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Does language matter? An Exploration of Social Capital in Malaysian Online Ethnic Communities

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ABSTRACT

The term "social capital" originated out of a discourse in developing community networks. In brief, it shows a cooperative model where people work with an underlying basis that the more one knows, the more ties one holds in connecting with community members. The changing nature of social relationships resulting from advances in today's new communication technology has brought about the idea of applying this concept within the context of online communities. This research empirically addresses the issues of social capital and ethnic integration in a study of six selected online communities in Malaysia. The main methods of data collection were online survey across 162 online community's members and interview of 8 online community's administrators. Results showed that, in many ways, online networking does facilitate interactions between members but most of the basic elements, as suggested by the concept of social capital, such as trust and norms of reciprocity, have been contested by various socio-cultural issues. The different needs served by online community members, along with the fact that society is still much influenced by various cultural capitals such as languages have arguably limited the way social capital can be developed across ethnic lines. Therefore, utilizing this concept in terms of online networking and socialization was actually a challenging and at times ambiguous process.

Keyword: Language, Social Capital, Ethnic Integration, Online Communities

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multiracial country and concerned with maintaining social integration particularly amongst its three major groups - Malays, Chinese and Indians. The question of ethnic integration has remained a national polemic since independence (Lee, 2004) followed by unfinished conflicts amongst the groups due to perceived differences particularly in terms of culture and religion. The interest in looking at this issue in this study has been influenced by the growing awareness of how communication through online medium fosters social interaction that may help generate and maintain social capital and, further establish social integration amongst inter-ethnic members (Ferlander, 2003; Hampton & Wellman, 1999). In Malaysia, online communities commenced as soon as the Internet was introduced to the country and has grown tremendously over time with the government's support. While previous studies have focused on online networks and their effects on community practices and civic engagement in the context of Western society, this study looks at how people from developing countries socialize and is affected by the same experience. Discussion in this paper mainly focuses on the formation and challenges of social capital development in both the real and virtual life of ethnic group-based communities. Several issues which affected the development of social capital, such as culture and religious practices, language and national identity are significantly raised in the general analysis. However, this paper only focusing on one of the factors that is language use as a communication medium to draw on the theoretical

underpinnings of emerging patterns of bridging and/or bonding capital across online ethnic communities.

1.1 Social Networks, Social Integration and Social Capital

Social networks, social integration 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, p.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" (pp.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 (Arneil 2000; Liu et al. 2009) that has been a focus in the current study.

1.2 Online Communities

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; Wellman, 1999). 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)

According to Rheingold, many activities that we do in the real world can also be done in online communities. Both activities can be seen as a place where social groups share goals, interest or satisfy each other's need; however, conventional communities are defined by physical features such as size, location and boundaries while online communities exist by means of fully technological support. 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; Katz, 1988). 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 (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 & Wellman (1999), in his project on the e-neighborhood, addresses concerns about the effects of the Internet on people's social networks and community involvement at neighborhood 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 that is largely populated by foreign nationals and single parents with low-middle income. The study suggests that online community strengthened both 'weak ties' and 'strong ties'. Conversely, Merydyth et al. (2002) study in Australia of Atherton Gardens multiethnic ICT community, comprised of 64% Vietnam 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.

2. 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. These communities were chosen based on some comparable characteristics, such as: open membership, sustainable websites, representing particular objectives of integrating people, sharing knowledge or common goals, and running online and offline activities. 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 and MySpace. USJ and SARA, on the other hand, function as residential-based online communities. This type of community, also known as a 'place-based' community, encompassed a character of "more traditional sense of a physically based community which adds electronic resources for its citizens' use" (Blanchard & Horan 2000, p.7). In this online community, members can develop their own electronic bulletin board, a section for forum meeting and any information that relates to their physical areas. What makes it different is that rather than having a face-to-face meeting with other local community members, activities and discussion about their living area can be done in a virtual medium. 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, the community was developed based on particular interest of parenting and children.
The study explored views and experiences of eight (8) online communities' administrators through interviews and online survey across 162 online members towards the central issue of social interaction and social capital in their respective online communities.

3. Findings and Discussions

Careful analysis based on administrators' views in this 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 and, the third pattern demonstrates the circumstances where there is only one particular ethnicity dominating the community online and offline.

3.1 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)
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)

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 programs 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 endeavors 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 neighborhood 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)

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.

3.2 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)

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 arranged 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)

"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)

3.3 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 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 , 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 1: 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 analyzing 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 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 these particular patterns.

3.4 Language and National Identity

As mentioned earlier, several factors were seen contributed to a different formation patterns of inter-ethnic interaction across six online communities involved in the study. One of the factors was language use. In every ethno-cultural society, cultural capital is often marked through the source of variations in behavioral norms, religious observations and celebrations, food, dress and group affiliations (Abdullah & Pedersen, 2006). Language is not an exception. Issues relating to language use in Malaysia are not new. They have played an important role in determining social relationships across ethnicities for a long time. Bourdieu (in Calhoun, et al., 1997) has suggested that language can be a “social marker” (p.98) in every society, whereby it functions as an indication of people’s identity, what group they belong to, as well as their social status. He further argues that language, apart from bringing people together, can also be a medium of differentiation. As found in this research, both Malays and non-Malay administrators have raised the issue of language as one of the factors that contributed to the lack of Malay participants in USJ Subang Jaya and PJNet offline

gatherings. It was also claimed as a reason why non-Malays were less interested in becoming VirtualFriends.net members. In both circumstances, non-Malays were identified as a group that is competent in the English language and use the language in everyday conversation, whilst the Malays are more into their mother tongue, the Malay language.

