

# Competitiveness between Ethnic Malays and Ethnic Chinese in Malaysia

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**Abstract** - Previous research have compared competitive behaviour between participants of different nationalities, profession and gender. This current research investigates competitive behaviour between a multiethnic sample from Malaysia. Ethnic Malay and ethnic Chinese Malaysians were primed to compete in a singing competition and completed a Revised Competitive Index questionnaire. Results showed that ethnic Chinese were more competitive and enjoyed competing more than ethnic Malays. There were also significant differences in gender with females being more competitive, enjoyed competing and were more contentious than males. These results are discussed in terms of previous research on cultural, socio-political policies and gender sensitivities.

**Keywords:** *competitiveness; cultural differences; socio-political policies*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Competitive behaviour refers to the desire to win in interpersonal situations (Kohn, 1986). Competitive individuals are expected to strive harder, earlier or more effectively than others, and there is evidence suggesting that higher levels of competitiveness relate to higher levels of performance (Hinsz & Jundt, 2005). One of the earliest research on competitive behaviour dates back to the pioneering work of Triplett (1897) who propagated concepts such as competitive instincts, mental attitudes and the desire to win. Deutsch (1949) emphasised that competitive behaviour is dependent on the importance of situational or external factors and how rewards are considerably valued by the competitor. According to this model, competition level is highest under a 'winner takes all' model. More recently, approaches by Gill and Deeter, (1998); Houston, Carter and Smither (1997) have conceptualised competitiveness as a personality characteristic that influences social interaction in both personal and professional life. The latter argued that professional tennis players scored higher on the competitiveness scale than amateurs, and concluded that competitiveness was a characteristic trait of world ranked players. Their findings suggest that the level of competitiveness was relatively stable

across the different stages of these professional tennis players' career indicating that competitiveness was an adaptive 'characteristic' trait, and not ability. Dumblekar (2010) found that competitiveness is shaped not only by individual differences but also by the context and circumstances of the individual.

Although competitive behaviour is deemed to be an important personality trait in both work and achievement motivation, there have been very few re-search that measures competitive behaviour in social environments (Slowiak, 2008). Competitiveness have been researched on in a variety of samples from the United States (Houston, Farese, & LaDu, 1992; Gill & Dzewaltowski, 1988; Smither & Houston, 1992; Houston, Carter, & Smither, 1997) but there are unfortunately very few samples from cultures outside of the United States. There are few exceptions to this, a study by Lynn (1991) reported that social and psychological factors correlate with the economic growth of a country. Economies in East Asia were found to have very high competitiveness scores compared with the developed countries of Europe, and the core trait that emerged as important in competitiveness was the high value East Asian countries attached to money-making. Furthermore, Furnham, Kirkcaldy, and Lynn (1994) found that Asian and Eastern countries, e.g., China, India, Israel, and Japan scored higher on competitiveness than countries from the Americas, e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and the United States. A study by Kirkcaldy, Furnham, and Martin (1998) further reiterates this point. National means were obtained from a sample of 53 countries with respect to personality variables, socioeconomic factors, work-related attitudes and well-being. It was reported that high gross domestic product (GDP) correlated negatively with competitiveness. Nations that attached high subjective well-being scores (e.g. mastery over problems and achievement through conformity) were less competitive, and attached less importance to money. Interestingly, a study by Houston, Harris, Moore and Brummett (2005) investigated competitiveness among three groups of cultures living in the United States, namely Chinese, Japanese and American. It was reported that American students enjoyed competing more than Chinese and Japanese students. Since previous research on competitiveness studied groups of people from different nationalities and with different sets of cultures, this present research intends to investigate competitiveness among people of

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the same nationality but with different cultural backgrounds, namely the eth-nic Malays and the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. This is important because both these ethnic groups have somewhat different historical and sociopolitical orientation, aspects of which are known to have effects on behaviours (see Hewstone & Ward, 1985). In such an environment, competitive behaviours are increasingly affected by the culture of the individual or society, and not necessarily only by their nationality, profession and gender.

