others.

Kiasuism elsewhere

Is kiasuism found only in the Singapore context? In a report on Singaporean undergraduates studying overseas, several have admitted to reserving plotters for one another at the expense of their Caucasian classmates (Fernando, 1991). Whilst their Caucasian counterparts partied till the wee hours of the morning, Singaporean students were reported as studying till the wee hours of the morning. This, too, was labelled as kiasu behaviour.

Unlike many who believe that kiasuism is a Singaporean trait, Tan (1993) reported otherwise. She mentioned that those who abuse the kindness of others know no frontiers and are not confined to any nationality or race. The same can be said of kiasuism. In fact, in a Singapore-Hong Kong twinning conference, a Hong Kong delegate was surprised to find their "Par Chup Sue" (literal translation; scared to lose out) attitude alive in Singapore (Foo, 1991). The only difference is that, in Singapore, it is coined kiasuism.

Research hypotheses

In view of the examination of the available literature on kiasuism, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1:Kiasuism is not unique to Singapore.

H2:There will be a negative relationship between kiasu tendency and general wellbeing.

H3:There will be a positive relationship between kiasu tendency and academic performance.

H4: There will be a negative relationship between kiasu tendency and grade-satisfaction.

Method

Sample characteristics

The sample consisted of 30 Australian and 60 Singaporean undergraduates. For the Australian sample, about half were males, and the mean age for the group was 23 years old. The Singapore sample comprised 30 percent males, with a mean age of 21 years.

Study procedure

The major methods adopted to investigate the research issues set out in this study is the structured interview and questionnaire-survey methods, consisting of two phases. The first phase was a pilot study designed to facilitate the streamlining of the definition of the term, kiasuism, and to assist in designing the instrument to be used in Phase Two.

Pilot study. The pilot survey questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A records the demographics of the respondents, whilst Section B actively seeks the definition of kiasuism as understood by the respondents. Brainstorming was carried out by a cross-section of 75 Singaporeans, ranging from undergraduate students to individuals in the sales, manufacturing, teaching and medical professions, as to what kiasu behaviour means to them. The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was employed whereby critical incidents/observations of kiasu behaviour, and the range of possible responses to the incidents, were generated by the individuals. These critical incidents and responses were then given to another group of individuals who would assess the degree of kiasuism expressed by each response to the critical incident. Where incidents and/or responses were not agreed upon by more than three individuals, the incident and/or response was discarded. These critical incidents were then translated into hypothetical situational questions for Phase Two.

Having established the respondents' view of what kiasuism means to them, respondents are also requested to rank a list of 17 adjectives, some formal and others mere translation of common Hokkien terms, in terms of the degree of accuracy in defining kiasuism (see Appendix I). Additionally, the pilot study also tapped respondents' opinions regarding whether certain commonly encountered types of social behaviour are classified as kiasu behaviour (see Appendix II). Personal interviews with both Singaporeans and Australians also assisted in the construction of the Phase Two questionnaire.

Phase Two. The questionnaire comprised four sections. Section A was designed to tap the level of kiasuism of the respondents by way of their responses to an array of hypothetical situations (see Appendix III for examples). Certain appropriate modifications were made to cater to the contextual differences between the two samples. Section B served to tap the degree of kiasuism in the respective society through the respondents' perception and experiences. From a list of common kiasu behaviours (derived from the pilot study), respondents were requested to gauge the frequency of these behaviours as observed by them in their society. For the Australian sample, special effort was incorporated to ensure that a working knowledge of kiasuism is achieved before proceeding to the other sections of the survey. The interviewer would first enquire their knowledge of the term, kiasuism, before supplementing or correcting where necessary. Published material, such as a newspaper article on the definition of kiasuism and Mr Kiasu's Kiasu Philosophy, were employed to ensure Australians' understanding of the term.

Open-ended questions regarding the prevalence of kiasuism in society, the existence of kiasuism in other cultural settings and the possible causes of kiasuism were posed to all the respondents. The respondents were also asked to rate the degree of occurrence of kiasu behaviours in their respective societies, on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very often; 5 = never), for each listed behaviour. The data obtained would provide an indication of the perceived level of kiasuism prevalent in that society.

