

## EVALUATING FLAG KNOWLEDGE AND NATIONALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA'S "LION CITY"

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Singaporean flag, as we know it today, was adopted in 1959 after the island became self-governed. The country displays its flag every year during the National Day celebration, intensifying the public's exposure to it during this time. This study intends to investigate public knowledge of the national flag and individuals' feelings towards it. To measure this, students from the National University of Singapore were provided with a 10-item questionnaire. Further, they were asked to draw the flag, identify its colors, and discuss its symbolism. All students drew the flag correctly and correctly identified the colors of most parts; only 18% listed all of the flag's symbolism. When asked how they felt about the flag, 65% said it was important or very important. Overall, most students attributed positive meaning to the flag, answering that the flag was a symbol of identity. The overall results highlight how well Singaporeans know their national symbols, such as the national flag, and how important such symbols are to them. Flags create a strong sense of nationalism, and this study illustrates how a national flag enhances Singaporeans' understanding of what it means to be an independent nation.*

**Keywords:** *national flag, nationalism, patriotism, Singapore, vexillology*

### INTRODUCTION

A flag is a nation's primary cultural identification because it represents a country's uniqueness and values (Minahan 2010) and conveys different messages to individuals (Matusitz 2007). Our understanding of flags transcends into principle-based knowledge, scientific theories, and the functions and forms that characterized them (Smith 1975). However, the approach of addressing the power and meaning of flags still requires more research (Guenter 2015). Guenter (2015) concluded that studying this behavior not only advances vexillology as a science but also provides information about the influence of a national flag and its interpretations among a nation's residents. As the field of vexillology continues to expand (Guenter 2015; Smith 2016), the study of flags deepens our understanding beyond a flag's perceptible visual representation (Guenter 2016).

Nationalism is often expressed through the use and display of flags (Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Diemer 2009). Fozdar et al. (2014) concluded that individuals using or displaying a national flag have a higher sense of nationalism than those that do not. In some studies, researchers have found that individuals who do not display the national flag are considered to lack nationalism or national pride (Orr 2010; Becker et al. 2012; Fozdar et al. 2014). The display of national symbols creates a sense of inclusion within a nation (Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Austin and Fozdar 2015). Flags can act as symbols of unification among the residents of a nation (Bratta 2009) and encourage them to develop a sense of belonging while reminding them of their place of origin (Billig 1995; Puri 2004).

In research, flags can be perceived as part of the banal nationalism discussed and coined by Billig (1995). These are everyday representations of a nation that create a sense of inclusion for individuals (Billig 1995). They strengthen individuals' ideologies while evoking specific identities in them (Chan 2017). In such cases, this sentiment becomes more patriotic than nationalist, such as the display of the United States flag after the events that unfolded on September 11, 2001 (Bratta 2009; Skitka 2005). These events created an increase in demand for flags within the U.S. flag market, and national flags were displayed more often than before the events (Bratta 2009). Billig (1995) describes patriotism as valuable because it builds on the well-being of the individuals in a nation. An example of this display of patriotism through flags is observed during sports events (Brown et al. 2014; Ho and Bairner 2012). A sentiment of pride and patriotism is potent when individuals support their country during such events (Billings et al. 2015). When a country's team wins in sporting events, research shows that individuals take more pride in their national flag (Becker et al. 2017). In certain countries, the first association individuals have with flags is through sports events (Becker et al. 2017).

Singapore's national flag, as we know it today, was adopted in 1959 when the island became self-governing (Smith 1966). The flag was first hoisted on December 3, 1959, after a bill was passed on November 11, 1959, to create a state flag and arms (Smith 1966). The ratio of the flag is 2:3; the top half of the flag is red and the bottom half is white (Ministry of Culture 1977). The red portion of the flag symbolizes universal brotherhood and equality of man; the white portion represents pervading and everlasting virtue and purity. The

red section includes a moon, which represents Singapore's status as a young and ascending nation. The five white stars, also located in the red portion of the flag, represent Singapore's ideals of peace, progress, democracy, justice, and equality (Ministry of Culture 1977). Singapore became an independent nation on August 9, 1965 and continued using the state flag adopted in 1959 (Guenter 1999). Guidelines for the use of the Singaporean flag are found in the Singapore Arms and Flag and National Anthem (Amendment) Rules 2007 (National Heritage Board *n.d.*). During the National Day celebration period (July 1 through September 30), individuals and entities can display the national flag without a flagpole and night illumination, and no approval is needed to use flag decals, stickers, posters, or other visual images (National Heritage Board *n.d.*). This period leading to Singapore's National Day is a time when the state flag can be seen the most throughout the country. After this period ends, there are strict guidelines of how and when the national flag can be displayed (see National Heritage Board *n.d.*). For example, the flag cannot be worn as a costume or attire and cannot be part of any decoration or advertisement.



