“Identity crisis is our identity”: Cultural Cringe and the Search for a Singaporean Identity through Nationalism

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Abstract

This paper is a preliminary inquiry into the unique interplay between nationalism and cultural perception in Singapore, borrowing from Phillip's (1950) notion of cultural cringe — the idea that local culture is deemed inferior to that of foreign entities. Despite being a hub for global cultural exchanges, Singapore's local arts and cultural practices are often devalued by its locals. This is evident in local sentiments that suggest Singapore lacks a distinctive culture or produces inferior cultural products. This study focuses on Singaporean youth, who stand to be future producers and consumers of culture. By tracing Singapore’s national history, we aim to elucidate the intertwined relationship between this sense of cultural inferiority and the nation’s identity and nationalism. We argue that those who align more strongly with Singapore's nationalistic attitudes are less inclined to develop attitudes of cultural cringe, viewing local cultural expressions not as subpar Western replicas but as emblems of Singapore's national prowess.

“Identity crisis is our identity”:

Cultural Cringe and the Search for a Singaporean Identity through Nationalism

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Abstract: This paper a preliminary inquiry into the unique interplay between nationalism and cultural perception in Singapore, borrowing from Phillip’s (1950) notion of cultural cringe — the idea that local culture is deemed inferior to that of foreign entities. Despite being a hub for global cultural exchanges, Singapore's local arts and cultural practices are often devalued by its locals. This is evident in local sentiments that suggest Singapore lacks a distinctive culture or produces inferior cultural products. This study focuses on Singaporean youth, who stand to be future producers and consumers of culture. By tracing Singapore’s national history, we aim to elucidate the intertwined relationship between this sense of cultural inferiority and the nation’s identity and nationalism. We argue that those who align more strongly with Singapore’s nationalistic attitudes are less inclined to develop attitudes of cultural cringe, viewing local cultural expressions not as subpar Western replicas but as emblems of Singapore’s national prowess.

Keywords: Cultural cringe, Singaporean culture, Cultural perception, National identity, Nationalism, Singaporean youth, Cultural devaluation, Cultural inferiority, Cultural self-perception, National pride, Cultural flows

Introduction
Amidst the widespread acclaim of East Asia in the global media, epitomised by the global recognition of South Korea’s Hallyu and Japanese anime and manga, Singapore, a Chinese-majority Southeast Asian country, finds itself occupying a tenuous cultural space. With a high level of cultural imports but a low level of cultural exports and support for local cultural products by its fellow citizens, Wee (2003) notes that the development of the arts in Singapore exists solely for economic purposes, with its cultural policies highly engineered by the state. Amidst the prevailing notion that Singaporean arts and cultural products are inferior compared to popular imported cultural flows, this paper thus calls attention to the phenomenon of cultural cringe amongst Singaporean youths, the future generation of Singaporean cultural producers and consumers.

As defined by Phillips (1950), cultural cringe is borne out of the belief that domestic cultural products are inferior to imported ones. Locally, this sentiment is manifested in different ways, often through laments that Singapore lacks culture or that we tend to destroy what little we have of it (Chen, 2019). A pervasive sense of inferiority often accompanies these notions - that local Singaporean culture cannot compare to foreign cultural metropolises such as London or New York. Such comparative criticisms reveal the cultural cringe Singaporeans feel towards their local culture and cultural products, despite the government’s best efforts and investments in the art scene. These sentiments are significant as they highlight a need to understand why Singaporeans believe their culture is mediocre.

As such, it is the intention of this paper to provide a preliminary understanding of the reasons for this inferiority that Singaporeans feel in relation to Singaporean cultural products. By examining Singapore’s relatively short history as a nation, this study seeks to elucidate the link between cultural cringe and nationalism, particularly among Singaporean youth. A critical understanding of Singaporean youth’s attitudes towards local cultural products is imperative, given that the youth will soon become the primary drivers and shapers of the cultural landscape in Singapore, both as producers and consumers of culture.

Literature review

“Majulah Singapura”: the Nation in Nationalism

The nation-building process of Singapore is deemed intriguing by many scholars in the sense that it is heavily imagined and constructed. Following its colonisation by the British in 1819, Singapore was part of the Straits Settlements until 1963, with a brief interlude of the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 (Toh, 2023). The pursuit of independence ensued after the Japanese occupation, with Singapore being granted self-governance in 1959, albeit with the British maintaining control over foreign affairs, internal security, and trade (Toh, 2023). A tumultuous merger and separation with Malaysia between 1963 and 1965 then led to Singapore’s eventual emergence as an independent republic (Toh, 2023). The nation-building of Singapore thus unfolded in a dynamic and ever-changing environment within a comparatively brief timeframe. Given this backdrop, it is worth examining the state’s role in establishing Singapore as a city-state through the concepts of nationalism and national identity, both of which have played a vital part in this process.

While the conceptual boundaries between nationalism, national identity, and national identification remain fuzzy ((MuBotter, 2022), this paper focuses specifically on nationalism and national identity. Here, we explore nationalism as a political ideology and national identity as a sense of belonging.

