

ICONSPADU 2021**International Conference on Sustainable Practices, Development and Urbanisation****IMPACT RACE FACTOR ON THE TOLERANCE OF A
MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

Malaysia is a country where people of diverse ethnicity and religion live together in a society for so long, establishing a unique multicultural identity. Nevertheless, the efforts to maintain the harmonious atmosphere is not easy, there are challenges especially in the Industrial Revolution (IR4.0) era, where the development in information and communication technology (ICT) platforms grows rapidly. Some of the digital media facilities offered are not utilised for their intended purpose, instead, they are now used as provocative instruments. Unfortunately, freedom of speech and expression are misinterpreted, leading to ethnic and religion slurs, as well as incitement to hatred. Thus, this study aims to analyse the impact of race's factor on the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia. The study used a survey design by adopting the quantitative method. The set of online questionnaires was distributed to 260 respondents, and the data obtained were subject to inferential analysis using ANCOVA. The study findings concluded significant impact of race factor's on the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia. Results indicated that Borneo ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.426$) showed more racial tolerant, followed by Others ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.614$), Indian ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.553$), Malay ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.498$) and Chinese ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.635$). Understanding on cultural and religious diversity is very important in producing a harmonious and tolerant society. The nature of mutual understanding in every citizen is able to create a society that respects, united and tolerates each other.

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Keywords: Communication, harmony, multicultural, race, tolerance



1. Introduction

Social interaction between multicultural communities, such as the one in Malaysia, is often in a strained state. The nature of human beings as the beings of conflict (*homo conflictus*) results in a long-lasting disagreement, competition, and clash of opinions between each other (Novri, 2014). In the context of a multicultural society in Malaysia, conflict is certainly inevitable. However, effective conflict management can help to produce positive outcome by mobilising great ideas and actions to gain a better quality of life. This in a way helps to steer clear of unfavourable conflicts such as hostility, hatred, stereotyping, collision, and violence (Mohd Anuar et al., 2018). The nature of multicultural relation in Malaysia shows that ethnicity and religion are not the main factors that can spark a conflict between communities. On the other hand, there are factors such as socioeconomic imbalance and the weakness of the government to come up with an inclusive policy to address the issues stemming from some parties that manipulate some issues related to ethnic and religious for the sake of provoking conflict and tension in the society (Chamil, 2007).

Advancement of today's technology makes room for a higher level of freedom of speech. This does affect the level of perception and participation of general public in the current affairs. All government policies are heavily discussed in many arenas, including on social media. In fact, this is a sign of people awareness of the current changes and developments. Nevertheless, the lack of control and integrity values contributes to the spread of negative perceptions, which have the potential to trigger negative sentiment among the citizens. Extreme attitude and provocative approaches in dealing with such issues have become a threat to the integrity and harmony of the multicultural society in Malaysia. Abuse of social media for such unethical purposes requires serious attention. This is because the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia is the key to social wellbeing and economic prosperity.

1.1. Multicultural Society: The Reality in Malaysia

Current technological developments have witnessed increased access to the use of digital media in society. Indeed, social media has a positive impact, however from another angle, the abuse of freedom by certain parties who touch on sensitive and provocative issues involving race and religion has created tension in the society, besides triggering the digital conflict. Looking at the statistics of this country in 2020, three of the four major religions in Malaysia reflect a certain ethnic dominance that exceeds 90% – Islam (Malays: 90.1%), Buddhism, (Chinese: 97.8%), and Hinduism (Indians: 98.7%). Christianity is more prominent in Sabah and Sarawak, which is dominated by other Bumiputera races such as Iban and Kadasan-Dusun, contributing to 64.7% of the total Christians in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Such interconnection makes it easier to manipulate sensitive issues involving race and religion, which are fuelled by certain parties to push their agendas without contemplating the resulting conflicts and tensions that may arise.

