Race and Religious Relations Study

September 2021

Project Overview

With the recent spate of racist incidents on social media, racial and religious tolerance and harmony in Singapore has come under scrutiny, with diverse opinions being shared on the relevance of current race-based legislation and policies. These policies include the ethnic integration policy for HDB flats and the GRC system used to ensure minority representation in Parliament. This research project aims to understand the landscape of race and religion in the Singaporean context through a mixed-method mode of enquiry, employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to develop a holistic and comprehensive understanding of public perceptions.

COVID-19 has stressed social fault lines in Singapore, creating tension[1] that has led to a significant increase in reported incidents involving racial or religious friction, from 18 in 2018, to 31 in 2019, and almost doubling to 60 in 2020[2]. The fault lines might not be identical for different segments of the population, andour research seeks to assess this in greater detail. In light of this sharp increase, it may be necessary for policies and legislation aimed at maintaining racial and religious harmony to be revisited and updated accordingly. This project aims to utilise data to develop potential recommendations for policy and communications to strengthen racial and religious relations in Singapore.

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[1] https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/covid-19-has-stressed-social-fault-lines-in-spore-grace-fu
[2] https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/parliament-police-reports-racial-religious-incidents-shanmugam-15159466

Methodology

A survey comprising N=1135 respondents was conducted with the ethnic breakdown representative of the general population[3], and also represented a diverse range of religions, age groups, educational backgrounds and gender.

Participants were asked a varied range of questions pertaining to how they felt about navigating racial and religious diversity in both the public and private spheres. Questions ranged from how they perceived casual joking about race among friends and family to the effectiveness of the government in addressing issues related to race and religion in the country.

 Since the content of the study relied heavily on lived experiences of our respondents, semi-structured interviews were introduced and conducted after the surveys to supplement the findings. The interview questions were revised in relation to the results of the surveys, where findings from the surveys that were deemed noteworthy by the researcher were further queried. While the roles of the interviewees were varied, ranging from social media activists to academics and authors, they were selected based on their expertise and interest in the subject of race relations and religious harmony in Singapore.

Complementing these in-depth interviews, focus groups were employed to further determine the sentiment of ordinary Singapore citizens. The main focus of these discussions was on learning more about the lived experiences of Singaporeans in terms of racial and religious identity and their interactions and thoughts pertaining to the current social climate in the country.

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[3] The demographics of our respondents surveyed are as follows:

Chinese- 69.9%, Malays- 18.2%, Indians- 9.1%, Others- 2.8%

Findings

1. The Chinese majority are expected to play a bigger role in being conscious of the needs and sensitivities of minority races

