

# Singaporean Identity Through Singaporean Eyes: A Cultural Study of the Instagram Account Humans of Singapore

1<sup>st</sup> Balqis Az Zahra  
English Studies Program, Faculty  
of Humanities,  
Universitas Indonesia,  
Depok, Indonesia  
balqis.azzahras15@gmail.com

2<sup>nd</sup> Harwintha Yuhria  
Anjarningsih\*  
Linguistics Department, Faculty of  
Humanities,  
Universitas Indonesia,  
Depok, Indonesia.com  
wintha\_salyo@yahoo.com

**Abstract**—Singapore has always been a hot spot for studies of multiracialism. Singapore's multiculturalism is so significant to the city that multiculturalism is the bedrock of government rules and policies defining what it is to be a Singaporean. However, cultural studies of representations of multiracialism as an aspect of Singaporean identity in social media, especially Instagram, are relatively rare. This study examines representations of Singaporean identity through the lens of multiracialism from a cultural studies perspective. This research analyzes six posts taken from the Instagram account Humans of Singapore (HoS). Contextual analysis was used to explore different viewpoints expressed in the six posts based on two categories: how the people featured in HoS experience or think about defying or debunking ethnic stereotypes and how the people of Singapore today react to government policies concerning national identity while also exploring the sense of belonging in the Singaporean community. This paper shows that popular representations of Singaporeans today: (1) blend cultures and emphasize the sense of belonging shared across different ethnicities in Singapore to counter ethnic stereotypes, (2) resist or work around government policies by narrating a sense of belonging to Singapore as a nation and Singaporean identity.

**Keywords**—Instagram, ethnic stereotype, Singaporean identity, representation, multiracialism.

## I. Introduction

Multiracialism in Singapore has brought Singapore many advantages, but has also inevitably led to the preservation of racial and ethnic stereotypes [1]. We can see this in how people talk about Singaporeans as belonging to one race unique to Singapore. This has become a common practice among Singaporeans, since their identity is always connected to their ancestry [2].

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field of research that investigates the ways in which "culture" creates and transforms individual experience, everyday life, social relations, and power [3]. Specifically, this paper explores symbolic activities that are articulated through the stories and narratives featured on the Instagram account Humans of Singapore (HoS). The insights gained shed light on

how contemporary Singaporean identity is being transformed in the era of mobility.

Because this is the first study to focus on the HoS account, it also aims to explore the impact of social media on behalf of multiracialism; specifically, we point out how this Instagram account serves as a forum where people are able to articulate their opinions on Singapore through narrative and stories. This raises questions about how today's Singaporean identity is visually represented and how, through the representations of the people featured, the account itself is helping to re-define Singaporean identity.

This work is based on a previous study examining the Instagram account titled Humans of New York, which showed that, through publication on social media, stories can serve as a means of airing social issues [4]. From a previous study by Reddy [5], we know that studies of multiracial identity construction need to include the careful negotiation of structural influences such as government social policies [5]. This paper argues that Instagram accounts like HoS can be a medium through which Singaporeans can reevaluate their own identity and dispel negative stereotypes. Furthermore, accounts like this can help Singaporeans to better articulate their identity to other people around the world. Using contextual analysis, this research explores how race and ethnicity among Singaporeans are represented as part of today's Singaporean identity. This paper also examines whether the representations published on HoS pledge or negotiate the notion of a unified Singapore.

## II. Method

This study examined data using a qualitative method in line with contextual research by O'Reilly. The premise of this method is that accounts such as Humans of New York (HoNY) featuring narration created by members of the public are able to create various representations on behalf of a place, race, and everything that relates to a city [6]. We used this method in this study because it fits well with the theme of this research. This study collected data by reading and examining every caption and photo from 951 posts on the HoS account. We identified every post in which the keywords Singaporean, Singapore, ethnic, or race were mentioned in the caption. After long

consideration, we decided not to include aspects of photo composition in the data we examined because we believe that captions are more important as they are closely related to the people’s experience.

The captions of the six posts chosen for in-depth analysis represent a combination of themes in four specific categories: experience or thoughts on ethnic stereotypes, blending culture, Singaporean identity and the sense of belonging, and reactions to government policies on race and the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) model. The reason for compressing the six posts into these four categories is that these six posts narrate experience or thoughts highlighting the four categories. We limited our analysis to these six posts to make our data collection and observation more consistent according to the theme of this research, which is multiracialism in Singapore. Additionally, this makes it easier to point out representations of today’s Singaporean identity.

