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# **Racism in Singapore**

Kayne Augustin

Matthew Davaraj Danapaul

Muhammad Irfan Bin Arshad

Muhammad Fakhrudin

Jun Jie Jeremy Teng

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RSCH 202: Final Research Proposal

Kayne Augustine

Matthew Davaraj Danapaul

Muhammad Irfan Bin Arshad

Muhammad Fakhrudin

Teng Jun Jie Jeremy

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University - Asia

## Abstract

Racism is a prevalent issue around the world. In Singapore, concerns of discrimination against minority racial groups, such as Malays and Indians, have been raised with regards to companies' employing procedures. However, there have been very little studies done on this issue. We have included relevant studies that support and do not support the claim of presence of racism in Singapore. In addition, we intend to replicate a previous study conducted by Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan (2004) in America by sending fabricated resumes to white-collared industries, such as the law, finance, and real estate firms in Singapore. These firms have been selected to represent jobs that do not require individuals to speak a different language or be of a certain ethnicity. The chosen firms are privatized and not under any current regulations regarding biased employment based on ethnicity. The fabricated resumes, which will use different names to distinguish their race, will be a test to determine whether a person's employability is affected by their ethnicity.

## Keywords: Racism, Singapore, Employability, Discrimination, Job

## Introduction

Issues with regards to race have always been a sensitive topic to talk about as there are gray areas that one never discusses. There may be questionable mindsets that may have been adopted over the years and are currently accepted as social norms. Some examples include things such as the Pinkerton Syndrome where Caucasians are viewed to be superior, giving them a better chance to get a job due to their colonial past as compared to Asians (Chew, 2019). These mindsets often lead to unfairness within the society such as unequal salary given the same qualifications. Other examples include how having an African American name as compared to a typical Indian name affects the likelihood of the resume being accepted for a job (Bertrand, & Mullainathan, 2004). That being said, it is clear that racial discrimination is something that is currently faced by countries worldwide.

While there have been improvements in racial and religious harmony in Singapore, the rising concerns of job discrimination still continue to persist. Topics that include race and religion can be controversial and something that is rarely discussed as they may cause misunderstandings. That being said, it becomes a sort of normalization of deviance as the society continues to live with the issue without voicing it out. The current problem is that minority groups in Singapore continue to indicate that they feel discriminated against when applying for 4jobs or seeking promotions in certain companies (Ho, 2019). This research is important because there is a need to find out whether jobs discriminating against race is an ongoing issue or job seekers are just blaming their failure on non-meritocratic reasons, especially during a recession. The discrimination mentioned are presumably more prominent for white collar jobs where there is an ongoing debate on whether companies choose to hire a local Chinese over a local non-

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Chinese worker (Ho, 2019). Solving this issue results in better racial harmony within the country and ensures that even the minorities stand a chance in these jobs where meritocracy is prioritized over other things such as race.

## **Literature Review**

In Singapore, the majority race are the Chinese as they make up 74.4 percent of the resident population, followed by Malays at 13.4 percent, and Indians at 9.0 percent (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2019). With such large differences in percentage, will favoritism exist for the majority race when it comes to employability? Will the minority races be on the losing end in securing jobs for a sustainable future or face discrimination in a work environment by the majority race? Although the answer may vary from person to person, and members of each racial group may have different views, it must be noted that there have been studies done with regards to this issue; however, the stand taken varies from study to study. Therefore, this research will attempt to analyze the results of the studies done to derive a conclusion on the existence of racial discrimination in workplaces in Singapore.

**Racism in Singapore.** Despite Singapore promoting itself as a country that embraces all races and has a strong culture of harmony among the different races in Singapore, there is still evidence to suggest that racial discrimination happens in the workplace, as well as during the process of job application. A study conducted by Mathews et al. (2019) found that 90% of respondents perceived racial harmony in Singapore to be very high. However, the Chinese were more likely to have a more positive outlook of racial and religious harmony. In addition, "there were more among Indians and Malays who viewed that racial and religious harmony in Singapore was at moderate levels" (Mathews et.al, 2019). While the majority would trust someone of another race to help them in times of need, it was also noted that the proportion of

people who viewed it as such was much higher in the lower age groups, than of respondents in the higher age groups. The study by Mathews et al. (2019) noted that:

"For instance, two-thirds of respondents aged between 18 and 25 would trust all or mostly all, or more than half, of Singapore Malays or Singapore Indians to help. The corresponding proportion of those aged 56 and above who would trust Singapore Malays or Singapore Indians to help ranged from 54.3 percent to 56.6 percent.".