The majority of our survey respondents - N=721 or 63.6% of our sample - agreed/strongly agreed that the Chinese majority should do its part to be conscious of the needs and sensitivities of minority races in Singapore. Of these respondents, we found that 74.2% of our Chinese respondents shared this view while 87.4% of minority respondents agreed with it. Of the remaining respondents, N=282 or 24.9% were neutral about this and 11.5% of respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement.
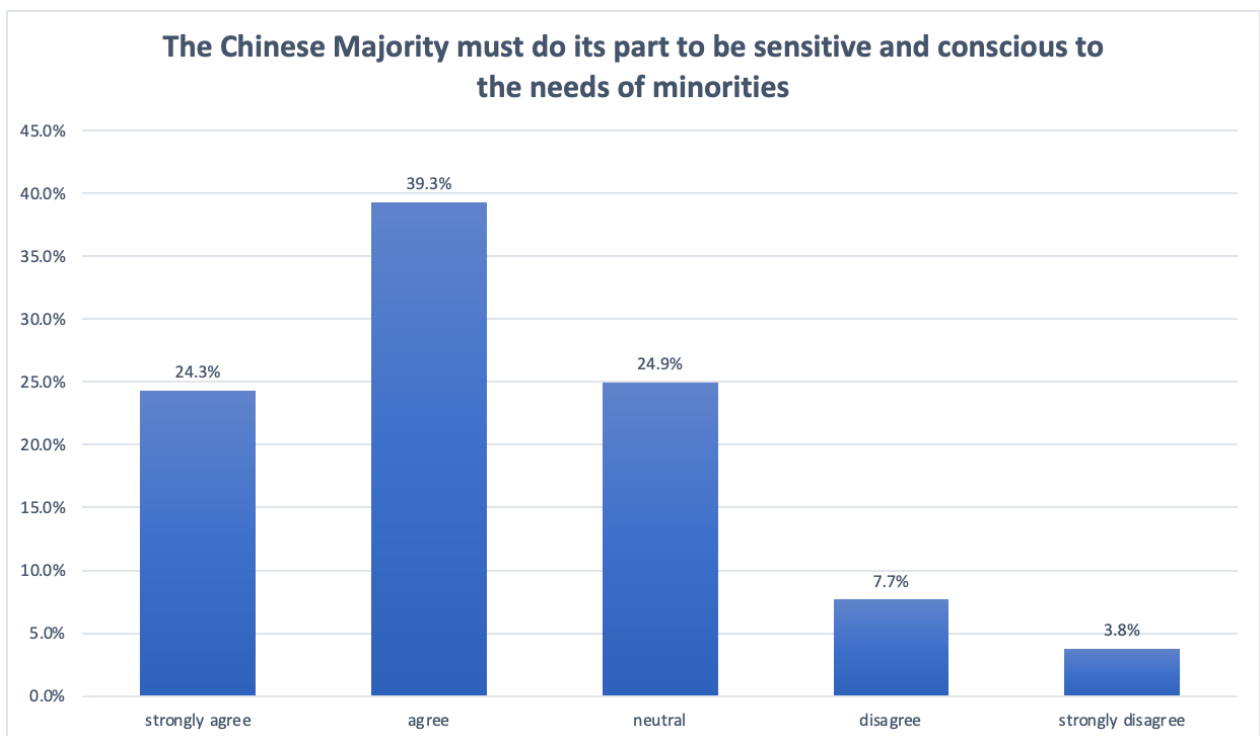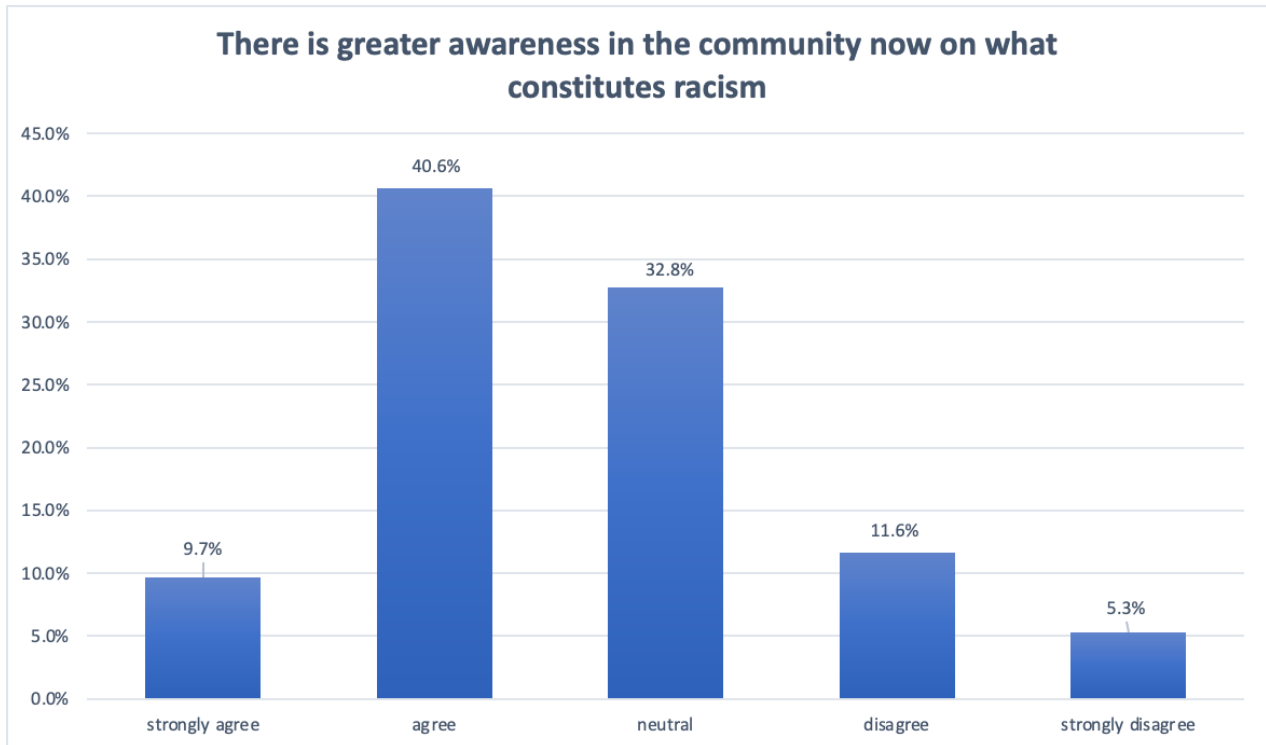