Furthermore, all of the specific keywords mentioned above were analyzed with a view to the relation between the captions and the context or certain theories. This research approaches the concept of multiracialism through the narrative suggested by O’Reilly [6] that accounts like HoNY which feature narration created by the public are able to provide various representations on behalf of a place, race, and everything that relates to a city [6]. Additionally, Reddy has suggested that the concept of multiracial identity construction must include careful negotiation with structural influences such as government social policies [5].

The theories and concepts implemented in this research include SIT (Social Identity Theory), which holds that there are three cognitive processes relevant to a person’s membership in an in-group or an out-group. Such group membership is possibly, depending upon circumstances, associable with the appearance of prejudice and discrimination related to such perceived group membership [7]. This is related to the concept of articulation of identity as suggested by Hall, in which articulation is a connection that can form a unity from two different elements under certain conditions [8].

**III. Results and Discussion**

We wish to call attention to six posts on the Instagram account HoS that express how Singaporeans perceive, negotiate, and even deconstruct their own identity. Rocha [9] points out that identity constructions are inevitably constrained by context. Aspects of race, such as the concept that every Singaporean can be classified as belonging to one of the four major races (CMIO), how each race interacts with the others, and how the members of each race perceive their own stereotypes, are essential to the discourse. Given that multiracialism is a key point in the context of Singaporean nationality and cultural identity, it is certain that these aspects contribute to the issues discussed in this research paper. Narrative provides a conceptual link between individual accounts of identity, and symbolic, historical, and institutional practices at societal and state levels [9].

This foundational assumption assigns significance to the narratives on HoS showing how Singaporeans give meaning to the concept of being ‘Singaporeans’ as their identity and relate it to the context of symbolic, historical, and institutional practices. Multiracial identity development is not linear, cannot be compared to single-racial identity development, is influenced by the specificities of social, cultural, and spatial context, and may change over the course of one’s life [10]. This study will thus note the contributions of certain contexts, as suggested by Rockquemore et al., to the present analysis. We also show how HoS as a social medium contributes to the ongoing redefinition of Singaporean identity.

*1. Stretching the Boundaries of Stereotypes: A Multi-ethnic Perspective*



Fig. 1. Figure used by permission ©Humans of Singapore (Hos) Instagram, 2019

This is related to the concept of articulation of identity suggested by Hall, in which articulation is a connection that can make a unity out of two different elements under certain conditions [8]. The articulation of identity can form a “unity” of identity that can also be rearticulated under different circumstances. In this caption, the subject is trying to articulate her self-identity by going beyond the stereotypes about her race and to reevaluate the construction of her own identity. This is in counterpoint to the stereotypes about people of Chinese origin in which they are shown as consistently superior in all aspects including education. Her story is an example proving that education is not uniformly valued by all members of any race and also how difficult it is to measure success in terms of how much a person has achieved. Her reference to her parents’ reluctance to accept her interracial relationship represents a circumstance in which Singaporeans still lack understanding about multiracialism.

Relating this to the previous explanation about stereotypes, this post challenges the stereotypes of ‘Chinese Privilege’. This post also indirectly presents equality as the main principle of Singaporean culture, as the term “Chinese Privilege” has been challenged through the rise of equality in Singapore. Furthermore, it also points out the idea of embracing multiracialism. The woman mentions that she started a clothing shop for the Malay market and that people have been surprised by her achievement given her young age. The fact that she is Chinese Singaporean, chose to make a clothing shop for the Malay market, and is in

an interracial relationship represents how some Chinese Singaporeans embrace multiracialism. It shows that there are no ethnic boundaries in the way she lives.



Fig. 2. Figure used by permission ©Humans of Singapore (Hos) Instagram, 2019

The caption accompanying the post in Figure 2 describes how stereotypes about Malay Singaporeans, such as that they are lazy or poor, has affected this young man's life in school. His statement that "I understand that as a race, we are more content and chilled and happy with less rather than more" is also an acknowledgment of Malay Singaporean stereotypes because those descriptions can be interpreted as a gentler way of saying that Malay Singaporeans are lazy. By highlighting the Malay Singaporean stereotypes, he tries to recognize his self-identity and to dispel these stereotypes by working hard in his life. It has also affected his perspective on 'Singaporean' identity. He is inviting Singaporeans to criticize the "stereotypes" and not just to participate in maintaining them. There needs to be a change in how each race sees each of the others, and this Malay Singaporean suggests that this change starts within oneself. As he mentions, "It's why I like to hustle as much as I can – just to prove everyone wrong... I don't want to be the stereotype everyone expects me to be"; this shows that he wants to prove that the stereotype is untrue. This, again, relates to the value of equality that characterizes Singapore. His comments can serve as a wake-up call for everyone to actually start practicing the values expressed in Singapore's pledge: "regardless of race, language or religion".