Presently, Malaysia is a multicultural society with a population of 28.5 million, of which Malays comprise 67.3%, Chinese, 24.5%, Indians 7.3% and others 0.9% (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2014). It is worth noting that these three ethnic groups have significant distinct cultural and religious heritages. They continue to maintain their separate identities, preserving their separate cultures which manifest itself in the languages they speak, dress codes, customs and behaviour patterns (Sendut, 1991). The beginnings of a plural society in Malaysia started in the early 1900s with the presence of immigrants from China, India, Sumatra, Java and other islands of the Malay Archipelago. Since colonial times, there was a clear division of labour among these three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. The Malays and other indigenous groups lived as farmers, peasants, hunters and fishermen, while the Chinese emerged as the first middle class society with their business and entrepreneurship qualities expanding tin mining industries. Indians were brought in to work at rubber plantations, railway constructions and as security guards. Of the three main ethnic groups, the Chinese eventually controlled the Malaysian economy (Montesino, 2012). After independence, this division of labour proved to be the source of cross-cultural conflicts, due to the unequal socio-economic standing between the two largest ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese (Mason & Omar, 2003). As a result, Malaysia devised affirmative-action policies to correct these economic imbalances in hope of reducing poverty, to the advantage of the Malays and other indigenous groups in Malaysia. One of the first affirmative-action policies introduced was the National Economic Policy (NEP) which was enacted in 1969. Since then, the government of Malaysia have been implementing further similar policies, namely the National Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-90), National Development Policy (NDP, 1991-2000), and recently the National Vision Policy (NVP, 2001-20). In short, the Ma-lays and indigenous groups in Malaysia have been given 'preferential policies' or 'special rights' (Haque, 2003) and although most Malays strongly support and welcome such ethnic preferential policies, the Chinese perceive these policies as discriminatory (Lee, 2000). These affirmative-action policies have expanded the Malay special rights to investment, capital ownership and education (Means, 1986, p.104). Such ethnic preferential policies have compromised the level of competitiveness for Malays and work as disincentives for non-Malays. Because of these policies, some have argued that the Malays have become overdependent on the government for various ethnic privileges compromising the need for merit and efficiency (Lim, 1999; Stafford, 1999). Inter ethnic differences

between Malays and Chinese are also found within the education system. A study by Joseph (2005), found that preferential treatment of Malays within the education system has also made competition among non-Malays, especially from Chinese children, very keen. She argues that the emphasis in Chinese schools in Malaysia is one that stresses upon academic excellence and keen competition. Such ethnic preferential policies have by and large had considerable implications affecting the level of competitiveness between these two ethnic groups.

Apart from economic policies that favour one ethnicity over another, an equally important factor in considering competitive behaviour lies in the cultural systems to which each ethnic group subscribes. Lim (1998) argues that the Malays are more accustomed to relationship building, preferring stability, and honouring traditions. On the other hand, the Chinese are more ma-terialistic, adapting better to risks, possessing perseverance and thrifty qualities (see also Harris and Moran, 1996: 279; Lim, 2001). Studies by Kennedy (2002) found that Malays are mindful to ensure that their actions do not upset the feelings of others. Social harmony and getting along with others are qualities that are emphasised within the Malay communities (see also Sendut, Madson, & Thong, 1990). They are hesitant in displaying assertive behaviour, offering negative feed-back or speaking up openly against their elders (Abdullah, 1996: 25). The Malay culture prides itself on the concept of *tolongmenolong*, which translates to 'mutual support' (Chee, 1992). Crouch (1996) states that the Malays are usually portrayed as polite and self-effacing, and would prefer to sit around chatting rather than working hard. They also express favourable attitudes toward religion and accept fate as being unchangeable and final, in line with Islamic principles which emphasise that the pursuit of financial gains should not be at the expense of the community (Sulaiman, 2000).

The Chinese, compared to the Malays are usually portrayed as being more acquisitive, highly inspired by financial rewards and driven by goals (Harris and Moran, 1996: 279; Lim, 2001). Possibly due to the immigrant psyche, the Chinese looks to material security in business environments. They are mainly urbanites, business oriented, and are committed to self-improvement while the Malays are seemingly more easygoing (Pye, 1985: 250). Chinese people are also more energetic, aggressive, self-confident, and entrepreneurial (Mastor, Jin, & Cooper, 2000). In the pursuit of material security, the Chinese are also devoted to maintaining good social relationships and have formed associations and guilds among members of the same clan, dialect or education-al group (Sendut, Mdson, & Thong, 1990). Concepts of *guanxi* (relationship building within a network of people through by which influence is brokered) and *mianzi* (giving of face or enhancing of someone's social status) epitomise this commitment (Ramasamy, Ng, & Hung, 2007). The Chinese are able to strike a balance between preserving good interpersonal relationships and work achievements (Lim, 1998). Unlike the Malay culture, the Chinese culture argues that religion is to be 'manipulated' to suit their goals: fate is negotiable if appropriate sacrifices are offered to the gods (Lim, 2001).