Exploring Nationalism in Singapore

Nationalism is a political ideology that is founded on three fundamental principles- first, the categorisation of the world into nations through a social, cultural, and political lens, the second, that individuals “must feel exclusively attached to one particular nation” (MuBotter, 2022, p.2179), and the third of which maintains that nationalistic attitudes arise from authoritarian patterns of thinking (Blank & Schmidt, 2003). Interestingly, much academic scholarship on nationalism has focused on the negativity of nationalism in terms of xenophobia (through attitudes towards immigration) and notions of hierarchies and superiorities. As Bonikowski (2016) argues, the idea of a nation tends to find its roots in an exclusionary conceptualisation of citizenship, which often tends towards ethnicity-based membership.
A nationalised body along ethnic and gender lines. In the context of Singapore, the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) framework as a form of classification of its citizens along ethnic lines has been the subject of much scrutiny for decades since the nation’s independence. Singapore, a predominantly Chinese country surrounded by Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, has a complicated history with race, with tensions among the various ethnic groups brought to the fore during the Maria Hertogh riots in the 1950s. In fact, one of the government’s most significant problems post-independence from the British was a “racialised, separated population without a unifying sense of national identity” (Rocha, 2011, p.103). “Built on the racialised framework of colonial hierarchy (...) to manage and organise diversity and difference” (Rocha, 2011, p.102), multiracialism was thus established as a cornerstone of Singapore’s politics.

In this way, Singapore exemplifies two lines of thought in the scholarship on nationalism. While the first perspective, as discussed above, portrays nationalism as a narrative of homogeneity and exclusivity based on ethnicity (Wimmer, 2018), the second, referred to as liberal nationalism, views nationalism as a cohesive and unifying force that fosters a sense of belonging and continuity across generations (Tamir, 2019). This alternative stance positively espouses nationalism, highlighting its ability to provide citizens with a profound sense of unity and belonging, as well as “stability and cross-generational continuity” (MuBotter, 2022, p.2180).

The CMIO categorisation in Singapore, while criticised for being overly reductive, exemplifies certain tenets of liberal nationalism. It “irrevocably linked (linking) the individual, society and the nation through a framework of racial singularity and belonging” (Rocha, 2011, p.104), helping to foster a sense of national identity. When we consider Singapore’s history of a divided population along racial lines, along with the state’s intentional creation of a racial framework to foster a sense of national identity, it becomes clear that both schools of thought related to nationalism lie at the core of Singapore’s policies. Specifically, the CMIO framework as a form of political management both deemphasises and prioritises ethnicity-based membership, “drawing symbolic boundaries around groups, to delimit where they did and did not belong” (Rocha, 2011, p.99). Given this historical context, we propose that ethnicity could moderate the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe, especially in relation to cultural policy related to the local arts scene.

Outside of ethnicity, the state has employed a deliberate gendered approach to establish nationhood, shaping and nationalising bodies along gendered lines. As discussed previously, the tenets of liberal nationalism prioritise the creation of a unified populace that shares a profound sense of belonging and continuity across generations. This is evident in the state’s depiction of the female body as a potential threat to the nation if women had control over their fertility (Hudson, 2009). By associating the female body with motherhood and the continuity of the next generation, the state thus sought to cement the idea that reproduction is a crucial aspect of national survival. In contrast, the male body has been hyper-masculinised and linked to military defence, with mandatory national service for young men positioned as the most significant contribution a man can make to the nation (Hudson, 2009). Since its introduction, National Service has become a battleground for determining citizenship and legitimacy as a national subject (Hudson, 2009). As a rite of passage for all Singaporean males, National Service attempts to foster a sense of belongingness by emphasising their responsibility to defend the nation. The state’s construction of nationhood thus heavily involves gendered bodies, with both male and female bodies subject to nationalisation and constructed through nationalist discourses prioritising national survival. Hence, in our study of the role nationalism has played in the creation of Singapore, it is crucial to consider how these gendered experiences shape perceptions of nationalism. As such, we propose that gender could be a moderator in the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe.

What is the Singaporean identity?

Drawing on nationalism as the dominant framework from which this paper theorises the reception of cultural products by Singaporeans, we continue to examine national identity as a socially constructed sense of sameness resulting from nationalism (Kunovich, 2009). While some scholars use identification and identity interchangeably, they are fundamentally different concepts - identification refers to the specific process of relating to a particular object or entity in the world (Gerhards, 2000), while identity refers to a sense of
belonging (Schatz & Lavine, 2007). As such, national identity refers to the process of social categorisation based on shared attributes, leading to feelings of belonging and togetherness (Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Cerulo, 1997). Since Singapore’s multiethnic population makes ethnicity-based nationalism unfeasible, the focus has been on cultivating a civic national identity. Ortmann (2009) highlights how “Singapore is a prime example of the attempt to construct an authoritarian civic national identity” (p.24), with the state actively involved in shaping how people see themselves as Singaporean, rather than this emerging naturally from the people. Scholars remain conflicted on the success of the state’s construction of national identity. While some empirical surveys suggest a strong sense of national identity (MacDougall, 1976; MCDS, 2001), other scholars argue that the country’s multiethnic makeup and lack of a distinct art scene have contributed to a fragmented sense of national identity (Hussin, 2004). Some scholars have also questioned the significance of economic success as a source of national identity (Yeo, 2003).