In Malaysia, the level of tension between ethnicities and religions shall be measured via the Societal Stress Index (SSI). SSI is an indicator used by the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN) to observe the level of social stress in Malaysia, which is portrayed by the acts that stem from or triggered by violence, riots, demonstrations, protests, attacks, fights, and issues reported on the social

media and mass media, putting unity in jeopardy. SSI helps JPNIN to understand the situation in the country and its long-term impact on ethnic relations, stability, and prosperity of the nation. The monitoring effort carried out by JPNIN through SSI will be communicated to the government so that intervention measure can be taken to defuse the tension.

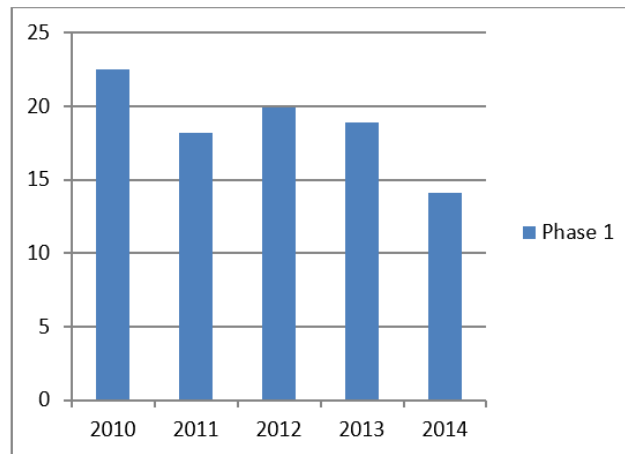


Figure 1. Societal Stress Index (Phase 1)

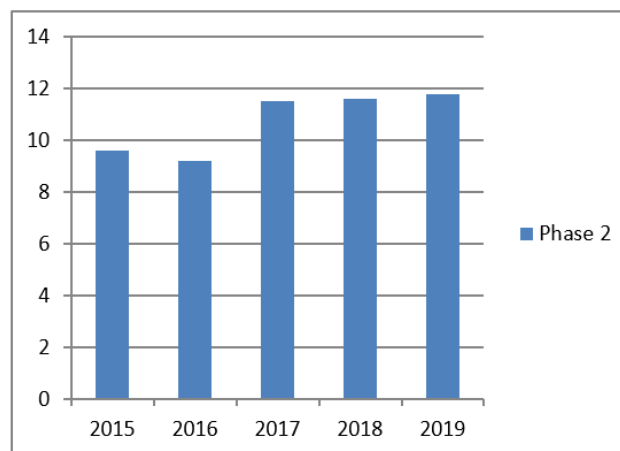


Figure 2. Societal Stress Index (Phase 2)

Based on the JPNIN report, there is a significant decline from the Phase 1 (2010-2014) to the Phase 2 (2015-2019). The first phase showed a high rate with the average SSI of 22 but the rate decreased in the second phase, with an average of 12.7. However, the decline is not the true reflection of harmonious relationship between people of different races and religions. This is because the indicator used by JPNIN emphasises on the incidents due racial tension such as riots and demonstrations, without considering the strain that exists on social media. That is why JPNIN has planned to improve the index in the future so that the sensitive issues discussed on the social media sites can be incorporated in the index.

According to the 2020 Global Peace Index Report, Malaysia is ranked 20th in the world out of 160 countries, with the drop of 4 places from the previous year's position. From another perspective, Malaysia is ranked in the 5th position in the Asia Pacific region and 2nd in the Southeast Asian region, losing to

Singapore. Looking at the country's achievements from 2011 to 2020, it turns out that Malaysia's best performance is being the 16th back in 2019. Of the three domains outlined, the country's achievements are significantly influenced by internal conflict and political instability. The uniqueness of Malaysia lies on its identity as a nation with multicultural society. The works to maintain peace and harmony are not an easy feat, especially with the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, when most of social interactions have transformed to the digital ones. However, in conjunction with 6 decades of independence, proper initiatives shall be mobilised to address the digital conflict between ethnicities and religions in Malaysia for the purpose to improve the current peace index of this country. In fact, the aim is to create a more secure, peaceful, and stable society despite the global challenges.