In stark contrast to the "kampung" spirit that is ingrained in many Singaporeans, the study attributes the root cause of the lower levels of trust to the older generation "not having the same access to racially integrated settings as younger Singaporeans." as well as the levels of trust being "affected because of the communal tensions such as the racial riots of the 1950s", referring to the racial riots that took place in the 1960s.

This may have an effect on the racism faced by minority groups when applying for a job. In June of 2020, a Facebook post by a member of a minority group clearly demonstrated an example of racism in his job application. In a news article on Asia One documenting the incident, it was noted that the applicant, while being told that he was suitable for the job, was also told in the same call that "the organization would not be comfortable with his turban — a religious headwear the caller described as "the cloth thingy"."(Sholihyn, 2020). In addition, it was noted that the Pinkerton Syndrome also affects how a job applicant is considered for a job. In summary, the Pinkerton Syndrome is defined to be when Caucasian people are viewed as superior by Asians by virtue of their colonial past, instead of taking into account their qualifications. It was noted that while Chinese viewed Caucasians as being equally competent as other races, it was observed that "Chinese participants rated White applicants as more suitable for the job and recommended them a higher salary than equally qualified Chinese applicants" (Chew, 2019).

Rebuttal of the presence of racism in Singapore. The available data that were released to the public had contradictory views, such as a 2018 survey on fair employment practices commissioned by the Ministry of Manpower, shows that specifically in workplaces, workplace discrimination complaints reduced by 65 per cent from 2015 to 2018 and that "did not feel that their gender, marital status, number of children, race, religion or nationality was an impediment when finding work" (Low, 2020). However, a survey conducted by Mathews et al., (2019) stated that in 2018, "22.3 percent of Malays in 2018 felt discriminated against often, very often or always when applying for a job, an increase from the 19.4 percent in 2013". These two sources report contradicting results. To retrieve true results is tough as "it is difficult to study whether differential treatment occurs in the labor market" as supported by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004). Bertrand and Mullainathan added in their paper about labor market racism and discrimination in The United States of America that researchers usually measure differential treatment by "comparing the labor market performance of Whites and African-Americans for which they observe similar sets of skills" (2004). But having similar skills as a single control variable is insufficient as they do not contain all the variables that employers observe when hiring or promoting thus, the survey results are not as accurate relating it back to the survey conducted in the study by Mathews et al., (2019).

**Neutral point of view on the stand of racism in Singapore.** It was argued by Chew (2018) that there is not much available research conducted that investigates racism in Singapore and if there were any, the studies produced limited and inconclusive results. This does not eliminate the fact that racism does not exist. A paper written by Velayutham (2017) discussed

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that institutional racism does exist in Singapore and "racist provocations and experiences of racism are not publicly discussed", which may be the answer to why there is limited research revolving around this topic and any readily available data may be inaccurate due to the lack of publicly released information. The lack of publicly released information, though, does not slender the fact that students of recognized institutions will perform their very own analysis and research. Aziz (2009), an honorary student of the National University of Singapore, in her research paper proposed that minorities, such as Malays, are in fact restricted by their very own 'cultural deficiency' and peripheral socio-economic position. An interesting find pointed out that only 23.35 percent of the total working population of Malays in Singapore held senior positions, professionals, and associate professionals - a fair analysis could suggest that these statistics prove not only the Malay community are struggling to attain high key jobs, but also the employed Malays face bigger hurdles when climbing the ladder of hierarchy. Though these findings may not fully prove that ethnicity plays a role in attaining a reputable job, it does present the possibility of proving the purpose of this study if explored further. When talking about the existence of racism in Singapore, this resource provides claims made by both Chew (2018) and Velayutham (2017) that Singapore has placed official laws that hinders the public and media from encouraging "ill-will, hostility and enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race in spoken, written or any visible representations" (The Statutes of the Republic of Singapore, 1948). As racism is a sensitive topic to talk about, this law may deter any research paper from being written that may expose harsh truths about the underlying problem in today's society, and afraid that such paper may spark unnecessary tension between racial groups if word choice or sentences are not phrased correctly.