Participants' health and well being was derived from the General Well-Being Questionnaire (GWBQ) (Cox & Gotts, 1987) in Section C. This is a 24-item questionnaire that measures self-reported symptoms of general malaise and impaired wellbeing. It asks respondents about the frequency with which they experienced various behavioural, cognitive, emotional and physical symptoms during the six months period prior to the enquiry. The GWBQ is presented in the form of a symptom checklist which the respondents score on a five-point scale ranging from "never" to "always". The scale is a composite measure of two dimensions of wellbeing:

- (1) feelings of being worn out (WO), including those of fatigue and tiredness, cognitive confusion and emotional lability; and
- (2) feelings of being uptight and tense (UT), including general nervousness and physical signs of being tense and jittery.

The more cognitive items in the first factor would appear to imply some difficulties in decision making: these may have implications for personal problem-solving and coping. The second factor is defined by feelings related to tension and worry and the physical signs of anxiety.

Section D requests for participants' academic grades obtained in the previous semester and their level of satisfaction with the

grades (on a five-point scale).

Results

The definition of kiasuism

The qualitative nature of the pilot study revealed a number of interesting factors that revolved around kiasu behaviour. Most outstanding was that the results yielded the finding that kiasuism is most commonly associated with five types of phenomenon, namely:

- (1) the fear of losing out (96 per cent);
- (2) selfishness (87 per cent);
- (3) calculating (73 per cent);
- (4) greed (65 per cent); and
- (5) kiasi-ism [literal translation: fearing to die] (55 per cent).

The "fear of losing out", mentioned by 96 percent of the sample in the pilot study, refers to an innate unwillingness to be disadvantaged or always wanting to be ahead of others. Seeing others in a better position or obtaining an advantage which too could have been attained by oneself presents substantial mental distress to a person exhibiting such a trait. In acute cases, individuals have been known to develop the often heard "grab first" attitude, that is, grab while the chance is there and decide later whether the item is needed. An example of a behavioural manifestation of this symptom is in the senseless rushing for items on discount during a sale, without due consideration for the worth or necessity of the item. It is felt that this definition comes closest to the original meaning of kiasuism, whilst the other four phenomena discussed below are embodiments of the term and characteristic of the kiasu behaviour.

"Selfishness", as defined in the Oxford Dictionary, is a "deficiency in consideration for others; actuated by or appealing to self-interest". In common English, it means acting in a manner that puts one's interest above all else. Efforts expended must be for a beneficial cause - beneficial to the self. Familiar examples of such behaviour include competing with the more needy for seats in the bus and/or train. Littering also falls into this category of "selfish" behaviour. This was highlighted 87 percent of the time in the pilot study.

The third phenomenon of the kiasu behaviour is "being calculating" meaning to be consistently weighing one's gains and losses that may result from undertaking a particular course of action. The Australian Macquarie Dictionary, in fact, based their definition of the word, kiasu, along this line - an obsession for value for money. Individuals guilty of this are often excessively concerned over small denominations of price differentials, leaving no room for doubt as to the validity of the word "obsession". It is of interest that the findings of this study indicate that "being calculating" is but one aspect of the kiasu syndrome, mentioned by 73 percent of the sample in the pilot study. It would therefore not be accurate to define kiasu behaviour solely from this one perspective.

Fourthly, kiasuism also includes the notion of "greed", highlighted by 65 percent of the sample. Greed refers to an excessive desire, especially for food or wealth. It refers only to that part of the mentality to amass and acquire more and is, again, only one facet of kiasuism. Manifestation of this behaviour is observed in the sale tactics of having "free" items accompanying purchases which, although is no longer a novelty, continues to be successful in playing on the weaknesses of individuals.

The final description of kiasuism is found in another Hokkien word, kiasi, which literally means "fearing to die". This was highlighted by 55 percent of the sample in the pilot study. Usage of the word usually involves situations where risk-taking is necessary, and it refers to behaviours of risk-aversiveness, with a demeaning, mocking overtone. An example of this manifestation is found in an individual's unwillingness to venture into unknown realms and tendency to hold back in the face of uncertainty.

Kiasuism - a uniquely Singaporean trait?

The results of this study revealed that there is no significant difference between the "kiasu tendency" of the Australian and Singaporean samples, thus indicating that kiasu behaviour is not uniquely Singaporean. To further support this point, the kiasu tendencies of the respective societies, as reflected by the perceptions of respondents, are compared (see Table I).

Table II displays a summary of the results of t-tests conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of the two samples in relation to each of the behaviours. Results of the t-tests indicate that of the ten commonly-cited kiasu behaviours, three exhibited significant differences in the frequency of observance between the two samples. It can therefore be concluded that the social behaviour of rushing for train/bus seats, reserving library seats and studying before the commencement of the semester, are significantly more prevalent in Singapore than in Australia. This need

for academic achievement could be explained by the strong emphasis placed on education and the competitiveness of education in Singapore.