1.2. Tolerance and Its Importance on Social Harmony

The General Conference of UNESCO in 1995 deems the values of tolerance as portraying true respect, acceptance and understanding of the cultural diversity worldwide, be it in the form of self-expression and personal acts of an individual (Declaration of Principles of Tolerance, 2020). Weldon (2003) defines the concept of tolerance in a multicultural society as 'to tolerate the content of that expression and the willingness to actually embrace the cultural and ethnic differences.' For Walzer (1997), tolerance involves a high level of acceptance, a desire to know, celebrate differences of opinion and respect the diversity that exists in the society. Thus, ethnic tolerance refers to an individual's acceptance of other ethnicities as well as the ability to work and live together as a society (Budi Anto, 2020). This tolerance can be realised through a variety of means such as initiating close relationships, acceptance as a family member, or via non-family relationships that include social, economic, and political interactions.

Melnichuk (2018) states that the effectiveness of tolerance is influenced by two aspects, namely patience in relationships and peace in action. Harsh reactions as well as rejecting the value of diversity can be deemed as discrimination. This kind of discrimination can get worse, such as xenophobia (fear and disgust of anything different) or radicalism (violent reaction towards something different). Lektorsky (1997) explains that intolerant personality traits are characterised by rejection of different cultures, traditions, values, behavioural and communicative models. It is also portrayed through the acts of disrespect for the habits and beliefs of others. This act is beyond the bounds of justice because religious, racial, and gender diversity is a universal norm that needs to be respected by everyone on the earth.

Such values of tolerance are not only practised in the real world, but also adapted on digital platforms. Social medias such as Facebook, Whatsapp, and Twitter have become the most influential communication medium nowadays. Communication and information sharing occur in a broad scale with no geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, the lack of consumer civic awareness and self-control can lead to unethical behaviour. A study by Wasserman (2018) found that the use of internet by individuals with limited intellectual capability would put them at risk of indecent behaviour. Lu and Yu (2018) in turn concluded that the poor security control on the internet and the absence of responsible moderators for social media content do affect social harmony among the public. Sometimes, the fast and free access cause some users to lose their judgment and engage in unethical behaviour such as cyberbullying, hate speech, sedition, and racist provocation. There are also those who attempt to uphold the value of tolerance

in the wrong context by making fun of sensitive issues and regard such act as entertainment to gain popularity on the social media. Thus, all parties are responsible to ensure social media remains as a platform to foster understanding and unity, instead of leading to division and squabble.

1.3. Multicultural Society in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 has brought massive changes to the digital world, as well as leaving a great impact on the social interaction pattern in the society. Based on the statistics of the Global Internet Use in 2019, 26.4 million people or 80.7% of Malaysians out of the total 32.7 million population are internet users. The use of internet is focused on the latest social medias such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Whatsapp. Nevertheless, the advances in technology and internet access that increase steadily somehow contribute to unhealthy symptoms among netizens of the digital space. The symptoms include espionage and cyberbullying, the spread of defamation and fake news, comments that are deemed vulgar and hate speech, besides inciting racial and religious sentiments. A study conducted by UiTM and MCMC found that almost 80% of the contents on social media nowadays sound racist.

This has prompted the government to introduce the Religious and Racial Hate Act to put an end to the ongoing insults which are now rampant against race and religion (Berita Harian, 2018). In the meantime, the government is in the midst of granting the full authority to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to delete any posts pertaining to false information, defamation, and racism on social media (Astro Awani, 2019). This action is an initiative taken to address the growing abuse of social media. The economic downturn that takes place due to the COVID-19 pandemic and political turmoil in the country at the end of February 2020 have set the country's political temperature to rise. The popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become a medium of debate and provocation on current issues, especially those related to race and religion.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) reported 266 investigation papers were opened in the first six months of 2020, some of them are pertaining to the sedition offences and spread of fake or seditious news. Out of the total, 172 cases are still under investigation, while those being charged in 30 other cases have been prosecuted in court, 12 have been issued with warning notices, 13 cases have been brought to trials and for 17 cases, the defendants pleaded guilty (Harian Metro, 2020). According to the Minister of Home Affairs, Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin, there is a drastic increase of cases compared to the last three years, with only 78 cases (2019), 31 cases (2018), and 9 cases (2017). These cases seem to spark anxiety and unrest among the public, especially when it comes to the sensitive issues with regards to the royal institutions, race, religion, position of privileges and rights protected by the Federal Constitution. Based on the issues that are highlighted, this requires a proper draft with the initiative to create a harmonious digital ecosystem, so that it remains as a civilised social interaction platform for the multicultural society in Malaysia. Indeed, this is crucial to ensure the concept of 'Unity in Diversity' as has been proposed by the government becomes a reality.