Although research on the political systems and cultural differences between Malays and Chinese are consistent in their findings, there is a lack of existing literature on how these have affected competitive behaviour between the two ethnic groups. In order to probe into the existence of an implicit competitive inclination between the Malays and the Chinese, this present study employs the use of the Revised Competitive Index (Houston, Harris, McIntire, & Francis, 2002). The Re-vised Competitiveness Index has high internal consistency and is a structured personality questionnaire consisting of 14 Likert-type items relating to interpersonal competitiveness in everyday context. It consists of 14 items that can be used in total to measure overall competitiveness and can be divided into two separate sub scales; 'Enjoyment of Competition' (nine items) and 'Contentiousness' (five items) (Harris & Houston, 2010). The Competitiveness Index has been used to make a distinction between amateur and professional athletes (Houston, Carter, & Smith, 1997), nurses and attorneys (Houston, Farese, & La Du, 1992), safe and aggressive drivers (Harris & Houston, 2010), and females and males (Houston, Harris, Moore, Brummett & Kametani, 2005). Previous studies relied on responses from groups of people who were not 'primed' into a competitive state. This study provides a stricter test on competitiveness between two groups of people in that it examines firstly, people of the same nationality but with different sets of cultural and socio-political upbringing and secondly, providing a platform to prime competitive behaviour.

The present study employed a reality singing competition, Putra Idol, which was run in as much a similar manner to the commercialized and well-known American Idol competition. The American Idol competition is a reality vocal competition that provides opportunity to all amateur singers a chance at being a solo recording artiste. Putra Idol was open to all students and staff at a public university in Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Upon successfully getting through a preliminary selection round, chosen participants would then compete in a semi-final round and eventually in a final round. The top three participants would receive cash prize and a trophy each. Due to an inherent cultural and socio-political make up, it was predicted that ethnic Chinese participants would exhibit a higher level of competitiveness than would ethnic Malays.

## II. METHOD

### A. Participants

Ninety seven participants took part in the study. Sixty seven participants were ethnic Malays and 30 were ethnic Chinese. In the ethnic Malay group, there were 36 males and 31 females, while in the ethnic Chinese group there were 14 males and 16 females. Participants' mean age was 23.2 years ( $SD = 4.2$ ). All participants were students and staff studying or working at Universiti Putra Malaysia and were recruited via street campaigns, posters, banners and social media. Testing was carried out at the preliminary round of the competition, on

campus in the 'green room', moments before going on stage to sing.

### B. Materials and Design

All participants completed the Revised Competitiveness Index (Houston, Harris, McIntire, & Francis, 2002), which is a 14-item self-report measure designed to access the desire to win. The Index uses a 5-point Likert scale response format on which 1 = 'strongly agree' to 5 = 'strongly disagree'. Questions 1-9 represented the 'Enjoyment of Competition' scale while items 10-14 represented the 'Contentiousness' scale. Examples of scale items in Enjoyment of Competition include 'I like competition', and 'I get satisfaction from competing with others'. Cronbach's alpha for the 'Enjoyment of Competition' scale was 0.79, and the corresponding value for the 'Contentiousness' scale was 0.73. Examples of scale items in Contentiousness include 'I try to avoid arguments', and 'I don't enjoy challenging others even when I think they are wrong'. Items 4,6,7,8,10,11,12,13 and 14 were reversed coded. Participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire requesting information on gender, age and ethnicity.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare competitiveness between Malay participants ( $M = 38.64$ ,  $SD = 5.70$ ) and Chinese participants ( $M = 41.30$ ,  $SD = 5.63$ ). The difference was significant,  $t(95) = -2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ . Results indicated that Chinese participants were more competitive than Malay participants. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare Enjoyment of Competition between Malay ( $M = 21.76$ ,  $SD = 4.42$ ) and Chinese participants ( $M = 24.90$ ,  $SD = 4.46$ ). The difference was significant,  $t(95) = -3.22$ ,  $p < .01$ . Results revealed that Chinese participants enjoyed competing more than Malay participants. A similar t-test was conducted to compare Contentiousness between Malay and Chinese participants. There were no significant effects for ethnicity on contentiousness.