2. There is greater awareness about racism in the community as a result of recent social media incidents

With the added coverage in mainstream as well as social media arising from the increase in racist incidents captured on video and elsewhere, our respondents found that they were more aware of racism and what can be constituted as racism than previously. N=571 or 50% of those surveyed agreed/strongly agreed with this statement while only N=192 or 16.9% disagreed/strongly disagreed, with the rest being neutral.

Our interviewees concurred with these findings, stating that social media platforms such as Wake Up Singapore and Minority Voices had served to create or encourage a more vocal minority. The ease with which people can record incidents and post them online was also cited as a factor in making the public more aware of racial and religious discrimination, in both explicit and more covert forms. Some of the responses shared by respondents are as follows:

a. "(But) I do have to say people are much more vocal about it now, and people are realizing that because of social media, because of the visibility and all of that, I think it really helps calling things out. I guess the fact that we have access to social media, we have access to our own voices and we have community. I think it really helps people feel empowered to speak up about their experiences, which is great because I have done it for the longest time".

b. "Nowadays, everyone's a journalist, right? In many ways, you have a camera, and you can just put it out there and when you see more people talking about it, you feel more emboldened today. And I don't think you can minimize the impact of pages like Wake Up Singapore or Minority Voices in really spurring people to talk about their own incidents and to post these things online".
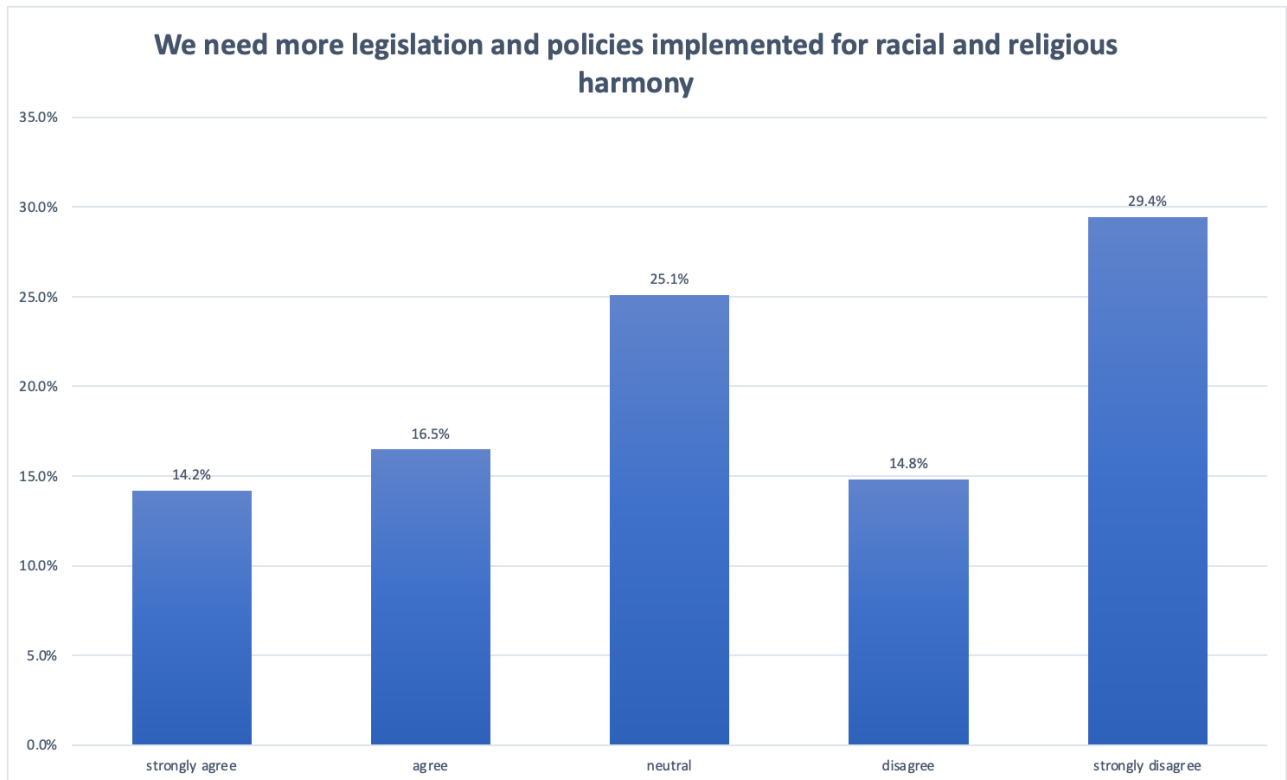
There is greater awareness in the community now on what constitutes racism

(Bar chart showing responses:)

- strongly agree: 9.7%
- agree: 40.6%
- neutral: 32.8%
- disagree: 11.6%
- strongly disagree: 5.3%

3. People are ambivalent about the government's efficacy in engaging with the public to address issues on race and religion in Singapore

While survey respondents and interviewees both generally agreed that the recent surge in racist incidents on social media in Singapore had resulted in greater awareness of the issue (38% who agreed/strongly agreed and 23% who disagreed/strongly disagreed, the rest were neutral), their opinions were more mixed on the effectiveness of the government's proposed solutions for addressing these issues (dialogues and ministerial statements).

Our interviewees mostly described the problem of racism and religious discrimination as being systemic or structural, with policies around ethnic integration in Singapore such as the EIP for housing, GRC system, and the reserved presidency scheme being described as counter-intuitive and no longer relevant in this day and age.

Of all respondents, 30.7% felt that more legislation and policies should be implemented to ensure racial and religious harmony while 44% disagreed with this. Of this segment, both majority and minority races were equally ambivalent on the introduction of further policies.

We need more legislation and policies implemented for racial and religious harmony

Response	Percentage
strongly agree	14.2%
agree	16.5%
neutral	25.1%
disagree	14.8%
strongly disagree	29.4%

4. Education is essential for encouraging diversity as well as racial and religious harmony

Respondents from the interviews and focus groups described the importance of education in shaping perceptions of the younger generations which carry on into later stages of life. As an interview participant posited, humans are drawn towards people who share similar identity markers to themselves, race being one of them.

> "I think there is a natural affinity with people who look like you. And I mean that, broadly, race is only one marker of that. It could be gender because you have more interests together, or it could be language, which is a huge bar.
>
> So I don't necessarily think racial preferences are racist. I know that's where the conversation is going, but what I want is to push back against that. When I was in school, I hung out with people who spoke like me all the time, and that's not necessarily because I didn't want to be friends with other people as well."