With the understanding that national identity concerns itself with a sense of belongingness to the nation, we thus hypothesise that strong positive feelings of national identity among Singaporean youths could mediate the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe, in the sense that strong positive feelings of national identity might lead to less discrimination towards Singaporean cultural products, thus reducing cultural cringe (Hinkle & Brown, 1990). However, if individuals find their Singaporean identity unsatisfactory, they may devalue local cultural products to associate themselves with a more ‘global’ identity.

Understanding Singaporean Culture

Throughout this paper, we have used the term ”culture” extensively, but it is essential to clarify what we mean by it and how it relates to cultural products. As Bennett (2002) notes, the vocabulary of culture is complex and encompasses a broad range of terms, from high culture and ethnic culture to popular culture and national culture - just to name a few. To clarify our argument, we distinguish between culture itself and the cultural products it produces. This paper understands culture as a set of standards individuals can use to bridge the divide between their unrefined, everyday selves and the grace and coherence embodied in artistic, cultural works (Bennett, 2002). As we attempt to trace in this paper, this idea of culture as a tool for refinement and development is not merely a theoretical concept but also guides the practices of the state’s cultural institutions, which strive to address the inadequacies of society by promoting and disseminating superior cultural standards throughout the community (Bennett, 2002). Expanding upon the preceding idea, it can thus be said that cultural products such as the arts serve as instruments designed to be consumed by individuals with the aim of promoting intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional development (Bennett, 2002). Thus, we are interested in understanding how culture came to be in Singapore.

Singaporeans have been characterised as ”trans-pop consumers” by Jung (2011, p. 76) due to the country’s high cultural imports and low cultural exports (Chua, 2012). Despite its rich cultural heritage, Singapore’s cultural scene is heavily dominated by imported media products, leading to a lack of recognition and visibility for local cultural products. Even in the academic field, there is a lack of attention paid to local cultural products, as reflected by the dearth of studies on local media products, with most existing research focused on East Asian popular culture, such as K-pop fans, Japanese cosplay communities, and Mandopop fandoms (Sim, 2016; Drinanda, 2023; Williams, 2016; Liew, 2005). Accordingly, there is little examination of the Singaporean consumer of local cultural products.

At the core of the issue lies the country’s conflicted view of ‘culture’- as late as the 1980s, the state’s understanding of culture was very much limited to a racial and religious framing of habits and practices and involved the engineered harmony of different races and cultures, rather than notions of support for the arts and high culture (Wee, 2003). It was not until the late 80s that the National Arts Council drew up the first policy paper to discuss culture in the sense of the arts and media, with the state adopting an engineered, formal approach to the arts - the ambition was to become a ‘Global City of the Arts’, with a “need for Western metropolitan- style cultural infra- and superstructures that would enable Singapore to become a sort of ”London of the East.” (Wee, 2003, p.87)

One of the best examples of such a transition from the political identification of culture as racial and religious
harmony to culture in the sense of cultural products developed for economic purposes is the Chingay parade. In the 1970s, Singapore revitalised and reinterpreted Chingay, a Chinese religious procession with Creole influences, to create an annual parade celebrating the nation's racially diverse groups and their shared commitment to progress and economic development (Goh, 2011). Over time, Chingay has evolved into an international spectacle that promotes Singapore as a cosmopolitan, globally-connected city that values multiculturalism and hybridisation (Goh, 2011). Here we highlight how the government had rejected the original heritage associated with Chingay and rebranded it for economic and modernisation purposes - in this, we see how the state had played a role in the engineering of culture in Singapore.

On the cultural cringe of Singaporeans

We hypothesise that it is precisely in such an emulation - manifested in both the state’s desire to be perceived as a successful metropolis of culture geographically situated in the East, as well as in the simultaneous rejection of an original Singaporean cultural identity, that cultural cringe is borne forth. The comparative standard of local cultural products to globalised, 'superior' ones, as evidenced in the Chingay example above, is a prime example of cultural cringe, which Phillips (1950) describes as the certain and assumed inferiority of a culture - leading to the feeling that local cultural products are inferior and lack meaningful value. Much like Phillips writes, “The Australian writer [Singaporean] cannot cease to be English even if he wants to” similarly, there is an underlying sense of inferiority of local cultural products in comparison to the benchmark of the global West. Such tension is perhaps best exemplified in the inherently conflicted economic and humanistic visions of the arts scene in Singapore (Chang, 2000), where the perceived success of local movements in the arts scene continues to be measured in economic terms with a production-line mentality. Significantly, under the Singaporean government’s vision, local cultural products are recognised specifically for their ability to showcase Singapore’s creative side to an international audience, which inevitably leads to a situation of traditional cultural products with heritage value being valued solely for their wider appeal to a mass cosmopolitan, global culture. It is here where notions of cringe may first arise - in the association of cosmopolitan culture as synonymous with value, the local heritage and culture of Singapore become lost. This loss of authenticity in local cultural products leads to cultural cringe, where Singaporeans begin to perceive their local cultural products as mere imitations of what other countries have.