An independent sample t-tests was also conducted to compare competitiveness between male participants ( $M = 37.50$ ,  $SD = 5.88$ ) and female participants ( $M = 41.19$ ,  $SD = 5.23$ ). The difference was significant,  $t(98) = -3.29$ ,  $p < .01$ . The results indicated that female participants were more competitive than male participants. Further t-tests on the Enjoyment of Competition between male and female participants showed strong significance as well, with males ( $M = 21.53$ ,  $SD = 4.54$ ) and females ( $M = 23.94$ ,  $SD = 4.41$ );  $t(98) = -2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ . These results suggested that females significantly enjoyed competing more than males. Similar t-test analysis on the Contentiousness Scale between male and female participants showed strong significance. Scores for males ( $M = 16.0$ ,  $SD = 3.20$ ) and females

( $M = 17.26$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ );  $t(98) = -2.09$ ,  $p < .05$ . Results indicated that females were more contentious than males in a competition setting.

Furthermore, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of gender and ethnicity on the Enjoyment of Competition. Results revealed a significant main effect on ethnicity whereby Chinese participants scored higher ( $M = 24.63$ ,  $SD = 4.41$ ) than their Malay counterparts ( $M = 21.76$ ,  $SD = 4.42$ ) on the Enjoyment of Competition,  $F(2, 94) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .05$ . There was a non-significant main effect of gender on the Enjoyment of Competition. However, there was a statistically significant interaction between gender and race on the Enjoyment of Competition,  $F(2, 94) = 0.08$ ,  $p < .01$ . A two-way ANOVA was also conducted examining the effect of gender and ethnicity on the Contentiousness Scale. Results revealed a significant main effect of gender whereby female participants scored higher ( $M = 17.27$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ) than male participants ( $M = 15.90$ ,  $SD = 3.18$ ) on the Contentiousness scale,  $F(2, 94) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .05$ . There was no significant ethnicity differences in contentiousness or any significant interaction between gender and ethnicity.

The results here indicate that Chinese participants scored higher for competitiveness and enjoyed competing more than Malay participants. The implications of ethnic preferential policies by the government which were introduced as early as 1969 can be clearly seen in this study. As predicted, the unequal preferential policies have caused the Malays to be less competitive while the Chinese have since emerged as a group of people who had to compete from this disadvantaged position, and hence have grown accustomed to competing, making competing an enjoyable behaviour. The implications of these policies have also affected economic competitiveness in Malaysia. Stafford (1999) argues that these preferential policies compromise competitiveness as Malays become overdependent on the state for various privileges. Since the Malays represent the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, the principle of special rights and preferences in favour of Malays, compromising merit and efficiency would eventually undermine the competitiveness of the Malaysian economy (Haque, 2003).

Apart from economic policies, the cultural systems to which both ethnic groups hold on to are different. The Chinese people tend to be risk takers, and have a high level of perseverance, traits that relate positively to competitive behaviour, while the Malays are more concerned with ensuring their actions do not upset others, stressing on social harmony. The stereotype Malays as described by Crouch (1996) are neither hardworking nor ambitious. In support of previous literature (see Lynn, 1991; Kirkcaldy, Furnham, & Martin, 1998), competitive behaviour is associated with the importance of money-making. People who do not attach importance to money-making and are able to achieve goals through conforming, tend to have a lower level of competitiveness. It is also noteworthy here to mention that the Chinese people tend to observe Confucian cultural traditions emphasising 'saving face'. 'Saving face' in the Chinese culture refers to safeguarding one's pride and dignity. Chinese

people participate in competitions with hopes of winning, as it upholds their self-esteem. This in itself is a compelling motivation to be competitive. In contrast, Lim (2001), argues that Malays tend to be more motivated by a sense of sharing with family and friends, taking precedence over self centred interests.