Education is thus essential to encourage people to learn more about the diversity of races and religions in the Singaporean landscape, playing a vital role in deterring animosity between people of different cultural backgrounds. The vast majority of our survey respondents, N=828 or 73%, indicated that they had close friends of a different race or religion, while N=447 or 39.4% had family members of a different race or religion from themselves. It is important to leverage on these kinship groups to further educate people on the diversity of cultures in a more informal setting, while using formal education on diversity to ensure that people do not hold deep-set racial preferences that carry forward into their adult lives.
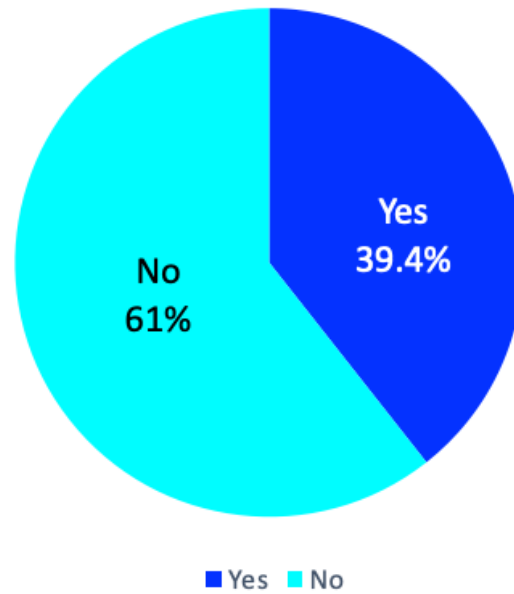
I have close friends of a different race or religion

No 27%

Yes 73%
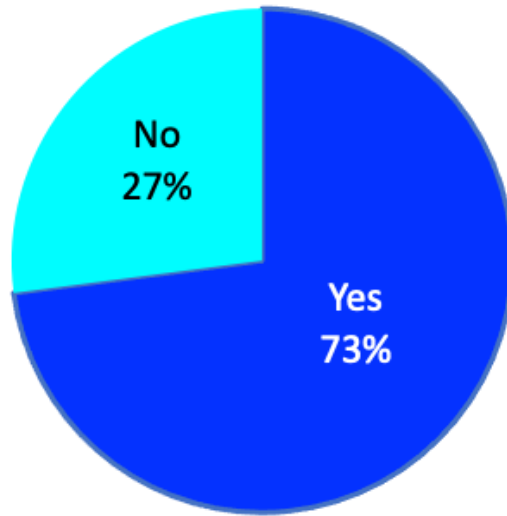
■ Yes ■ No

I have family members of a different race or religion

Yes 39.4%

No 61%

■ Yes ■ No

Solutions

1. Rework how people are educated about issues on race and religion

The dominant sentiment from our interviewees indicated that the best way to tackle racism is by approaching it as a top-down issue (i.e. focusing on abolishing structural racism first instead of focusing on interpersonal racism), and that education about the different manifestations of racism is needed to further explore issues on race and religion. As one of our interviewees described it: "Structural racism occurs when a combination of structural, institutional and policy factors produce racialised outcomes, even without racist intent." A strong focus on getting rid of interpersonal racism entirely was seen as trivial and an unviable long-term solution, with a focus on education starting from childhood being viewed as the most crucial way to tackle structural or institutional racism.

Respondents from our focus groups agreed on the need for education. However they were more wary of utilising a top-down mode of education. Cultural visits to religious places of worship for example were viewed as more 'natural' or organic ways of teaching diversity and harmony. A focus on character development was deemed necessary as well, with respondents believing that the present framework is too focused on academic success, which can have a detrimental effect on cultural sensitivities. Consequently, education on the issues of race and religion were suggested to begin at a younger age, whether formally through the education system or casually through social interaction with children of different ethnicities and religious backgrounds.

2. Contextualise the history of race and religion in Singapore

Drawing further on the need to rework education about racial and religious diversity in Singapore and how to approach it, historicizing the concept of race-based frameworks is necessary to further understand how current forms of categorising race originated, due to its link to British colonial practices (Nirmala 1998)[4].

