



Selected Papers of Internet Research 15:
The 15th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Daegu, Korea, 22-24 October 2014

RACE AND RELIGION IN EVERYDAY INFORMATION SEEKING ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

Sandra Hanchard
Swinburne University of Technology

Abstract

This paper investigates the range of social networks that Malaysian users value on social media for information seeking in everyday contexts. It specifically examines whether Malaysian users demonstrate preferences towards connections of shared race or religion on social media. Results from an online questionnaire of 400 Malaysian users, including Bahasa Malay, Chinese, Indian and English speakers demonstrates that social media in general helps users increase their connectedness, both online and offline, with different types of social networks. Malaysian users do not preference ties of shared race or religion over other types of social networks in how they value information for usefulness and trust on social media in everyday contexts. This is an encouraging sign for the potential of social media to promote social cohesion in Malaysia.

Keywords

Social media, everyday life information seeking, ethnic polarisation, networked individualism, Malaysia

Race and religion in everyday life in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the constructs of race and religion pervade national media and political narratives (Noor) prompting an investigation into how Malaysians interact with other ethnic groups in daily life on social media. The notion of a 'two-social' reality (Shamsul 1996) can be used to explain why everyday information practices between ethnic groups, should not be assumed to be determined by macro frameworks that arguably contribute to ethnic polarisation, such as the New Economic Policy (Jomo 2004). The government '1Malaysia' program is an attempt at ethnic unification, yet historical divisiveness between the major ethnic groups - Malay, Chinese, and Indian - persists in political and media ownership affiliations. Social media arguably plays a disruptive role in an information environment where traditional media is both tightly controlled by the government and ethnically polarised, by allowing users to access information directly across social networks.

Suggested Citation (APA): Hanchard, S. (2014, October 22-24). *Race and religion in everyday information seeking on social media in Malaysia*. Paper presented at Internet Research 15: The 15th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Daegu, Korea: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Social networks and everyday information seeking

Social media is a utility for everyday information seeking and sharing across social networks. Everyday information seeking is a way for people to bring order to their everyday lives and solve problems (Savolainen 1995). The curation of sources based on meaningful social networks to serve everyday information seeking needs is a compelling affordance of social media. It is important first to compare what social networks mean in South East Asian versus Western contexts. Networked individualism emphasises that 'people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members' (Rainie & Wellman 2012, p.12). However, in collectivist cultures such as Malaysia (Postill 2011) traditional social networks still have a role in supporting the individual in everyday life. Cultural values and local contexts shape daily practices, including everyday information seeking on social media.

Approach and methods

I examine how Malaysian users value types of social networks for everyday information. My results are based on an online questionnaire of 400 respondents, from a pool of 85,000 internet users representative of the Malaysian online population in 2012. The results here are part of a wider doctoral study. As the ethnic background of the respondents could not be collected, users were selected on a quota basis among major language-groups as a proxy, namely Bahasa Malay, Chinese, Indian and English speakers. Language is arguably as a marker of ethnic identity (Fishman 1989) although this is a topic of intense debate in socio- linguistic research. Demographic variables (sampled across a broad cross-section) included gender, age, residence, language, education, income and occupation. The following questions are relevant to this paper:

Connectedness: Has Social Media increased in general your everyday contact, online or offline, with any of the following?

Useful: Do you get information on Social Media that is useful in your everyday life from any of the following?

Trust: Do you get information on Social Media that you generally trust from any of the following?

The social networks respondents could select from included (more than one could be chosen):

- Friends and / or Family
- Work peers
- School, College or University peers
- Acquaintances and / or Strangers
- People who share your religion
- People who share you race / ethnicity
- People who share your interests
- Other
- None

I adopt the language of 'strong' and 'weak' ties (Granovetter 1973) to illustrate how ties are prioritised for the information they provide. I use a simplified measure for tie strength based on increased contact frequency with ties, either online or offline, through their use of social media; which I term, 'connectedness' (compare more in-depth modelling by Gilbert & Karahalios 2009). Further, I assess how Malaysian users value these ties in terms of 'usefulness' and 'trust' of information, drawing on internet credibility research (Flanagin & Metzger 2007).