2. Problem Statement

A study by Zahara et al. (2007) found that the tolerance level of the multicultural society in Malaysia is still moderate. The scores of ethnic unity among the Chinese and Indians are found to be declining, while the level of unity among the Malays does not portray an increasing trend. Economic and political factors are deemed as major contributors to the fragility of social relationship between these diverse ethnicities. For Amir (2004), this situation is due to the dysfunctional agents of socialisation such as the education system, language, and environment in fostering the values of unity and togetherness. The multi-ethnic school environment has shown a greater level of tolerance compared to vernacular schools which are often dominated by certain races. Individuals who live in a multicultural environment are observed to possess a higher level of tolerance than those who are more comfortable in their own group. (Ezhar et al., 2006). Thus, the experience of socialisation is a crucial factor as a catalyst for ethnic unity and tolerance among Malaysians.

The foundation of a rigid ethnic identity in Malaysia, particularly involving racial and religious diversity (Fox, 2000a) is the major factor that affects the efficacy of tolerance values in multicultural societies. Differences in norms and cultures oriented around race and religion that shall be perceived in a harmonious manner have instead been manipulated as propaganda that triggers discrimination and tension (Fox, 2000b). According to the Theory of Intergroup Contact, discrimination between races and religions is often set off by the hesitance of some parties to embrace differences as well as growing estrangement in daily interactions between themselves (Allport, 1954). In the context of Malaysia, there is a high prevalence rate of Chinese and Malays to reject people of different races and religions as neighbours. This situation is driven by several race-based policies such as race-based vernacular schools and quotas to higher education.

The policy is deemed as protectionist towards the Malays, as well as raising scepticism among the Chinese (Kee, 2010; Lee, 2016). The main problem behind this crisis is the lack of social interaction involving different groups, resulting in the existence of prejudice and negative sentiments. Based on the Theory of Social Identity, the main factor that drives this segregation is due to individuals who deem their ethnicity is superior to others, thus causing them to underestimate other groups (Tajfel et al., 1971). This situation can only be overcome through positive interaction based on understanding and acceptance of the value of diversity that exists in the society (Kanas et al., 2015).

The value of tolerance is driven by the ability to think critically about different beliefs and behaviour, thereby fostering an attitude of tolerance in overcoming the social diversity (Vogt, 1997). In the context of this country, the interconnection between race and religion in establishing an identity has indeed taken root in the society. The existence of an ethnicity is attributed to both factors with shared values and culture (Liebkind, 2006). Ultimately, the government needs to take a holistic approach to implement the values of tolerance in a multicultural society. The diversity and differences of people of this multicultural society need to be highlighted to the public up to the point they are welcomed and can be handled wisely (Nur Amali, 2020). This is important in fostering strong unity because a united society can only be established when the members of the society are willing to internalise diversity in its entirety. The public need to be constantly exposed and encourage to interact with others of different groups in a

harmonious manner. This is to increase the value of tolerance as well as eradicate the negative sentiments and stereotypes between themselves (Kanas et al., 2015).

3. Research Questions

This study focuses on the impact of race factor's on the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia. Thus, the research question of this study related to:

- i. What is the pattern of relationships between multicultural societies in Malaysia?
- ii. To what extent does race's factor affect tolerance of the multicultural society in Malaysia?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to identify the impact of race factor's on the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia. To be specific this research based on the race's perspective to gain some vital evidence on actualised affordances. The study concludes that race's factor has the potential to influence the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Research Design

The research is the quantitative survey type of research. The link to the online survey was distributed through social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Email. By using social media platforms, it easy to reach the public as the study is focused on public response.