As one of our interview respondents posited, a proper transparent accounting of history with regard to prior policies and actions is necessary in order to understand current policies and discuss them. According to him,

> "There has to be honesty within the policies and there has to be honesty within the government. What form that takes, I don't know. I'm just sharing the philosophy of it. And then of course, there'll be dialogue in public and everything, but we just need to be honest about that first.
>
> We just need to be honest about it because if you want me to talk about specific policies, I can. So that quote that you just mentioned that Singapore wouldn't have been as successful if we were majority Indian, that was in the 1980s in parliament[5]. And that has directly influenced our desire to keep Singapore majority Chinese. Singapore actually calibrates their immigration to make sure that we always remain majority Chinese[6]".

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[4] Purushotam, Nirmala (1998). "Disciplining Difference: "Race" in Singapore". In Khan, Joel S. (ed.). Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Singapore: ISEAS. pp. 51–94.

[5] The quote we were discussing can be read in its entirety here: https://theindependent.sg/lee-kuan-yews-comments-on-race-and-chinese-majority-resurface-online/

[6] https://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20130206-400532.html

It is thus the suggestion of the respondents of our study that education about this history should be included in the Singaporean education system. This will ensure that people will be aware of how policies have changed as a result of these historical narratives around race and religion.

3. Implement stricter discrimination laws to curb employment and rental discrimination

It is important to move fast as a society to create definitions of racism in order to educate the public on more implicit forms of racism that might otherwise be overlooked. By increasing knowledge of the different types of racism beyond simply interpersonal racism being shown on social media, Singaporeans will be able to go beyond just base or superficial knowledge and understanding of racism. Understanding these different definitions of racism that negatively impact minority races will in turn make it easier to hold dialogues about racial and religious harmony, where more implicit forms of racism can be better dealt with .

While the majority of our survey panel felt that Singaporeans were tolerant of all races and religions, with N=653 or 57.5% of those surveyed agreeing/strongly agreeing with this sentiment, only 40% of our minority respondents shared these views. However, 15% of the entire panel surveyed felt that they had been discriminated against due to their race or religion, and there is room for improvement in this regard through the proposed changes that we suggest.

The prevalence of discriminatory practices in Singapore was discussed in the context of employment and flat rentals as well, with respondents in our focus groups and interviews

feeling that more has to be done to combat these forms of discrimination. The following insights were given:

a. "There needs to be more done when it comes to discrimination in employment and rent. I think the base thing is that when it comes to businesses, Singapore doesn't like to intervene too much. I think that's the habit of having as few regulations as possible around businesses.. I think that's part of the reason there's also an unwillingness to define and call things out as racist".

b. "I think that for employment discrimination, those need to be evaluated on a case by case basis. I mean, they are mostly because of racist preferences but in some cases they might be legitimate requirements for the job. For rental flats I think it is more clear cut, and the legislation should be tweaked accordingly".

Employment discrimination similarly was described as rampant and difficult to enforce currently, with current frameworks to tackle employment discrimination such as the fair consideration framework (FCF)[7] simply not being defined enough to ensure that employment discrimination is legislated comprehensively. We suggest reworking how discriminatory hiring practices are currently defined, and expanding legislation for employment discrimination to include ones that more explicitly scrutinise the breakdown of locals as well. This could involve looking at firms that have high concentrations of Singaporeans of a particular race or religion compared to industry peers and adding them to the FCF watchlist (Figure 1).

Ensuring adequate representation of locals from different races and religions by looking at hiring practices is needed to ensure that minorities are not overlooked due to their race or

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[7] https://www.gov.sg/article/tackling-workplace-discrimination

religion, creating more representative workplaces and encouraging diverse hiring practices. While the FCF (See Figure 1) is aimed at specifically targeting discrimination against locals, where companies might opt to employ foreigners instead of locals, the legislation we suggest differs by targeting locals. Namely, racial and religious representation in companies should be kept diverse and be actively scrutinised to prevent people from being discriminated solely based on their ethnicity and religious beliefs.