Fig. 3. Figure used by permission ©Humans of Singapore (Hos) Instagram, 2019

Reddy states that strengthening national identity is one reason to encourage people to interact more frequently with other groups who are unlike their own [11]. One of the ideas that is prominent in today's Singaporean identity is the concept of a blended culture including the multiple ethnicities resident in Singapore. Figure 3 depicts how interracial relationships can be a medium through which to embrace the diversity of races. The Chinese Singaporean woman pictured here mentions that Malays always celebrate "Hari Raya" whereas Chinese celebrate "Chinese New Year". The keyword "celebrate" in this caption emphasizes that the couple embraces cross-cultural interaction in their relationship. The way she described her experience - "then you start listening to Malay songs and memorizing their lyrics by heart, and after engaging in a duet with your Malay significant other, you realize that maybe, just maybe, the saying that Malays are the better singers" is correct because EVERYBODY in your boyfriend's family CAN SING except you. Funny realizations aside, my relationship

Then you start listening to Malay songs and memorizing their lyrics by heart, and after engaging in a duet with your Malay significant other, you realize that maybe, just maybe, the saying that Malays are the better singers" is correct because EVERYBODY in your boyfriend's family CAN SING except you.

2. Resisting or Negotiating the Singapore Government Policy on Ethnicity



Fig. 4. Figure used by permission ©Humans of Singapore (Hos) Instagram, 2019

The caption accompanying Figure 4 tells about the man's thoughts on the development of Singapore from two perspectives, not only as a nation that he loves but also as a nation to which he feels like he does not belong. The narrative is based on his experience on the modernity of today's Singapore, and his experience has led him to express his so-called 'Singaporean' identity in a more personal way. The whole caption gives the impression that he knows the old Singapore and is very aware of the shifting culture from the 'old' to the 'new' Singapore. The man mentions that he misses the "Kampong Spirit". This can be seen as a sense of nostalgia shared by Singaporeans who lived in that era.

The shift from the old to the new Singapore is, therefore, marked by the appearance of modern housing and the loss of the "Kampong Spirit". Note that the man uses not the word "I" to express his thoughts but rather the word "we", in an attempt to represent the many Singaporean voices that have not been heard. He thinks that the lost value of Kampong Spirit will reinforce the loss of a sense of belonging among the Singaporean people. Through this narration, he seeks to negotiate with government policy; in this way, he also suggests that the Kampong Spirit should not be abandoned and should be rooted in the identity of being a Singaporean. The feeling of dissonance that this man describes draws on the changing perception of belonging and home.



Fig. 5. Figure used by permission ©Humans of Singapore (Hos) Instagram, 2019

The caption dictated by the middle-aged Singaporean man in Figure 5 is filled with criticisms of his own people. The value of tolerance that he promotes in this post hinges on the idea that his identity, and the identity of Singaporeans in general, are not threatened by immigrants.

This post is a narrative that exemplifies the turning point experience by some xenophobic Singaporeans who are afraid of immigrants. Therefore, being Singaporean as a nationality, the people have to represent the Singaporean identity through respect for and acceptance of minorities, who are considered "others", to strengthen the positive sense of belonging among Singaporeans. In this sense, his Singaporean identity is considered a medium through which he can contribute to shaping the general Singaporean identity such that it becomes more self-renewing and challenging toward the stereotypes that have been promoted by Singaporeans themselves. Figure 5 also reveals that discrimination still exists in Singapore despite the government's attempts to encourage harmony and integration through policy. It also indicates the different definitions of Singaporean identity expressed by the people and the government's policies. Posts like this can be a medium for negotiation where Singaporeans can rethink or reflect on the way they think about immigrants, which is an important part of defining their national identity.



Fig. 6. Figure used by permission ©Humans of Singapore (Hos) Instagram, 2019

As the man in Figure 6 tells it, becoming a Singaporean in his youth was not a matter of choice as he had to follow his parents' decision. The man tells the story of his father's decision to leave

Malaysia for Singapore because he wanted to take part in building the new nation. Even though his father offered the family a choice, he ended up making the decision for them. Even though the children therefore became Singaporeans because of their father's decision, this man's sense of nationalism is still strong. This can be inferred from the line "I am doing not so bad, even with guard job. I am glad we stayed." This shows that, even with a lower-middle-class occupation, this man still enjoys his life in Singapore and has reached the stage of recognizing his sense of belonging, as shown by his comment that "I am glad we stayed." He thanks his father implicitly for making the decision to stay in Singapore and for instilling the value of Singaporean nationalism. The man in Figure 6 represents an unusual case of Singaporean identity: he perceives himself as Singaporean, based not merely on birthplace or geographical factors but also on much more complicated factors.