We thus theorise that the concept of cultural cringe could be applied to the lack of support for the arts scene in Singapore - inevitably, local Singaporean cultural products are mere imitations. This paper thus contributes towards a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon of cultural cringe in Singapore so as to further illuminate the direction of the country’s cultural studies and development of the arts.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship has explored the role of state-engineered nationalism and the resulting construction of national identity in Singapore’s nation-building process, there is little research that links such processes to the local arts scene, and specifically the theorisation of the role of these processes in the low level of support for the arts by Singaporeans. Given the focus on the arts as a signifier of the cosmopolitan identity of Singapore from a policymaker perspective, we believe that theories of nationalism and national identity are greatly relevant to better understand the disregard for local cultural products.

Yet, an understanding of such a response would be incomplete with the examination of cultural cringe as an effect of nationalism in Singapore. We theorise that cultural cringe accounts for the negative emotions invoked in Singaporeans when they reject local cultural products and compare them to the imported cultural exports they enjoy instead, epitomised in responses such as those of ‘Singapore has no culture’. Subsequently, individuals who align more strongly with Singapore’s nationalistic attitudes are less likely to develop attitudes of cultural cringe, as they perceive local cultural products not as inferior imitations of Western culture but rather as signifiers of Singapore’s strength as a nation. With the state having nationalised bodies along gender and ethnic lines, we propose that gender and ethnicity are possible moderators in understanding the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes. We also propose that this relationship is mediated by national identity, with individuals who experience strong feelings of national identity being
less likely to feel cultural cringe. Finally, we propose that cultural cringe is a possible and integral tool in understanding why there is a low level of support for the local arts scene.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Accordingly, the following theoretical framework and hypotheses are proposed.

**Figure 1**

![Theoretical Framework Diagram]

*Theoretical Framework*

**H1**: Singaporean youths with strong positive feelings toward nationalism are less likely to display cultural cringe attitudes overall.

**H2**: Racial identity moderates the relationship between feelings of nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes.

**H3**: Gender identity moderates the relationship between feelings of nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes.

**H4**: National identity mediates the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes.

**H5**: Cultural cringe attitudes are negatively correlated with the level of support for the local arts scene.

**Methodology**

**Factors and variables**

Factors and variables from our hypothesis were identified and summarised in the table as follows:

**Table 1**

*Factors and variables in our study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV (1)</th>
<th>DV (1)</th>
<th>IV (2)</th>
<th>DV (2)</th>
<th>Moderator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>Cultural Cringe attitudes</td>
<td>Cultural Cringe attitudes</td>
<td>Level of support for the local arts scene.</td>
<td>Racial Identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measuring Feelings of Nationalism

Although there is a rich field of work on measuring how much an individual agrees with nationalism, Huddy (2016) highlights that the field of nationalism research is flawed due to the prevalence of a multitude of scales and concepts. Furthermore, most of the popular scales which have been used to measure nationalism have low validity - that is, these scales fail to measure what they intend to measure. Hence, we will be adopting Fleiß et al.’s (2009) measure for our study, as it has been found that the items used to measure nationalism effectively captured the two dimensions of emotions that indicate individuals feel positive emotions about nationalism: *general pride in the nation* and *pride in the nation’s superiority* (Müßotter, 2022). The measure consists of seven items, each rated on a scale of 1 to 4 (Fleiß et al, 2009). For consistency with other measures used in this study, the scale will be converted to a 7-point Likert scale and adapted to suit the local Singaporean context. For example, questions such as “The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like [Country]” were replaced with “The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Singaporeans.” In other cases where words could not simply be swapped or replaced, questions were contextualised to Singapore. For example, a question on pride in the nationalism scale asked, “How proud are you of [COUNTRY]’s achievements in sports?” was changed to “How proud are you of Singapore’s achievements in scientific fields, including technological and engineering fields?” as it did not make sense to ask about Singapore’s achievements in sports, which does not receive as much attention as the field of science. A question, “How proud are you of Singapore’s achievements in cultural fields, such as the fields of performing arts, literary arts and visual arts?” was added to balance out feelings of pride in different dimensions since the dimension of pride sought to measure overall pride, which would not be valid without accounting for the dimension of culture, which is a key focus of this paper. As such, our final scale measuring nationalism had a total of 8 items, with 4 items measuring pride in the nation’s superiority and 4 items measuring general pride in the nation (See Annex A for the full list of questions). All questions were positively worded.