5.2. Sampling Technique

The study used a convenient sampling technique which was nonprobability sampling. According to Lavrakas (2008), in non-probability sampling, the population may not be well denned, and the non-probability sampling is often divided into three categories which are purposive, convenience, and quota sampling. The study used a convenience sampling technique where the target respondents were among the youths in various category, which were workers in government and private sector, self-employed, housewives, students, and also unemployed. The total number of respondents for the survey was 260.

5.3. Research Measurement

The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions included with the demographic section. The questionnaire was related to the research objectives of the research. The questions were used ordinal, nominal, and scale to measure the data. The data were key-in in the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS). The questions were reliable and valid which makes it the respondents were easy to understand and answer the questions.

5.4. Data Analysis

The method used for data analysis was through Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) software version 23. The data analysis procedure was included creating the survey stage, pilot test, and data transferring. The survey or questionnaire was created with the questions that were related to the research objectives of the research. The questionnaire was distributed to the first 40 respondents in order to identify the reliability of the research. The survey was continued to complete the data of 260 responses and the data collected transferred to SPSS software for analysis and finding purposes.

Table 1 demonstrates how the five-point scale interval undergoes division to obtain the mean score. The five-point Likert scale is ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For the mean score calculation, the value is categorised into three levels of measure, namely low, medium, and high. Then, 5 (Likert scale: strongly agree) has one point deducted (Likert scale: strongly disagree) and then divided by 3 (measure of mean level).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

| Mean Score | Level |
|--------------|--------|
| 1.00 to 2.33 | Low |
| 2.34 to 3.67 | Medium |
| 3.68 to 5.00 | High |

Therefore, the interval between each mean level is 1.33. The mean score of 1.00 to 2.33 is deemed low, the mean score between 2.34 and 3.67 is categorised as a medium level measure, whereas the mean score of 3.68 to 5.00 is a high level measure.

6. Findings

6.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics are presented in the Table 2. +

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

| | Variable | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 111 | 42.7 |
| | Female | 149 | 57.3 |
| Age | 15 - 25 | 219 | 84.2 |
| | 26 - 35 | 22 | 8.5 |
| | 36 - 45 | 12 | 4.6 |
| | > 45 | 7 | 2.7 |
| Race | Malay | 45 | 17.3 |
| | Chinese | 75 | 28.8 |
| | Indian | 49 | 18.8 |
| | Sabah ethnic | 63 | 24.2 |
| | Sarawak ethnic | 24 | 9.3 |
| | Indigenous people | 4 | 1.6 |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----|------|
| Religion | Buddha | 62 | 23.8 |
| | Hindu | 39 | 15.0 |
| | Islam | 47 | 18.1 |
| | Christian | 108 | 41.5 |
| | Sikh | 11 | .4 |
| | Tao | 1 | .4 |
| | Irreligion | 2 | .8 |
| Marital Status | Married | 37 | 14.2 |
| | Single | 223 | 85.8 |
| Education | PMR/PT3 | 6 | 2.3 |
| | SPM/STPM/Sijil/Diploma | 174 | 66.9 |
| | Degree | 77 | 29.6 |
| | Master/PhD | 3 | 1.2 |
| Residence area | Urban | 177 | 68.1 |
| | Rural | 83 | 31.9 |
| Interaction with different races | Rare | 82 | 31.5 |
| | Frequent | 173 | 66.5 |
| | Never | 5 | 1.9 |

Table 2 summarizes the socio-demographic profile of the sample. 260 respondents participated in the survey, with 111 of them males and 149 females. 84.2 percent of the respondents, or 219 of them, are between the age of 15-25, 8.5 per cent of the respondents, or 22 of them, are between 26-35, 4.6 per cent of the respondents, or 12 of them, are between 36-45, and the remaining 2.7 per cent of the students, 7 of them, are aged between above 45 years. 28.8 percent or 75 of the respondents are Chinese followed by ethnic Sabah with 24.2 percent or 63 of them. The survey revealed that more than 40% of the respondents are Christian. Most of the respondents are single. have been educated to college or higher education level: 2.6% are STPM, 3.6% are Matriculation, 2.6% are pre-diploma, and 59.8% diploma holders, while 32% have bachelor's degrees. In addition, 66.5% of the respondents interact with individuals of different races/religions, and 94.2% have not read, heard, or know anything about another religion.