#### **Research Question**

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Is race one of the primary factors being considered by certain companies for job applications and promotions? As the main purpose of this research is to find out whether racial discrimination for certain jobs still exists, it is important know whether there are still companies out there that may have a preference over a job seeker's race and the need for such a preference. Certain jobs may require an applicant to be of a certain race due to reasons such as the type of customers they are dealing with or the environment as whole. While white collar jobs like lawyers, politicians and corporate executives usually look at merit and experience over anything else, the research questions helps in answering whether race is still one of the factors being considered by these jobs.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Racism as explained by Clair and Denis (2015) is "an ideology of racial domination in which the presumed biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or prescribe the inferior treatment or social position(s) of other racial groups". Particularly in the neutral group of references, the term 'cultural deficiencies' will be talked about. Although it does not contribute significantly to this study, it does define the allegations and perceptions that have infiltrated a specific ethnic community, in this case, the Malays. Aziz (2009) allegedly claimed that the People Action's Party (PAP) government advocates the abandonment of the 'deficient' lower class culture in order to rid away the serious problems of the nation.

This research is based on a few studies done by previous researchers. When Mathews et al., (2019) stated that in 2018 that there was an increase of racial discrimination experienced from the Malays in Singapore than in 2013, it was contradicting a statement concluded by the Ministry of Manpower in that same year stating that there was a great reduction in racism in terms of seeking jobs. This study aims to look into and debunk any contradicting statements and

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look into this issue with a new perspective and a measurement. In this study, both racism faced when seeking for jobs and discrimination in the workplace due to difference in race will be examined. A study was done by Bertrand and Mullainathan in America about the impact that Western names have against names that were associated with race, such as a typical Indian name of "Jamal", or a African-American name of "Quashawn", have on resumes and their chances of callbacks (2004). This research paper can be considered an extension to Bertrand and Mullainathan study but in Asia, where names between racial groups are a fusion that is Western names. In fact, one of our experiments would include sending out multiple similar resumes to industries that have been cluster-sampled. These resumes are a representative of people with similar qualifications but with distinctively different names (Malay, Indian, and Chinese).

Hypotheses are based upon the research question of this study, it is hypothesized that the two main racial groups will be categorized as Chinese and Non-Chinese groups, as Singapore is a Chinese-majority country and based upon previous researches that Non-Chinese groups tend to have disadvantages when it comes to securing a job. Moreover, the dependent variables that will be taken into consideration would be the employability of a person in the white-collared industry, which we have defined to be the attributes of a person that allows him or her to attain a certain white-collared position and maintain employment. It would be measured based on survey data obtained from both groups - current employees in white-collared industry and those who intend to pursue the white-collared industry. In addition, we will be carrying out an experiment similar to a study that was done by Bertrand and Mullainathan in America about the impact that Western names have against names that were associated with race. Our key independent variables include the ethnicity of the more pronounced communities in Singapore, such as the

Chinese and the non-Chinese, and whether or not where a person falls under affects their employability in the white-collared industry. Some control variables which we included are education, experiences, age, and gender requirements when applying for certain jobs.

## **Hypotheses**

Two hypotheses have been developed based on this study's research question. The null hypothesis is that race does not impact hiring decisions made by employers and minority ethnic groups are unlikely to face discrimination in their workplace than the majority race. An alternative hypothesis is that minority races do face discrimination in their job-seeking journey and work environment.

H0: A person's race does not affect his/her employability in a certain industry

H1:A person's race affects his/her employability in a certain industry

## **Research Methodology and Analysis**

## **Study Design**

The topic of this research project is racial discrimination while job seeking in Singapore. The purpose of doing this project is to find out whether racial discrimination still exist for white collar jobs in terms of hiring new employees. We will be asking the question "Is ethnicity one of the primary factors for companies in job application?" The null hypothesis for this study is that a person's race does not affect his/her employability in a certain industry, while the alternate hypothesis is that a person's race affects his/her employability in a certain industry.

We will be collecting nominal and ordinal data over the period of this research. Our data file will be collated in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, where each column represents a variable.