Measuring cultural cringe attitudes

To measure cultural cringe attitudes, we have adopted the *Cultural Cringe Scale* designed by Feather (1993). The scale is a 16-item measure designed to assess attitudes towards cultural cringe in Australia. The items in the scale compared Australia’s products and achievements with those from other countries and sought to gauge the need to validate these against an overseas frame of reference. The items are phrased in a positive or negative manner, and respondents indicated their level of agreement on a six-point scale (from -3 to 3 - with no neutral option), ranging from “I agree very much” to “I disagree very much.” The internal reliability of the Cultural Cringe Scale is reasonable, with reported alpha coefficients over .70 for both the positive and negative items and .80 for the total scale (Feather, 1993). This suggests that the scale is measuring cultural cringe attitudes consistently. We will be localising the scale, swapping Australia for Singapore, and adding an option of “neutral” to minimise fence-sitting (Schutt, 2018). As such, our scale will be measured on a seven-point Likert scale.

While studying the scale for localisation, we further separated it into three dimensions - cultural cringe in the domain of science and technology, cultural cringe in the domain of the culture, and feelings of cultural cringe overall. Questions about the manufacturing sector were replaced with questions asking about how they felt about the scientific and technological developments in Singapore, as in 2022, Singapore was ranked 2nd in the world for its research and development spending, manufacturing capability and concentration of high-tech public companies (IPOS, 2023). As such, we thought it was important to measure cultural cringe along these two dimensions, as we expect that cringe in the dimension of cultural products would be higher than cringe towards science and tech products. We included a third dimension of overall cringe to provide a baseline of comparison between the domain of science and culture. In the end, we had a total of 15 questions measuring cultural cringe along the three dimensions. A total of 10 questions were positively worded, and 5 questions were negatively worded.
Measuring support for the local arts scene

Since this paper is interested in understanding the role state-engineered culture plays in the support for the local arts scene, we have operationalised the local arts scene as events featuring local artists from the visual arts, performing arts and literary arts sectors, as defined by the National Arts Council of Singapore (2022). We have operationalised the level of support for the local arts scene along two dimensions, the first being knowledge of the local arts scene and the second being participation in these events. Participation was further separated along the dimensions of actual participation and intention to participate. We have separated the level of support into these three dimensions as one could have knowledge of the local arts scene but not necessarily participate in the art scene. At the same time, it is important to note that individuals may report an intention to participate but, in reality, fail to actually participate in any event. In order to capture these nuances, we measured all three dimensions—knowledge, participation intention and actual participation. The final level of support was scored out of 60, with the dimension of knowledge done as a knowledge check comprising 10 questions, with each correct answer worth 2 marks. Participation intention and actual participation each had 4 questions that measured their willingness to participate and actual participation, totalling 20 marks per dimension. We were concerned about order effects in this section - if participation were first tested on their knowledge or actual participation, they may either feel more encouraged or discouraged and, as a result, inflate or lower the score for participation intention. As such, participation intention was measured first, followed by their actual participation and then finally, their knowledge of the local arts scene.

Measuring Moderating and Mediating Factors

In research studies, it is important to identify moderators and mediators. A mediator is a variable that explains the relationship between two other variables, while a moderator is a variable that affects the strength or direction of the relationship between two other variables (Hall & Sammons, 2013). While mediation addresses questions of how and why a relationship exists, moderation deals with questions of when and for whom the relationship exists (Hall & Sammons, 2013). The two concepts are distinct hypotheses, allowing researchers to develop and test complex research hypotheses in social research contexts (Hall & Sammons, 2013).

In our study, we have identified two moderators: Ethnicity and Gender. The concept of ethnicity has been operationalised according to the CMIO framework. We also operationalised Gender as Male, Female and Others, with others being an open-ended option for individuals who do not identify within the gender binary to declare their gender.

Based on our literature review, we identified feelings of national identity as a mediator. Since we are approaching national identity through a sense of belonging based on shared attributes, we will measure national identity by adopting and localising a measure of general belongingness (GBS) by Malone et al. (2012) to our study. The GBS was constructed by examining the literature for keywords, phrases, themes, and instruments related to belongingness. Belongingness in the GBS was defined with respect to valued involvement, fit, and antecedents to belonging (Malone et al., 2012). In the construction of the scale, Malone et al (2012) highlighted concerns over previous instruments assessing general belongingness using predominantly negatively-worded items, which as a result, measured “a sense of belonging by assessing a lack of not belonging” (p. 311). They explain that including a balance between negative- and positive-worded items could better account for individual differences in how respondents may interpret an item. As such, the GBS sought to assess belonging in two dimensions, acceptance/inclusion, which were positively worded, and rejection and exclusion, which were negatively worded. The items in the GBS are scored using a 7-point Likert scale and reported high reliability and inter-factor correlation. Because the GBS measured a general sense of belonging, we adopted the scale by using the same questions but changing the terms to measure how much individuals identified with being Singaporean. For example, under the dimension “acceptance/inclusion”, the GBS asked, “When I am with other people, I feel included.” In our measure of feelings of national identity, we asked, “When I am with other fellow Singaporeans, I feel included.”
Data collection procedure