Figure 1. National flag of Singapore. [Image obtained with permission from Flags of the World <https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/sg.html>]

The juxtaposition of the strong symbolism of the Singaporean flag and the guidelines established by the National Heritage Board allows the country's residents to associate the flag with obedience and benevolence (Becker et al. 2017). National patriotism can be observed throughout other venues as evidenced by the findings of research conducted by Chua and Sim (2017) and Ortmann (2009). Some individuals believe patriotism is derived from the country's governmental success (Ortmann 2009), while others value the importance of the flag as a national symbol (Chua and Sim 2017). The National Day celebration period seems to support this latter approach since exposure to the flag intensifies during this period (Guenter 1999).

This study supports Guenter's (1999) research on the Singaporean flag in several respects. Given the obedient nature of Singaporeans and the increased exposure to the flag during National Day festivities, the purpose of this study is to determine the degree to which such exposure assists Singaporeans in correctly identifying their flag. This study also measures the degree to which the symbolism and various parts of the flag are known and understood. Finally, this study explores the importance the flag has for Singaporeans and the individual meaning of such national symbolism. Finally, this study seeks to gauge the degree of potential nationalism the state flag evokes in Singaporeans. The information gathered will help develop a baseline understanding of Singaporean flag knowledge and nationalism.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Using a non-probability sampling method, students from the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore (NUS) were selected to participate in this study. The idea was to explore this group first to gain an initial understanding of this novel topic. Students were informed about the study, what data would be collected, and how the data would be used and analyzed. The participants in this study received a 10-item questionnaire that was completed in person. Participants were asked knowledge-based questions about their country's flag, ensuring that non-Singaporean exchange students had the opportunity to provide answers appropriately. For this study, only answers from Singaporean students were considered. In addition to knowledge-based questions, participants were asked to rate the importance of the flag and the meaning it carried for them. Finally, participants were asked questions about their municipal (hometown) flag.

## RESULTS

A total of 113 students participated and completed the questionnaire, 81 of which were from Singapore; the remaining participants were exchange students from other countries. For this study, only the results from Singaporean students are presented. Participants were divided between two age groups: 18-24 years (98%) and 25-35 years (2%), with most of them currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at NUS.

The first question asked participants if they knew their country's flag to which all of the Singaporean participants answered "yes." Participants were asked to draw the flag and name the colors of each part. Though all participants drew each part of the Singaporean flag (Fig. 2), not all participants correctly identified the color of each part. Some participants were not specific when providing the colors for the stars and the crescent moon (Table 1). Over 50% named all four colors correctly (see Figure 2). The next question asked participants to provide the symbolism associated with each part of the flag. Participants were expected to provide information on the flag's four symbols: the five stars, the crescent, the red band, and the white band.

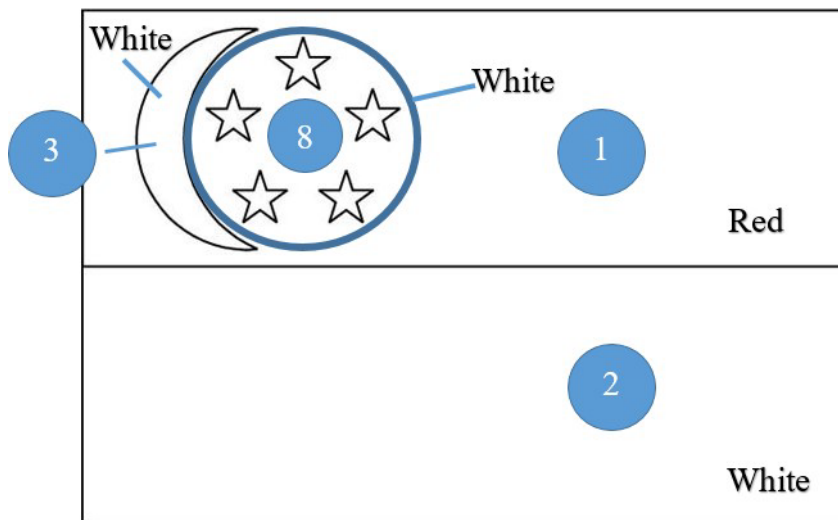


Figure 2. Parts and colors participants had to list. Number parts expected are listed in the blue circles. Note that the number of parts on the flag is eight. Participants had to draw all five stars.

Table 1. Number of colors participants identified correctly.

Number of colors identified	Percentage of participants
One color	1%
Two colors	30%
Three colors	6%
All four colors	51%
No answer	12%

Answers related to symbolism varied. Overall, 19% of participants correctly identified the meaning of each symbol, while another 19% provided incomplete or incorrect answers. Some of the answers provided for the symbols included: equality, unity, new country, purity, rising/young nation, part of the pledge, democracy, unity of races, prosperity, brotherhood, peace, justice, harmony, transparency, and virtue. The remaining answers included the following correct symbolisms/answers: 16% provided two, 16% provided three, 15% provided one, 12% indicated they did not know the symbolisms, and 4% did not provide an answer.

