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Towards ICCS 2025

Fostering Social Cohesion in Today's "Privatised" Societies

By Leong Chan-Hoong

SYNOPSIS

While we are familiar with the sectarian instincts that pull communities apart, a parallel primordial force is quietly changing our sense of togetherness – the tendency to retreat from socialisation and shared rituals, reinforced by digitalisation and the craving for social disconnection.

COMMENTARY

The Singapore Story is well known. The city state has managed to keep its multicultural society intact and the primordial sectarian instincts at bay, notwithstanding the emotional scars of racial riots in the 1960s.

Singaporeans have largely learnt to get along with one another regardless of race, religion, and class. This achievement is due to the opportunities for social mixing, meticulously curated residential policy (e.g., the Ethnic Integration Policy), and urban planning guidelines to co-locate public housing and private condominiums in the same neighbourhood. This mixture ensures organic interactions in Singaporeans' daily lives, sharing common routines and facilities near their homes.

However, 60 years since Independence, the social fabric of Singapore society seems to have undergone significant changes. Some of its shared rituals are disappearing from the scope of Singaporeans' lived experiences.

What Has Changed?

Tensions over identities and ideologies are not new and have affected many countries.

Although social divides are well recognised in policymaking, the country's economic development and society's progress are accompanied by a silent transformation that has not been fully acknowledged – the diminishing of organic interactions in day-to-day lives, whether with people known to each other or among strangers.

Regardless of differences in backgrounds, Singaporeans share common routines, whether at a national or festive celebration, dining at a restaurant or hawker (food) centre, watching a movie in a cinema or a performance at the concert centre, or grieving over the passing of a national leader. The positive and negative sentiments shared among members of Singapore's plural society constitute the collective memories that make people feel part of a broader, more inclusive in-group.

As societies become more affluent, complex, and politically conscious, the attitudes toward these rituals have changed or become resistant. For a long time, Christopher Columbus was widely considered the founder of the Americas. Many celebrated October 12 as Columbus Day, commemorating his discovery of the New World. Today, only 21 out of the 50 states in the United States of America consider the occasion sufficiently worthy of remembrance to grant workers a day off.

In Singapore, country club memberships and social clubbing were once highly sought after, partly due to their excellent facilities, including gyms and swimming pools. Today, much of that glitz has vanished as many of the desired amenities are available in private condominiums and homes.

The declining importance of revered traditions and the increasing priority given to personal time influence Singaporeans' daily routines and interactions with others.

"Privatising" Our Way of Life in the Digital Age

Interactions with people in public places such as offices, shopping malls, and restaurants are a practical and spontaneous way to learn about social norms and the Singaporean way of life. The hands-on curriculum offers an invaluable means to validate or invalidate the stereotypes of immigrants and people from other racial and religious groups.

However, the digital transformation that has been happening worldwide since the mid-2010s, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020, has drastically altered how Singaporeans socialise with people, especially those from different backgrounds.

At the peak of the cinema industry in 2011, some 22 million people patronised the screens each year. With online streaming available at home, cinema attendance has plummeted to just 10 million viewers in 2023.

The same fate has fallen on the retail industry, with many brick-and-mortar shops giving way to 24/7 online shopping. Ten years ago, food delivery services were non-

existent. With the emergence of the new gig economy, this sector is now supported by over 16,000 delivery riders on platforms that offer a wide range of culinary options.

The working population in Singapore used to spend a lot of time on-site at the workplace. Physical contact with people in a close-proximity environment provides an impetus to sharpen interpersonal skills, even if interactions with colleagues are not always pleasant. As companies pivot to a hybrid or work-from-home policy, the opportunities for organic cultural encounters have decreased.

There is generally less opportunity for anyone to step out of the home, let alone socialise with strangers. Many have retreated to their private cocoons, and many channels for face-to-face exchanges have vanished.

A Differentiated World

To be sure, not every one of these social ills is attributable to technology. The decline in shared rituals and opportunities for random engagements with other people in modern societies results from the evolution of work and family relationships and contemporary social organisations.

The 1970 population census listed 235 occupation classifications in Singapore. This figure has since ballooned to 1,002, reflecting rapid labour specialisation and occupation proliferation. In 1980, one in eight Singaporeans said they had no religion. This proportion has since doubled by 2024. Just one in 20 households was classified as a single-person household 35 years ago. Today, one in six households belongs to this category, and the ratio is likely to increase with the rise in singlehood among Singaporeans.

The differentiations resulting from these work, social, and household changes are not necessarily an indicator or precursor of polarisation, but they add to the challenges of forging social cohesion among people.

Singaporeans and policy makers in the city state have put in much effort to contain racial, religious, and nationalist sentiments from raising social tensions and dividing the country. However, they have yet to conceive of an effective strategy to manage the "privatised" spaces of the 21st century.

Charting the Next Chapter of the Singapore Story

The diversity discourse in the West has always prioritised individual autonomy and distributive justice above the interests of society. In contrast, Singapore has always adopted a calibrated approach to ensure that the national interest, not sectarian ones, remains the cornerstone of national development – occasionally to the disappointment of individuals and ethnic and religious groups.

Critical, but not necessarily popular, policies such as National Service, learning of mother tongue languages in schools, and the Ethnic Integration Policy in public housing have curated the common space when tribal heritage maintenance is still cherished by many.

In today's socioeconomic environment, it is not wise to decree against the preference for privatised space. However, it may be helpful to expand the scope of encounters in cyberspace through online resident townhalls, citizen assemblies, or market forums to facilitate exchanges, whether on matters about housing estates or national policies.

Social cohesion cannot be fostered in a vacuum. The next chapter of the Singapore Story will require tribal groups and individuals to co-write, even if this is to be achieved over virtual space.

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