Although it is unclear why no cross-cultural differences were detected for contentiousness, the results may be in part due to participants being mostly under-graduate students. Since this scale examines attitudes about challenging and questioning others, sampling from academic environments may have contorted results here. It is possible that in such environments challenging assumptions and thinking critically are discouraged. Hence this would have disguised the cultural differences that may be discovered outside academic environments. A similar study on competitiveness among undergraduates by Houston, Harris, Moore, Brummett, & Kametani (2005) found no differences in the level of contentiousness among their sample of students. Furthermore, both the Malay and Chinese culture emphasise the importance of maintaining good social relationships with others (Lim, 2001). In the Malay culture, it is important to get along with people to avoid interpersonal conflicts, and they take great efforts to ensure disagreements are not discussed openly (Goddard, 1997). Similarly the Chinese are committed to maintaining cordial social relationships (Sendut, Mdsen, & Thong, 1990).

Interestingly, female participants were found to be more competitive, enjoyed competing and were more contentious when compared to male participants. This is in contrast to previous studies in the U.S. and in many other countries that have shown that men scored higher on competitiveness than women (see Helmreich, Sawin, & Carsrud, 1986; Gill, 1988; Shapiro, Schneider, Shore, Margison & Uvari, 2009). In a study by Lynn (1991, 1993) it was reported that men were significantly more competitive than women in 20 countries, including China, Japan and Taiwan. Women were found to be more competitive in only one country, Iraq. On a similar vein, research by Houston, Carter, & Smither (1997) found that female tennis professionals were more competitive than males. Also in support of this, a study on Malaysian teenagers by Yusof and Amin (1999: 806) reported that female teenagers valued 'attention-seeking' and 'self-achievement' more than male teenagers did, implying that females behaved in a more competitive manner in fulfilling their goals of 'self-achievement'. Similarly, a study by Westwood and Everett (1995: 22) observed that Chinese female managers were more ambitious, and achievement oriented than Chinese male managers. Despite an immense amount of literature that affirms of men being more competitive than females, recent re-searches have discovered that females too are advancing to be more competitive.

It is possible that this may be due to the effects of feminist movements which began in the 1970s when women began questioning and addressing inequalities in the political, financial, social and cultural realms. In the early 1990s, feminists sought to dispute, reclaim and redefine ideas about gender roles while seeking power to control domains which were previously held by

males (Mendes, 2012). Perhaps even similar to preferential policies that favour the Malays over the Chinese, females had to compete in 'glass ceiling' settings, competing with men from a disadvantaged position. This could have arguably led to females in this study being more competitive and contentious than males. Since females in this study were university students, it would be interesting to investigate if females of an older generation would be as competitive as females of this present generation. The effects of such gender sentiments are still unclear and further quantitative work is needed to map out the underlying psychological processes.

The results of the present study offer encouraging evidence that competitive behaviour is shaped by cultural and socio-political policies. Firstly, competitive behaviour is not limited to nationality, but is very much dependent on the policies devised by the leaders of the country. A policy that allows for preferential treatment for one ethnic group over another would affect the former's level of competitiveness, making them less ambitious and aggressive in the face of competition. Secondly, the results also indicate that cultural differences influence competitiveness among people of the same nationality. Previous researches have shown differences in the level of competitiveness between people of different nationalities, but this present study examined with an even greater scrutiny the level of competitiveness between ethnic groups of the same nationality. It is interesting to note that despite being of one nationality, a culture that prides itself on being non-assertive, community driven and preferring stability would be less competitive than a culture that emphasises individuality and acquisitiveness. Thirdly, the effects of gender equality have resulted in females being more competitive and contentious in achieving their desired intentions. Although past studies have shown men to be more aggressive, ambitious and assertive, the recent social implications of gender equality have led to an increase in competitiveness among females.

The results of this research is a generalisation of respondents who are undergraduates at a local university, competing in a non-academic competition. Although the participants were driven by financial and 'attention-seeking' goals, further research should be conducted on a purely academic setting whereby participants may manifest a different set of results. The current research also tested purely on undergraduates who are a generation that grew up with the effects of affirmative action policies and gender movements, and results may have differed if this research was conducted with different age groups of people. Lastly, the study here did not investigate the effects of political and social cultural effects on Indians, the third largest ethnic community in Malaysia. Comparison studies between the three major ethnic groups could have perhaps strengthened some aspects of this current study.

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