DERC approval was obtained prior to the data collection process. Following this, a pilot study was conducted with 10 participants. Revisions were made to the survey according to the qualitative feedback gathered from the pilot study before being sent out to our participants. Data was collected over a period of three weeks, from March 2023 to April 2023. There were a total of 48 questions in the survey. At the beginning of the survey, participants had to read through a participant information sheet, and informed consent was obtained by having participants check the option “Agree” to participate in the survey. Potential self-reporting bias was minimised by keeping the survey anonymous (Schutt, 2018). As such, participants were assured that their personal identification data would not be collected, and responses would be kept confidential. They were reminded that their data could not be identified nor eliminated once the survey was completed due to the completely anonymous nature of the study. We followed up with basic demographic questions to ensure they fit within our target population, with NUS students seeing a different set of demographic questions (“At the time of filling in this survey, are you between the age of 18 to 35?”) from non-NUS students (“At the time of filling in this survey, are you between the age of 21 to 35?”). They were then asked about their ethnicity, gender and education level.

In the second part of the survey, participants filled in answers to questions measuring their feelings of national identity, level of nationalism, cultural cringe and level of support for the local arts and culture scene (in that order). Definitions of conceptual terms, such as local cultural arts events, were provided to provide participants with sufficient context and understanding to answer the relevant questions more accurately.

At the end of the survey, participants who indicated that they were from NUS were asked if they required participation marks for NM2103 and were prompted to enter their matriculation number so that they could be accorded their points, following which they were thanked for their time and provided with the email of the researcher should they wish to get in touch. Those who were not part of NUS, as well as those who indicated that they did not require participation marks for NM2103, were thanked for their time and provided with the email of the researcher after they completed the survey, to ensure that they could get in touch with the researcher should they need to.

Sampling Strategy and Procedure

Due to resource constraints, we have employed a non-probabilistic, purposive, convenience sampling method to obtain our sample. Purposive sampling was chosen to eliminate individuals who are not part of our target population (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011)- which were Singaporeans aged 21 - 35 and Singaporean NUS students aged 18 to 35. The reason for having two population groups is due to DERC guidelines, which do not allow individuals under 21 outside of NUS to participate in surveys without parental consent in order to protect the rights of the participants. As such, our survey would filter out individuals who do not fulfill the requirement, and they would be informed that they are not eligible to participate in the survey. Three paths of participant recruitment were conducted, and all took place simultaneously. The first path involved reaching out to students enrolled in the module NM2103 Quantitative Analysis, as students in this module are encouraged to participate in quantitative research studies to gain participation marks and are thus an immediately available group to tap on. The second path involved reaching out to the researchers’ contacts and spreading the word about the survey through a personal text message. Sending a text message over an email was selected as it allows the message to feel more personal, a key node in improving the response rate for surveys (Schutt, 2018).

A third path of recruitment occurred by sending emails to the module coordinators who were teaching the two largest cohorts in the department and asking them for their assistance in publicising our study to their students. A total of 170 participants were recruited through these three recruitment pathways.
Study Instrument

In order to study the impact of cultural cringe attitudes on the support for the local arts scene, we conducted an online survey. An online survey was chosen due to its versatility, time efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013; Schutt, 2018). The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and consisted of a combination of closed-ended multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions (refer to Annex A for a sample of the survey questions), totalling 48 questions.

To increase the internal validity of our study and minimise bias and misunderstandings, we have considered the suggestions from Wimmer & Dominick (2013) and Schutt (2018) in designing our survey questions. We have avoided asking double-negative or double-barrelled questions, and leading questions, and ensured that the response choices provided are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. To avoid agreement bias, we have tried to vary our questions by presenting counterarguments and providing neutral options to reduce fence-sitting. We also used composite measures to measure the variables of national identification, nationalism, cultural cringe attitudes and level of support for the local arts scene, building on reliable measures from previous studies where possible (Schutt, 2018). To ensure the reliability and internal validity of our study, we also conducted a pretest with 10 participants, from which we collected qualitative feedback about the phrasing of questions and the layout of the survey (Schutt, 2018). Schutt (2018) also highlights the importance of designing an attractive questionnaire to decrease participant mortality, and to this end, we have paid attention to the instructions provided and ensured that the survey is not overly complicated.

Findings

Demographics

A total of 170 participants participated in our study. Slightly more than half of the participants were NUS students (n = 87), while the remaining (n = 83) were non NUS students. Of which, 110 participants were female, 57 were male, and 3 participants identified as other, but did not specify. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants were Chinese (n = 155), with a few Malays (n = 8) and Indians (n = 5). 2 participants reported their ethnicity as Bangladeshi (n =1) and Eurasian (n = 1).

In terms of education, only one participant reported receiving only primary education, 14 reported having received at least Secondary education, and the majority reported having received Tertiary education (n = 155); with the majority of participants reporting having a university education (n = 135). 4 participants reported “other”, and close inspection revealed they had obtained Masters’ degree or higher, and this group was thus included in the count under tertiary education.