6.2. The Impact of the Factor of Race on the Tolerance of A Multicultural Society

Positive interaction between individuals in a multicultural society can reduce prejudice and increase a sense of togetherness (Ahmad et al., 2018). According to Langer (1978), the diverse social interactions can help individuals to promote active thinking and stimulates their intellectual growth. In a complex social structure, the experiences of interacting with strangers and getting to know people of different backgrounds in the community are good solutions to build tolerance. Social media is a platform that is influential to serve as a great communication media in realising this goal.

Table 3 shows that the level of racial tolerance among the Malaysian citizens.

Table 3. Anova Analysis

| Tahap | Melayu (n = 45) | Cina (n = 75) | India (n = 49) | Borneo (n = 83) | Lain-lain (n = 8) |
|--------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Rendah | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Sederhana | 15.0 | 36 | 13 | 12.0 | 2.0 |
| Tinggi | 30.0 | 39 | 36 | 71.0 | 6.0 |
| Min | 2.66 | 2.52 | 2.73 | 2.85 | 2.75 |

The study reported that the mean levels for each race varied between 2.52 to 2.85. The five groups (categorised according to race), namely Malays (2.66), Chinese (2.52), Indians (2.73), Borneo (2.85), and others (2.75) recorded the moderate mean levels. Based on the classification of the mean score range in Table 1, the level of racial tolerance of the society in Malaysia is moderate in general. The races in Borneo encompassing the natives of Sabah and Sarawak recorded the highest level of tolerance, followed by others, Indians, Malay, and Chinese. According to Budi Anto et al. (2020), the high level of tolerance among the community in Borneo is because there is no dominant group that makes up majority of the population. This promotes a strong unity among the indigenous community as there is no racial issue can be manipulated for the personal interests of a particular group. In a way, this scenario has contributed to a high level of ethnic tolerance among the local community. They are free to mingle and interact without any constraints and interferences on a daily basis. In addition, the common practice of mixed marriage is regarded as the beauty that nurtures tolerance and unity in society.

Thus, this study found that there was a significant impact of race's factor on the tolerance of multicultural society. This finding is in line with the Contact Theory by Allport (1954), who highlighted negative stereotyping and prejudice in a multicultural society stem from poor communication, lack of knowledge and overload of false information associated with other individuals. Thus, an effective method to combat conflict can be implemented by encouraging ongoing interaction in a harmonious manner besides practising self-control and self-preservation to avoid any unethical behaviour from taking place (Schlossberg, 1984). In short, to nurture a positive racial integration, every individual in a multicultural society needs to be civilised in social interaction with others. According to the Theory of Beliefs, discrimination and racial stereotyping have something to do with prejudice and negative preconception between multicultural communities (Rokeach & Mezei, 1966). Religious, cultural, racial, and gender differences are exploited to create division rather than unity (Hamilton, 2007). In fact, Malaysia is an accomplished country with a good track record in maintaining peace in a diverse society. Every human being has a special place regardless of ethnicity, religion, culture, and gender. Thus, the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and unity must be inculcated in every individual so that those of diverse backgrounds can embrace the differences and coexist on the good terms (Abdullah, 2009).

7. Conclusion

The great relationship established in the multicultural society of Malaysia shall always be maintained so that everyone can enjoy social harmony in the community. This requires cooperation of all parties in its entirety to foster integration process for nation development. The willingness to share and adhere to admirable virtues and norms shall be deeply ingrained in every human being to reach a

compromise across racial and religious boundaries. Thus, the ethical use of social media plays an important role in translating the value of diversity that has long existed in Malaysia in a solid and integrated manner. Any threats that are deemed to ruin the foundation of tolerance, acceptance, and understanding must be eradicated without delay, either via campaigns and dialogues or law enforcement to retain the stability and harmony of the multicultural society in Malaysia regardless of ethnicities and religious beliefs.

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