In 2014, we introduced the Fair Consideration Framework (FCF) to specifically target discrimination against locals;

- The FCF Watchlist was introduced in 2016 to proactively identify employers with indications of discriminatory hiring practices.
- We look out for employers with exceptionally high share of foreign PMETs compared to industry peers, or high concentrations of single nationalities.
- Employers on the FCF Watchlist will have all of their Employment Pass applications scrutinised or withheld.

Figure 1: Description of the Fair Consideration Framework (FCF)

While the announcement of a reworking of the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) guidelines during NDR 2021[8] where guidelines to promote fair and representative hiring practices were enshrined into law was a welcome change, anti-discrimination legislation remains targeted at discrimination against locals in favour of foreigners[9]. Further work on ensuring adequate racial and religious representation among local workers is thus necessary to prevent locals from being discriminated against based on either their race or religion. It is thus our hope that anti-discrimination guidelines will be further tweaked to discourage this discrimination, allowing for more inclusive workplace cultures to be encouraged in the future.

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[8]
https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/national-day-rally-ndr-2021-workplace-discrimination-racial-harmony-2143201
[9] https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ndr-2021-anti-discrimination-law-tafep-pm-lee-2143101

Conclusion

As conversation about race and religion continues into the future, it is essential for Singaporeans to be aware of how race and religion were constructed and narrativized in the history of Singapore. Education in particular has been targeted as a key factor in creating more awareness of the different forms that racism can manifest itself (casual, institutional, etc), and increased discussion about the subject should lead to lasting changes in how race and religion are discussed in the nation state.