Reliability of Measures

Cronbach’s alpha was tested for all the scales used. The results of the test have been summarised in the table below. All scales reported moderately high to high alpha scores, indicating high internal reliability for our instruments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Tested</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Identity Scale</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Cringe Scale</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism Scale</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hypothesis 1

Our first hypothesis hypothesised that Singaporean youths with strong feelings of nationalism are less likely to display cultural cringe attitudes on overall. We conducted a correlation test and found a moderately strong negative correlation ($r = -0.600$, 3 s.f., $p < 0.01$) between strong feelings of nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes. This means that Singaporean youths who have strong feelings of nationalism are more likely to feel less cultural cringe. However, it is important to note that correlation does not imply causation, and there may be other factors at play that influence the relationship between feelings of nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes.

Hypothesis 2 and 3

Table 3

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indian (S.D)</strong></td>
<td>-0.10444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malay (S.D)</strong></td>
<td>-0.10692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others (S.D)</strong></td>
<td>-0.19324</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender identity moderates the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes.

Our second and third hypotheses were concerned with the role of moderators, positing that racial identity and gender identity moderate the relationship between feelings of nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes. At $p < 0.01$, our data yielded no significant findings for both ethnicity and gender identity after running a moderation analysis. This finding suggests that gender and ethnicity are not significant predictors of how much cultural cringe participants felt. This is not surprising, as the sample size ($n = 170$) to conduct analysis for both ethnicity and gender against their respective reference categories, Chinese ($n = 155$) and Female ($n = 110$), was extremely small.

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 posited that national identity is a mediator for the relationship between feelings of nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes. After running a causal mediation analysis, it was found that there is a statistically significant moderate indirect effect of nationalism on cultural cringe ($-0.182$ S.D, $p < 0.001$) that has been mediated through national identity, based on ACME. The ACME is the indirect effect of Nationalism on the Cultural Cringe that goes through national identity. This means that as nationalism increases, cultural cringe decreases by 0.182 standard deviations after accounting for the role of national identity. The estimate for ADE is 0.000, which means that there is no direct effect of nationalism on cultural cringe that is not mediated through national identity. The estimate for Total Effect is -0.148, which is the same as the ACME. The estimate for Prop. Mediated is 1.000, which means that all of the effects of nationalism on cultural cringe is mediated through national identity. This suggests that national identity is a key factor in understanding the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe.
Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 theorised that cultural cringe attitudes were negatively correlated with the level of support for the local arts scene. This hypothesis had a weak correlation ($r = -0.046$) and was not statistically significant at $p <0.01$. This suggests that cultural cringe attitudes are not correlated with the level of support for the local arts scene at all. A possible explanation for this result would be that our measure for the level of support for the local arts scene needed more improvement in terms of external validity.

Additional Findings

Table 4

*Scores for cultural cringe felt.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total score: 7</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Cringe (Science)</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Cringe (Culture)</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Cringe (General)</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the table above, the mean score for the dimension of culture in the cultural cringe scale is the highest, at 5.09, whereas the mean score for the dimension of science (3.74) is closer to the dimension of general (3.28), which we used as a baseline. This means that, on average, participants felt more cringe towards the dimension of culture than they did for the dimensions of Science and General. Culture also had the highest minimum score of 2.8, which is more than 1 score point above the lowest score for both the general and science dimension. Thus, although our last hypothesis did not find any support that cultural cringe attitudes were negatively correlated with the level of support for the local arts scene, we can safely conclude that our participants had higher cringe for cultural products than science and general on overall.

Table 5

*Scores for level of support for local arts scene.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Out of 20</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Score</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation Intention</td>
<td>11.22</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Participation</td>
<td>8.89</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, we note that the mean score for participation intention is rather low - at 11.22 out of 20, this suggests some level of apathy from our participants in terms of their willingness to even engage with the local arts scene. We also note that participation intention does not equate to actual participation in the local arts scene, with the mean score being well below 10. In addition, actual participation has the largest standard deviation out of the three groups. This means that there is a significant amount of variability (S.D = 4.05) in the levels of actual participation among the participants. The mean knowledge score of 10.80 out of 20 indicates that, on average, participants have a moderate level of knowledge about the local arts scene. The standard deviation of 3.33 suggests that there is some variability in the participants’ knowledge levels, with some individuals having higher or lower levels of knowledge than others.
Discussion

Interpretation of findings

As a preliminary inquiry into notions of state-engineered nationalism and identity in Singapore, and its subsequent relationship with cultural cringe, our paper has found a significant correlation between strong feelings of nationalism and lower levels of cultural cringe. Specifically, we found that individuals who felt more positively towards nationalism were less likely to experience cultural cringe. However, further research would be needed to determine whether this relationship is causal. Yet this does not discount the need for a formal inquiry into how cultural cringe is experienced amongst youths in Singapore, in relation to state-engineered culture through practices of nationalism.