In discussing such issues, it would be a good beginning for Singaporeans to try to understand immigrants and give them room to establish themselves in the city. Such behavior would be a sign of acceptance from the Singaporeans themselves and would help develop tolerance among the people.

#### IV. Conclusion

This research has examined representations of Singaporean identity with regard to two major issues: how the people featured on the HoS Instagram account experience or think about defying or debunking ethnic stereotypes and how the people of today's Singapore react to government policy while also diving into their sense of belonging as Singaporeans. On one hand, embracing a blended culture while preserving a sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group are the characteristic features of boundary-crossing lifestyles that counter ethnic stereotypes. On the other hand, the second issue was highlighted by stories of resisting or negotiating government policies through narrating the sense of belonging to Singapore as a nation and Singaporean identity. These feelings enable the dual, sometimes conflicted, representation of today's Singaporean identity as disparities arise from divergent understandings of government policies regarding multiracialism, particularly the CMIO model, and as the Singaporean people narrate their own stories of negotiating with or even resisting the policies through their everyday lives. Given that Singapore is multiracial, it is baffling that stereotypes about each race are still prevalent today and even powerful within the society in Singapore. Subsequently, identity crisis has also become a problem due to rigid definitions of racial identities among Singaporeans. However, ethnic, racial, and national identities are fluid over time. Through our examination of the posts described above, this study explores how the representations of the people featured on the Instagram account Humans of Singapore re-define what it means to be Singaporean. The account has not yet re-defined Singaporean

identity, yet the people featured seem to follow a pattern in terms of how Singaporeans perceive the process of reconstructing their identity. Additionally, the HoS Instagram account serves as a medium for the unheard voices of Singapore regarding certain issues, including multiracialism in Singapore. This is represented by the people featured on the HoS Instagram account, by the creation of their own narratives regarding their identity as citizens of a multiracial country. The HoS Instagram account has the power to provide much-needed exposure of Singaporean issues to people around the world.

#### Acknowledgment

This work was supported by Universitas Indonesia's Research Grant (PITMA B 2019) managed by DRPM UI.

#### References

- [1] Chew, P. (2018). Racism in Singapore: A Review and Recommendations for Future Research. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 12. 10.1017/prp.2018.3.
- [2] Tan, C., & Ng, P. T. (2011). Functional differentiation: A critique of the bilingual policy in Singapore. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 4(3), 331-341. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2011.630227>
- [3] (n.d.). What is Cultural Studies? Retrieved from <http://culturalstudies.web.unc.edu/resources-2/what-is-cultural-studies/>
- [4] Türk, J. L. (n.d.). Showcasing humanity: An analysis of audience engagement and narrative on the "Humans of New York" blog. Gothenburg University.
- [5] Reddy, G. (2018). Fluidity amidst structure: Multi-racial identity constructions across the life course of Malaysians and Singaporeans. *Social Identities*, 25(3), 327-344. doi:10.1080/13504630.2018.1499222
- [6] O'Reilly, M. (2015). Constructing a Sense of Place through New Media: A Case Study of Humans of New York (Master Dissertation). Retrieved from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/msc-dissertations/2015/Mariele-OReilly.pdf>
- [7] Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of inter-group conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.). *The social psychology of inter-group relations* (pp. 33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- [8] Hall, S. (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London: Sage Publications & Open University.
- [9] Rocha, Z. L. (2014). 'Stretching out the categories': Chinese/European narratives of mixedness, belonging and home in Singapore. *SAGE Publications*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24735561>.
- [10] Rockquemore, K. A., Brunsma, D. L., & Delgado, D. J. (2009). Racing to theory or retheorizing race? Understanding the struggle to build a multiracial identity theory. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(1), 13-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.01585.x>
- [11] Reddy, Geetha. (2016). Race Rules in Singapore. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/16502435/Race\\_Rules\\_in\\_Singapore](https://www.academia.edu/16502435/Race_Rules_in_Singapore)
- [12] Rockquemore, K. A.; Brunsma, D. L.; Delgado, D. J. (2009). Racing to Theory or Rethorizing Race? Understanding the Struggle to Build a Multiracial Identity Theory. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(1), 13-34.

- [13] Singapore, Humans of. (@humansofsingapore). (n.d.). Feed Post [Instagram profile]. Retrieved October 10, 2018, from <https://www.instagram.com/humansofsingapore/>