Further analysis on the subject of racial and religious harmony could include conducting a follow-up survey on the topic after COVID restrictions are further relaxed. This will allow us to further ascertain the impact that COVID had or may have had on fostering increased racial and religious tension in the nation state.
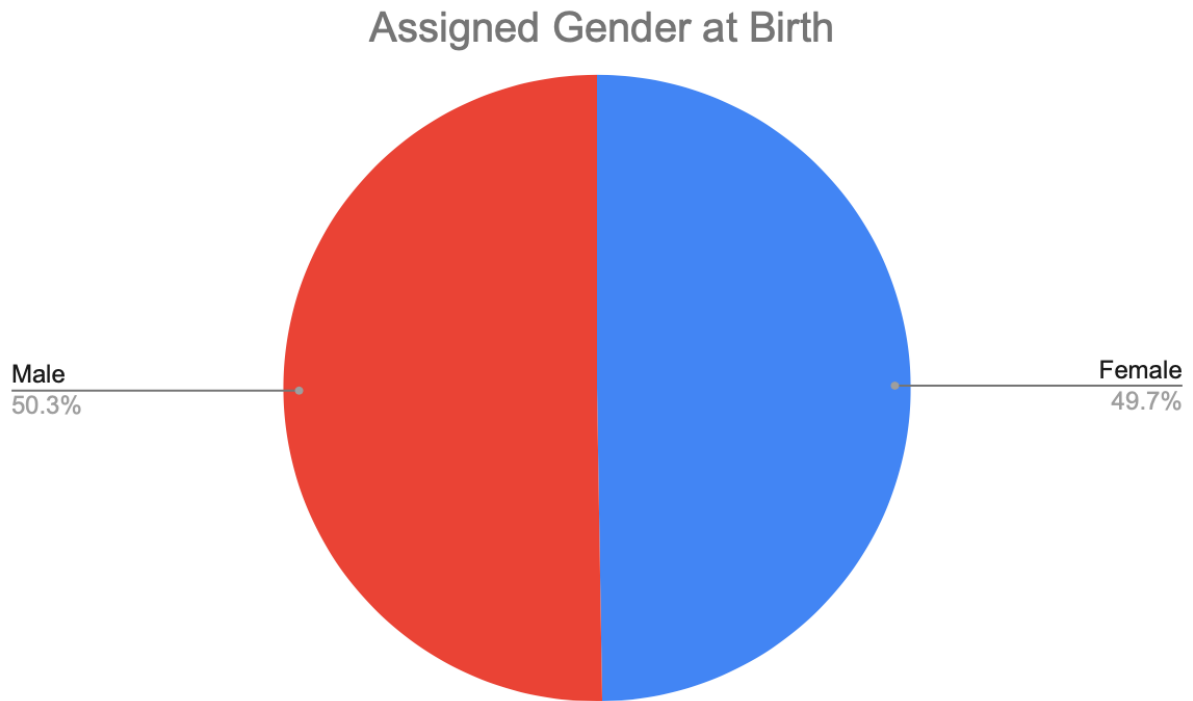
Additionally, conducting a more rigorous literature review might help to uncover further gaps in race-based legislation, both in Singapore and in other countries, allowing for more avenues to explore in tackling racial and religious discrimination.
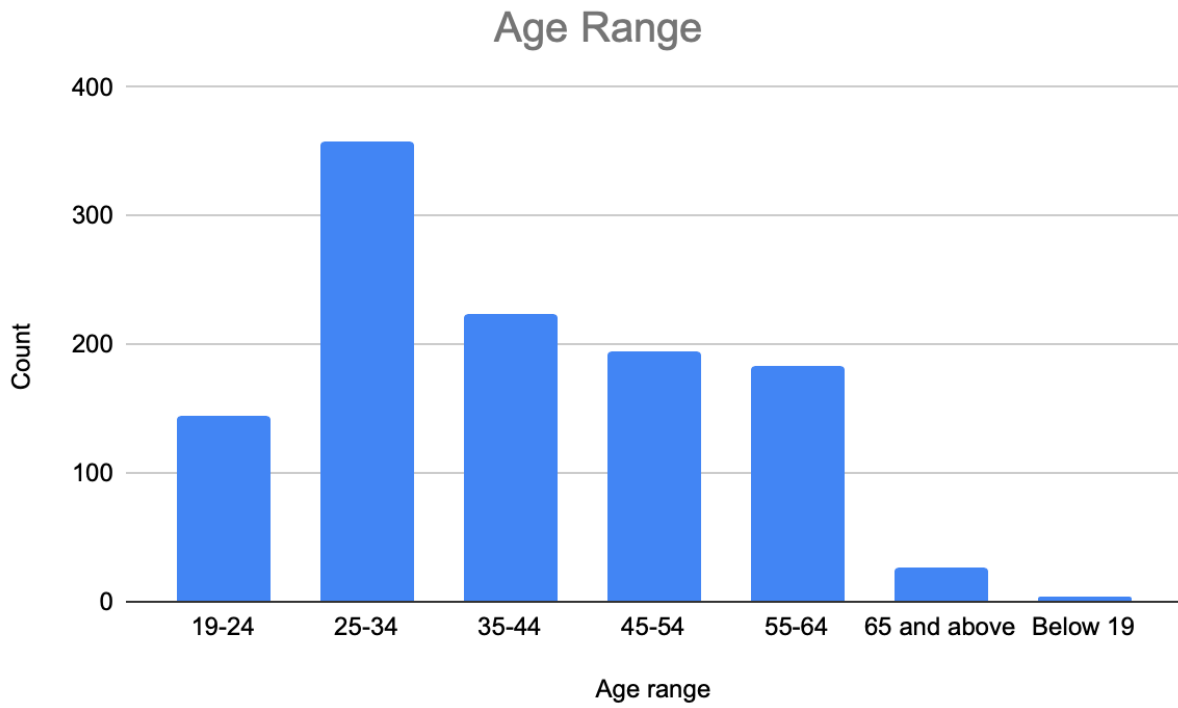
Nonetheless, we hope that our study and the results gathered can contribute to the wider discourse surrounding racial and religious relations in Singapore, and catalyse greater societal structural change by positing recommendations that can be utilised for more helpful policy changes in the nation.

ANNEX - Demographics of the Survey Respondents

Assigned Gender at Birth

Male
50.3%

Female
49.7%

Age Range

Ethnicity Breakdown

Others (32)
2.8%

Malay (206)
18.2%

Indian (103)
9.1%

Chinese (793)
69.9%