The claims made by the administrators were confirmed by survey findings, revealing that 90% of non-Malays tend to choose English for online communication compared with only 17% Malays. Interestingly, the survey of members also reveals that a higher percentage (44.3%) of Malays consider using both languages (Malay and English) for online communication rather than only Malay (36.7%). The default of English on the Internet as a content medium indicates that the English language plays an important role for online communication, rather than the Malay language. However, this does challenge the Malay administrator's views about the reality of ethnic Malays and their use of language while communicating online. It is argued that the reason for Malays not attending offline meetings is probably less critically a language issue, but more likely due to other factors such as cultural and religious barriers.

On the other hand, the fact that non-Malays use more English than Malays in everyday online/offline conversations probably reflects reluctance in identifying with Malaysia's national identity. As shown from the survey analysis of members, none of the non-Malays identified using the Malay language as a medium of communication.

The Malay language constitutes the national language. It would be expected that national citizens follow this. But refusal to speak the language may develop negative perceptions, such as unresponsiveness and indifference towards Malay national aspirations and unity with other ethnicities. Because not all Malays can speak fluent English, mixing with non-Malays tends to create a personal sense of incompetence and an uncomfortable feeling. This is also true in the case of VirtualFriends.net. Because the majority of members are Malays, the non-Malays who either cannot or are not willing to speak the Malay language may have a sense of discomfort and alienation from being within the dominant Malay group. With reference to Blumer's symbolic interaction perspective, a sense of superiority by the dominant group, as in this case the non-Malays with regards to their capability of using English, may also potentially develop racial prejudice. The conflict of interest in the use of language may contribute to people's resistance in getting to know each other even in virtual communities.

From a social capital point of view, the ability of a group to share similar language may accelerate the bridging process and networking potential. As for the non-Malays, having proficiency in English may speed up the process of information sharing and knowledge diffusion between them (Chinese and Indians in particular). Language becomes a medium to broaden identities and reciprocity between groups. In fact, the "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973) that link between networks are believed to be even stronger. This further gives the power to the group; as Foucault argues, power comes from the knowledge accumulated from the group's observations, actions and networking. In modern society, prejudice between groups no longer lies in the context of the capitalist ruling class and work force. Instead, the new type of "capital" exists in the form of power/knowledge. Accordingly in the context of today's network societies, those who have access to information are considered knowledgeable and will become a new class in the digital era. Racism in today's cyber communities could exist in brand new "superior-inferior" relationships through domination of knowledge. With respect to intergroup relations, bridging social capital which develops amongst non-Malay groups allows them domination and control of knowledge and thus, they gain power. In contrast, Malays may not have such advantages as they only form bonding to their own group. With regards to this assertion, the issue of language use in Malaysia may continue to be unfinished business due to its unique historical significance in symbolizing Malaysia's national identity. The problem of language will remain unresolved and, without

any compelling proactive solutions, the hope to unite the diverse communities may not be achieved.

4. Conclusion

The term "social capital" originated out of a discourse in developing community networks. In brief, it shows a cooperative model where people work with an underlying understanding that the more one knows, the more ties one holds in connecting with community members. In other words, social capital is seen as a way of conceptualizing the intangible resources of a community's shared values and trust represented through our everyday relationships. The changing nature of social relationships resulting from advances in today's new communication technology has brought about the idea of applying this concept within the context of online communities.

Social capital, as Bourdieu (1985) suggests, must involve durable obligations where individuals or groups possess a robust network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Similarly, social capital according to Coleman & Crassey (1980) represents a resource because it involves the expectation of reciprocity where relationships are governed by a high degree of trust and shared values. Furthermore, it involves a collective action which is based on routine, sustainability or wider networks and values which facilitate mutual collaboration. Applying this concept in light of online community practices in Malaysia indicates significant difference. In many ways, online networking does facilitate interactions between members but most of the basic elements, as suggested by the concept of social capital, such as trust and norms of reciprocity, have been contested by various socio-cultural issues. The different needs served by online community members, along with the fact that society is still much influenced by various cultural capitals such as language have arguably limited the way social capital can be developed across ethnic lines. Therefore, utilizing this concept in terms of online networking and socialization was actually a challenging and at times ambiguous process.

While social capital exists in the online medium, evidence gathered from this study has pointed out that bridging social capital is prevalent among all different ethnic groups in some online communities (FamilyPlace.com, MalaysiaMAYA.com and SARA) when it comes to offline relationships. While in three other communities (USJ Subang Jaya, PJNet and VirtualFriends.Net) bridging social capital in offline meetings was not successfully formed. Bonding social capital, which developed within each different ethnic group, suggests that people who share similar values, language use and cultural practices tend to more easily interact with others who are like themselves. This echoes previous study that people from similar ethnic background tend to create a group bonding because they have a high level of trust towards each other (Ibrahim, et al., 2009). Social integration can exist only when there is constant interaction across all ethnic communities that will develop strong ties (Guest & Stamm, 1993) producing stability. However, the lack of trust which influences the formation of bridging and bonding social capital across the groups of different ethnicities may affect the process of integration. Even though the existence of the online medium does create opportunities to communicate and build respect for each other, the prevalence of ethnic enclaves, especially between the Malays and non-Malay groups, has somewhat diluted the effectiveness of offline communities. This is due to the fact that ethnic integration and bridging social capital may only flourish under conditions where trust and reciprocity between groups is equally shared. Given the variations in language use as well as different observations in religious and cultural practices (these two factors were not discussed in this paper), the possibility of reaching harmonious integration among the three ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese and Indians – remains challenging at best. All these factors obviously distort the development of trust and reciprocity, which are the core elements of "bridging" social

capital to be formed across ethnic communities. Therefore, to answer the question posed in the title of this paper, it would be certain that in the course of inter-ethnic relationships, language does matter.

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