A t-test for independent samples was performed on the kiasu tendency means of the two groups (Australia = 2.76; Singapore = 2.46). The 2-tail significant value of 0.234 implies that the null hypothesis is not to be rejected, indicating that there is no significant difference in the kiasu tendency between Australians and Singaporeans. This renders further support to H1, that kiasu behaviour is not unique to Singapore.

Kiasuism, general wellbeing, and academic performance

Multiple regression analyses were carried out to test H2 and H3 which state that there will be a linear relationship between kiasu tendency (independent variable) and wellbeing and performance (dependent variables). Results of the analyses indicated that the null hypothesis is not rejected as no significant linear relationship was found between kiasu tendency and wornout ($t = -0.429$; $p > 0.05$) and uptight ($t = -1.216$; $p > 0.05$). Similarly, no significant linear relationship was found between kiasu tendency and academic performance ($t = -0.622$; $p > 0.05$).

Kiasuism and grade-satisfaction

Results of the multiple regression analysis rendered support to H4, which stated that there is a negative relationship between kiasu tendency and satisfaction with academic grades (see Table III). This finding is therefore indicative that a linear relationship exists between the kiasu tendency and satisfaction with achieved grades: the higher the degree of kiasuism, the lower the satisfaction with one's performance.

Discussion

Findings of the study point towards the existence of the kiasu behaviour in countries other than Singapore. Kiasuism, therefore, appears to be a learned human behaviour that stems from the non-satisfaction of human desires. Economists have dealt in great depths into the theories of unlimited wants and limited resources, and it is due to this inherent nature of the human society, that over time, people start to experience an urgency in their pursuit to satisfy needs. It seems possible therefore that kiasuism is a product of certain societal and environmental factors.

With the development of money as a medium of exchange, humans need to exercise caution in seeking optimal ways of using limited purchasing power to meet their long lists of demands. Those who carry this behaviour to the extreme are perceived as being calculating.

Similarly, with time, the more cautious members of society realized that certain objects of fancy may be stored to meet future needs. The uncertain world in which we live tends to breed a sense of insecurity so intense thus leading to an obsession which prompts amassing for the sheer pleasure of the act - greed. Additionally, with limited resources to meet all wants, it is inevitable that some members of society have to experience unsatisfied demands. Thus, for those who had initially exercised consideration in favour of fellow members, finding their favours unreciprocated, would likely soon find themselves being advocates of selfish behaviour. A similar rationale can be offered for risk aversiveness where risk-taking may not always result in the desired outcome.

Thus, all the described components that make up kiasuism - the fear of losing out, selfishness, being calculating, greed, and kiasi-ism (e.g. risk aversiveness) - are by nature, general. They could be found in any geographical region, across any time horizon, regardless of cultural and social backgrounds.

Kiasuism, wellbeing, academic performance and grade-satisfaction

A person's kiasu tendency was found to have no direct implications on the level of his/her general wellbeing. The assumption that kiasuism, being associated with fear, would logically lead to stress and poor wellbeing was not supported, thus suggesting that one's level of stress may or may not be affected by one's kiasu tendency. The rationale for this finding is that wellbeing is a multi-faceted factor, and naturally there are many other psychosocial influences which would contribute to an individual's wellbeing.

Similarly for the relationship between kiasu tendency and performance, the results obtained appear to be contrary to popular belief. It is a seldom disputed fact in the local context that, to do well academically, one needs to possess some degree of kiasuism. What is suggested by this set of results is that kiasuism does not guarantee success in academic performance. Thus, in the case of Singapore undergraduates who exhibited behaviours such as studying before the commencement of the semester and reserving seats in the library (see Table II) significantly more than their Australian counterparts, it may be noteworthy that these behaviours would not ensure academic success and instead may lead to dissatisfaction with performance and social relationships.

Although kiasuism did not exhibit effects on wellbeing and performance, it has a significant effect on satisfaction levels,

indicating that the higher the kiasu tendency, the lower the satisfaction with attained academic grades. This finding is easily understood by way of a review of the terms that are deemed to describe kiasuism most aptly - fear of losing out, calculating, greed, selfishness and kiasi-ism. Of the five terms, the three foremost words and phrases are in themselves, potential sources of dissatisfaction. What was found, therefore, was a statistical confirmation of the hypothesis that such a relationship exists.