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Some variables are non-numerical, such as gender, and thus will be converted into numerical data in order to perform our quantitative analysis. We will most likely be demonstrating a regression analysis. We will be looking for relationships within the data and the influence of one or more independent variables on a dependent variable. There might even be spurious relationships being discovered. The coincidence or a third factor that may link those variables in a spurious relationship will not be ignored.

We will be collecting data through sending out resumes with similar qualification backgrounds but different ethnicity, gender and age through various companies and firms. Our primary target would be white collar jobs and with that, we have decided to look into companies under law, finance and real estate. Certain things just as work experience will also be considered in the resume after weighing the need for such variables in the jobs we are focusing on. Once the response of the resumes have returned, we will begin compiling and sorting out the ones that have been rejected and the ones that got through. The data that we will get out of it should tell us the number of resumes for a certain ethnicity being accepted or rejected for the different sectors that we have chosen.

#### **Population and Sample**

The samples that will be polled for the research are the job listings that we are sending the resumes to. We will look at three separate populations: employers that are within finance, law and real estate. As we want variance within our sample, we intend to find out the probability of different ethnicities successfully securing a job within the three populations given that the control variables are kept the same. The ethnicities which we are interested in obtaining the results from would be, Chinese, Malays, Indians and Caucasians. Having three different populations to gather data from will account for a bigger sample size and results in an unbiased data pool of information to be utilized in the research project.

## Variables and Measures.

There are many variables that can be considered in the study. The dependent variable is, needless to say, the employability of a candidate, or the ease of which he or she can secure a job. As the factor that is being examined is whether the race of a person affects the chances of him or her securing a job, the first variable that is being examined will be the ethnicity of the person and how it relates to the chances of the person securing a job. However, there are other factors that are linked to the chances of securing a job as well. The second variable that will be studied is the age of a person and its relation in the person's chances. More specifically, it examines whether older people will have a higher or lower chance at securing a job than younger ones. Secondly, gender will be examined. It is a well-known fact that certain positions such as pilots and flight engineers have a disproportionate male to female ratio, with many more males in these roles. Therefore, certain positions may offer higher employability chances for members of a certain gender, and this is where this factor comes in. Finally, job experience is something that will have to be looked at to determine the chances of someone getting a job. Certain positions, such as senior management, have a certain amount of time in a relevant job as a prerequisite to apply for this job, and employers generally prefer candidates who have prior experience in a similar role over someone who is fresh out of school and is attempting to land his or her first job. Therefore, another factor studied will be prior experience and how it affects the chances of someone getting a job.

As mentioned above, certain roles have a disproportionate male to female ratio, which links to the third factor, the job position applied for. Certain jobs may have certain requirements, or the Human Resource department prefers people of a certain race or gender for this job, which will be studied to determine if the position applied for affects the chances of someone landing this job.

The method of data collection will be the same throughout all the tests that will be conducted. To be specific, we will send out resumes to different employers, each of which differs slightly in one area or another. The purpose of doing so is to find out which of these has a better chance of getting an interview, which represents the person having a higher chance of getting the job, rather than the resume getting ignored and the person not receiving any call for interviews. Several tests will be conducted, each of which will be split based on the aforementioned factors, which are ethnicity, gender, job position desired and work experience. In each of these categories, a test will be carried out whereby resumes are sent out, with the only difference being the factor in question (with the resume being identical apart from in the factor being tested) to see the chances of the person getting a call from the company to schedule an interview, which, as mentioned above, represents that person having a higher chance of securing the job.

#### **Data Collection Methods**

The data that we are collecting will be derived from sending similar job applications to various firms from different white collared industries. These include the finance sector, law and real estate. The resumes will be fabricated to suit the scope of our study, where the minimum requirements for the job positions will be met. There will be controlled variables for each resume including the age, gender, work experience and position applied for by the applicants. The key

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independent variable will be the names of the applicants based on the main ethnicities in Singapore. From the response from the employing firms, we will be able to collect data based on whether the applicants are called in for an interview or not. This data will be interpreted to find if there is biasness in the applicant eliminating process based on the ethnicity of the applicant.

We will be sending out a total of 36 applications evenly across the 3 sectors (population) with 3 different firms per sector. Each sector will receive 4 applications per Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian ethnicities. The names will be considered carefully for the ability for hiring managers to distinctively tell the applicant's ethnicity. Resumes sent to a particular sector will be similar in terms of gender, age, and working experience as they are controlled variables. The only difference between the resumes sent will be the names of the applicants tied to their ethnicity. The quality standard of the resumes are also to be kept similar, as it may influence decisions of employers.