Although our paper did not yield significant results for gender and ethnicity, the heavy influence of the state in the regulation of bodies along ethnic and gender lines, as established in our literature review, calls attention to these two dimensions as potential moderators of the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe. We believe that a more representative and diverse sample would yield important findings in this area. Additionally, our paper found a moderate but significant effect of national identity in mediating the relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe. As such, future studies should continue to explore this relationship to better understand the mechanisms by which national identity may impact cultural cringe experiences and to investigate the potential mediating factors that may influence this relationship. A possible understanding of this finding is that individuals who strongly identify with their nation may be less likely to experience cultural cringe because they feel a sense of pride and ownership over their culture. Conversely, individuals with a weaker or more ambiguous sense of national identity may be more susceptible to cultural cringe and the desire to adopt or imitate the practices of other nations. Examining these effects may provide further insights into the complex interplay between nationalism, national identity, and cultural cringe. On overall, these findings highlight the need for a more nuanced and multi-dimensional approach to understanding the complex relationships between nationalism, national identity, and cultural cringe attitudes.

Our paper revealed an intriguing insight regarding the low scores for intention to participate, indicating a certain level of apathy among Singaporean youths toward supporting the local arts scene. Despite being asked only about their willingness to participate, without having them commit to actual participation, the obtained scores remained considerably low. This finding implies that Singaporean youths are not significantly engaged with the local arts scene, demonstrating a general lack of interest.

Hypothesis 5 theorised that cultural cringe attitudes were negatively correlated with the level of support for the local arts scene. However, this hypothesis was not statistically significant. This suggests that simply addressing cultural cringe attitudes may not be sufficient to increase support for the local arts scene. This reflects a need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that drive support for the arts, and for the development of more targeted and effective strategies to increase support for local arts amongst Singaporean youths. A possible reason for this is related to notions of culture in Singapore - with two flows of culture in Singapore - the top down culture engineered by the state, which we have attempted to measure here and the bottom-up culture that captures the lost heritage and tradition, which are more closely aligned with an uncouth, low brow form of culture. We propose that where the first case of state-engineered culture mimics highbrow cosmopolitan notions of culture as refined, the second form of culture that comes from the ground up captures more 'cringe' than the former. This supports Mattar’s (2009) earlier findings on cringe in relation to the local creole language, Singlish. A possible understanding here is that youths are apathetic towards high-brow, state-engineered culture - of which notions of cringe cannot explain their low level of support, while is better used to understand low-brow culture more associated with the everyday life and experience of a Singaporean. At the same time, our study indicates that Singaporean youths did feel more cringe in the dimension of culture compared to other dimensions, highlighting that cringe towards culture exists. Future research should thus explore both notions to capture a much more nuanced understanding of the role of cringe in the consumption of local cultural products.
Improvements

Our paper’s sample was heavily skewed towards Chinese Females who were highly educated and is, as such, not representative of the Singaporean youth population overall. Furthermore, due to time constraints and small sample size, the paper did not yield as many statistically significant results.

Another possible explanation for the lack of a finding for Hypothesis 5 could be explained by the fact that our knowledge quiz had high internal reliability but low external validity. Just as previous scholars have noted how political information is generally measured by adding up the number of correct answers given by respondents to quiz-like questions related to political knowledge, we need to question how we can account for different question formats yielding different slopes or error terms (Weith, 2011). What this means is that our knowledge scale is difficult to quantify in terms of difficulty when crafting it. Further research is needed to create a scale with better external validity.

Conclusions

This paper draws on conceptualisations of nationalism and national identity - specifically, in dimensions of pride and belonging to better understand the phenomenon of cultural cringe we theorised to be present in the aversion of Singaporean youths towards local cultural products. We thus take an original approach by using cringe as a tool to explore the negative response of Singaporeans towards their country’s cultural institutions, thereby taking a step further to interpret the unique brand of nationalism that permeates Singapore’s policy-making processes. In the process, this paper was able to contribute to the literature on Singaporeans’ response to the nation’s engineered forms of identity to understand the unique context of the Singaporean cultural consumer.

As a preliminary inquiry, our study found a promising relationship between nationalism and cultural cringe attitudes. Our data reflected that there were higher levels of cringe felt in the dimension of culture compared to overall and towards dimensions of science, highlighting a need to uncover the reasons for such a disparity in the cringe felt by Singaporeans in different dimensions of the country’s achievements. However, the findings did not support cultural cringe as an explanation for the aversion of consuming local cultural products, which suggests that there are other factors at play. Despite the lack of a relationship between cultural cringe and support for the local arts, our data reflected moderately low engagement and willingness to engage with the local arts scene in general. This suggests that there may still be some missing factors in understanding why there is a low level of engagement with the local arts scene.

While unable to conclusively state that Singaporeans’ cultural cringe arose as a form of response to certain authoritarian nation-building narratives, specifically, studying cultural cringe in relation to nationalism and national identity is an original perspective. In Singapore’s context, the concept of cultural cringe’s origins (in Australian academia) is rooted in a completely different history and politics. This paper thus further contributes to the literature on cultural cringe by exploring this concept as a methodology.

References


Chen, D. (2019, August 8). In Singapore, 'culture' is what we love, only after we’ve lost it. *RICE*. Retrieved from https://www.ricemedia.co/culture-events-culture-love-loss-fvs2amk/