What are the implications of this finding that kiasuism is inversely related to satisfaction? The implications to a society dogged by the syndrome would be similar to that of mercenary, selfish, calculating, greedy members and cut-throat competitions. Evidently, domestic security would be at the brunt of all these controversies. The quality of life enjoyed by the people may be rich in terms of material comforts, but psychologically, they may have to live with constant fear and anxiety, speculating and looking for opportunities to "stab someone's back" while at the same time, fearing for their own. In such a society, security could become a word of myth in time to come. It is thus necessary for the relevant authorities to devise measures to curb the syndrome, dispelling the feelings of threat and animosity that may be beginning to take root.

Conclusion

This preliminary study has obtained an operating definition of the concept of kiasuism, and has found sufficient evidence to substantiate the belief that kiasuism is not unique to Singapore, although a more extensive multi-cultural study is required to determine the universality of this trait in other societies and cultures.

Yet, the ugly behaviour of kiasuism is much associated with Singapore and has officially been declared as being "hailed as a national fixation in Singapore" (Australian Macquarie Dictionary). This study has revealed that such behaviour is not confined within the boundaries of the island. The difference between Singapore and other nations, for example, Australia, may lie in the fact that Singaporeans have paid more attention to the kiasu behaviour than other countries have. The extensive coverage and openness about this behaviour has, on one hand, tarnished Singapore's image, and on the other, focused the attention of the authorities towards inculcating graciousness in the society. Whether this undesirable social behaviour would ultimately result in a self-fulfilling prophecy of a "national failure" (Seah, 1995) significantly depends on the masses' awareness and understanding of the causes and effects of kiasuism and their response, and the future steps of the government.

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Appendix I

How pertinent are the following traits in kiasu behaviour?

Please rank them in order of pertinence (1 = the most pertinent trait; 17 = the least pertinent trait).

1. Achievement-oriented _____
2. Calculating _____
3. Competence _____
4. Competitive _____
5. Conscientious _____
6. Envy _____
7. Fear of losing out _____
8. Gian Bng (literal: to lust for rice; meaning: to desire something ravenously) _____
9. Greed _____
10. Insecurity _____
11. Kiasi (literal: fear of death; meaning: risk averse) _____
12. Motivation _____
13. Selfishness _____
14. Stingy _____
15. Suspicion _____
16. Ugly behaviour _____
17. Yau Gwee (literal: hungry ghost^[sup]* ; meaning: avaricious) _____

[sup]* It is believed that the spirits of the departed who are now in hell would only be released once a year during the seventh lunar month when they are free to roam the earth. Sacrifices are made to appease their hunger.

Appendix II

Would you consider the following social behaviour indicative of kiasuism?

- a) Bringing back hotel toiletries.
- b) Queuing up ahead of time for soccer and/or concert tickets.
- c) Not giving up one's seat on the bus/train to the elderly.
- d) Drivers not giving way to one another on the road.
- e) Elbowing one's way into crowded lifts.
- f) Bringing empty containers to fill with free flow of drinks provided at buffets.
- g) Tar-powing (doggy-bag).
- h) Requesting that no ice be added to one's drinks, so as to get your "money's worth" of drink.
- i) Refilling mineral water bottles with tap water and placing them back in the hotel fridge.

- j) Piling up food during a buffet.
- k) Piling up of food during a feast where the customer is only allowed one serving.
- l) Selecting only the expensive food during a buffet.
- m) Rushing for a sale, in the hope of grabbing the "best buys".
- n) Rushing for MRT (train) seats.

Appendix III

Examples of hypothetical situational questions on kiasu behaviour:

- (1) The examination is approaching but the workload is too heavy to allow most students to start their preparations. You, however, have completed the first round of revision. Your friend asks if you have started preparing for the examination. How would you most likely respond?

I will tell him/her that:

- a. I have completed my revision.
- b. I have completed half of the revision.
- c. I have not started revision at all.
- d. Don't worry, no need to start so early.

- (2) You had a tiring day at work, and are now waiting for the subway train to take you home. You know the train will be crowded, and as the train approaches, what do you do?

I will:

- a. Stand in queue and wait my turn to board.
- b. Keep clear of the crowd.
- c. Weave my way to the front of the crowd.
- d. Wait for the next train.

[Illustration]

Caption: Table I; T-test for independent samples: Australians vs Singaporeans; Table II; Perceived kiasu tendency of Australians and Singaporeans; Table III; Regression analysis: kiasu tendency and grade-satisfaction (DV)

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