Findings and Discussion

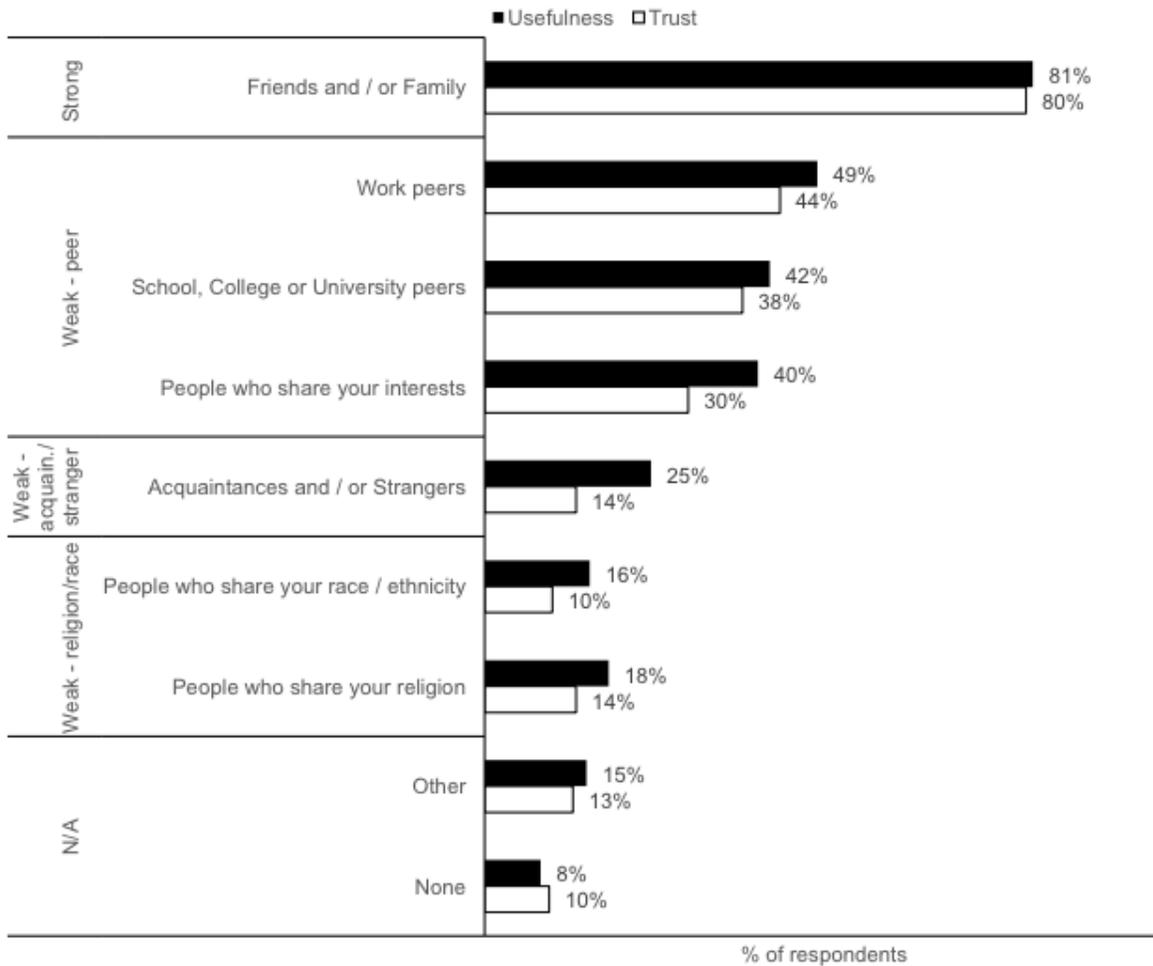
Social media, in general, helps Malaysian users increase their connectedness, both online and offline, with different types of social networks (Table 1). Malaysian users do not preference ties of shared race or religion over other types of social networks in how they value information for usefulness and trust on social media in everyday contexts (Table 2). Friends and family are the preferred sources of information on social media, suggesting that strong ties remain important in a Malaysian setting. For solving quotidian problems through information seeking on a domestic information and media utility (Bakardjieva 2005) strong ties appear to provide the most value to users.

Table 1: Tie strength of social networks ('Connectedness') through social media use based on Malaysian users

Tie strength	Social network	Connectedness % of respondents	Categories within tie strength
Strong	Friends and / or family	85%	n/a
	Work peers	49%	Peer
Weak	School, College or University peers	49%	
	People who share your interests	42%	
	Acquaintances and / or Strangers	25%	Acquaintance/Stranger
	People who share your religion	19%	Religion/Race
People who share you race / ethnicity	15%		

Source: Hanchard
n= 400
October 2012

Figure 1: Usefulness and trust of social media information from ties based on Malaysian users



Source: Hanchard
n= 400
October 2012

More detailed findings showed that users who had higher employment and education advantages valued information from ties of greater social distance ('Peer', 'Acquaintance/stranger') which may enhance opportunities during job-seeking (Kavanaugh et al. 2005). Users without tertiary-education relied on religious connections, suggesting that traditional social networks still have a role for social support. While networked individualism might have limited applicability in a collectivist setting, a network society framework (Castells 2010) is relevant in emphasising access to diverse social networks through ICTs, such as social media.

I do not claim that that ethnic polarisation is devoid on social media, especially in times of heightened political awareness; information seeking and sharing could become more siloed along ethnic lines during civic events. Yet based on my findings, Malaysian social media users appear to rise above national constructs in how they value diverse social networks for everyday information, supporting the notion of a 'two-social' reality.

References

Bakardjieva, M 2005, *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.

Castells, M 2010, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., with a new preface., Chichester, Malden, Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, MA.

Fishman, JA 1989, *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*, Multilingual Matters, Ltd, Clevedon, Avon, England.

Flanagin, AJ & Metzger, MJ 2007, 'The role of site features, user attributes, and information verification behaviors on the perceived credibility of web-based information', *New Media & Society*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 319–342.

Gilbert, E & Karahalios, K 2009, 'Predicting Tie Strength with Social Media', Boston, MA.

Granovetter, M 1973, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *Journal of American Sociology*, vol. 78, no. 6, pp. 1360–1380.

Jomo, KS 2004, *The New Economic Policy and Interethnic Relations in Malaysia*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Kavanaugh, A, Reese, D, Carroll, J & Rosson, M 2005, 'Weak ties in networked communities', *The Information Society*, vol. 21, pp. 119–131.

Postill, J 2011, *Localizing the Internet*, Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford. Rainie, H & Wellman, B 2012, *Networked : The New Social Operating System*, MIT Press, Cambridge,

Mass. Savolainen, R 1995, 'Everyday life information seeking: Approaching information seeking in the context of "way of life"', *Library & Information Science Research*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 259–294.

Shamsul, A 1996, 'Debating about identity in Malaysia: A discourse analysis', *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 566–600.