The age of the applicants in the resumes sent to different sectors will be 30 years old as the applicant would have some relevant experience at that age. The work experience will vary between 5 to 7 years, which will be decided appropriate for each different sector and the position applied for will depend on the characteristics of the firm. The genders will be evenly split between male and female and as it falls under one of the controlled variables, the 4 resumes that will be sent to a firm will all have the same gender to retrieve accurate results.

An example of a resume would include the applicant's name, his education qualifications, age, prior work experience and achievements, contact information, cover letter explaining his desire for the position applied. The format of the resume is a formal setting and would be

standardized across the applicants so as to not stand out from each other. The cover letters will be paraphrased differently while still carrying the same information.

## **Data Analysis Methods**

"Quantitative analysis refers to a set of processes by which numerical data is analyzed and is measured by visually presenting correlation tests between two or more variables of significance" (Lebid, 2018). As this study consists of numerical data that will be collected via means of sending resumes to the sample of hiring employers derived from the total population considered, there are various ways of analyzing them such using a regression analysis, ANOVA, or a T-Test. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) the collected data is "only worthwhile in the event that it is analyzed, and the meaning of the data is understood." It is important to ensure that the chosen analysis methods are appropriate to the collected data and suitable in revealing vital information from them.

We have considered the data analysis methods and have decided that using a regression analysis will fit the data and also extract information from the data to develop strong conclusions towards the study. Regression Analysis consists of dependent variables where it is the main factor that the study is trying to understand or predict and also independent variables where they form a list of factors that hypothesize they have an impact on the dependent variable (Foley, 2018). Regression analysis is appealing because "it provides a conceptually simple method for investigating function relationships among variables" (Chatterjee & Hadi, 2015) and examines the influence of one or more independent variables on a dependent variable. Using this data analysis method suits our study as we are keen on developing conclusions if a person's employability is related to their race and the role of other variables which can be found in the above section catered for variables and their measurement.

To be specific, multiple regression analysis is chosen as the study contains multiple independent variables.

## $Y_i = \alpha + \beta x_1 + X_2 + \epsilon i$

Y denotes the dependent variable,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  is the regression coefficient where it represents the average change in the dependent variable given a one-unit change in the independent variable. X1 is the key independent variable for this study such as the names of the applicants based on the main ethnicities in Singapore, X2 are the vector of control variables such as for this study is the age, gender, work experience of an employee and  $\varepsilon_i$  is an error term that refers to the distance between the regression line generated and any one of the residuals produced by the scatter graph in the analysis.

Although proved to be the best suitable data analysis method that includes all data points and provides accurate results, there are limitations to the analysis that have to be considered and made known. Regression analysis looks at a relationship between the mean of the dependent variable and the independent variables, and derives conclusions from them (Flom, 2018). It is important to note that the mean may not be a complete description of a single variable, but in this study is used to show relationships. According to Flom (2018), regression analysis is sensitive to outliers and can have huge effects on the regression as it deals with the study of means, standard deviations, and correlations. The assumptions and conclusions will need to be studied carefully to note the influence of outliers or spurious relationships, if any.

Results from this data analysis can be interpreted by looking at the p-values produced by the regression analysis. According to Frost (2017), p-values help "determine whether the relationships that you observe in your sample also exist in the larger population." Frost (2017) also added that when you have a low p-value, typically < 0.05 which is the level of significance used in this analysis, the dependent variable and the independent variable is statistically significant and vice-versa. The study will look at the results from the regression analysis, consider the p-values of the relationships to answer the hypotheses that the study aims to discover.

## Conclusion

The conclusion derived from this paper will give further insights to the industry's hiring practices and spot relationships of their decisions that may affect the employability of certain racial groups in Singapore. The results of the data would provide an alternative explanation for the underlying issues of racial disparities in securing a job. With the findings, it can prove and provide substantial evidence answering the hypotheses that an individual's race may or may not affect their employability for certain jobs. If proven otherwise, an intervention for any forms of racism should be developed in preventing such discrimination from occurring in the future.

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