The fourth question asked participants about the personal importance of the Singaporean flag. Most participants answered that the national flag is important to them; a combined 65% answered that the flag was either important or very important to them. After answering this question, participants were asked to answer what the flag meant to them. All the participants that had answered that the flag was important or very important provided answers that included keywords such as pride, identity, "my country," and a "sense of representation" (Fig. 3). Answers concerning the flag's representation also included responses related to international representation in sports events. Participants who reported neutral feelings about the importance of the flag

provided similar keywords about what the flag meant to them, including feeling a sense of belonging, their birthplace, their home, and independence/separation from Malaysia (Fig. 3). For the final part of the questionnaire, participants were asked the same five initial questions but about their hometown flag. All participants answered correctly, as Singapore does not have sub-national flags for their administrative divisions.

Table 2. Results for question #4: How important is this flag to you?

Answer	Number of answers (percentage)
Very important	18 (22%)
Important	35 (43%)
Neutral	21 (26%)
Not important	2 (2%)
Do not care	4 (5%)
No answer	1 (1%)



Figure 3. Word cloud showing the keywords participants used the most when answering what the national flag means to them.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study contribute to the ongoing literature on vexillology about flag knowledge and meaning, specifically when it refers to Singaporean knowledge about the national flag and how individuals react to it. Understanding that the results from this study are from a group of students in a single department at one university, the overall results highlight how well Singaporean students know their national flag, and how important their flag is to them. There were clear patterns associated with the participants' answers that highlighted the positive sentiment they have towards this important national symbol.

### *Flag Knowledge Results*

The results on how well Singaporeans know their flag was expected since they emphasize conservatism and structure (Guenter 1999; Chua and Sim 2017). The national symbols are promoted and emphasized by the government, particularly during National Day celebrations when the flag is displayed throughout the island (Ortmann 2009). Further education about the flag is another contributing factor to the vast knowledge of the flag and its symbolism (Chua and Sim 2017). Although knowledge about the flag's symbolism varied, it is evident that Singaporeans can identify some of the symbolism of their national flag. Even when providing incorrect answers, participants still highlighted some of the values Singapore upholds as a sovereign nation.

### ***The National Flag as a Symbol of Nationalism?***

It is not new knowledge that flags are a way for individuals and entities to display their nationalism and pride (Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Diemer 2009; Becker et al. 2017). It was expected that Singaporeans would attribute great importance to the national flag, given their obedient nature and the values of honor and tradition they uphold (Becker et al. 2017). Most participants opined that the flag was important or very important to them, and this was reflected in their answers about the meaning behind what flag represents for them. Even individuals who expressed a neutral feeling towards the importance of the flag attributed meanings of nationalism to the Singaporean flag. This can be attributed to Singapore's status as a young nation, which leads locals to seek out symbols that offer differentiation from their previous colonial status (Guenter 1999). Further, these feelings may be the result of the Singaporean government's effective way of promoting and enforcing national symbols (Guenter 1999; Ortmann 2009). As Ortmann (2009) pointed out, having a national flag enhances Singaporeans' understanding of what it means to be an independent nation. Therefore, the Singaporean flag is serving a flag's purpose, acting as a symbol of nationhood (Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Becker et al. 2017).

While it is known that flags convey different messages to individuals (Matusitz 2007), these results show that Singaporeans still attribute positive meanings to the national flag. More than 50% of the responses attributed a high level of importance towards the national flag, which confirms the results obtained by Becker et al. (2017). It is known that the national flag is revered by loyal citizens (Billig 1995), and this is especially true in societies where hierarchies are emphasized such as India and Singapore (Becker et al. 2017). This aligns with the positive view received from the participants when explaining the meaning they attribute to their national flag. As it is not clear if these views are related to the obedient nature previously attributed to Singaporeans (Ortmann 2009; Becker et al. 2017), it could be argued that this obedient sentiment is switching into a genuine feeling of nationalism (Chua and Sim 2017). Other values such as honor and tradition are important in Singapore and associated with the national flag (Guenter 1999). Such values gave the flag an even greater value in society, which could explain the positive words the participants associated with the flag. This, coupled with not having overexposure to the flag, supports the banal nationalism illustrated in this study's results (Billig 1995). As Billig (1995) concluded, the national flag usually falls into the background in many countries because individuals are used to seeing it in their everyday lives.

### ***Uncertainty and Limitations for Future Research***

This research only considered one specific group at one Singapore university. It is important to extend this research to other populations and groups to determine if the findings were unique to this particular population. This study was an initial attempt to understand flag knowledge and nationalism as expressed through national symbols. There are opportunities and various sampling approaches that may allow for a better understanding and interpretation of this topic. There is also an opportunity to explore other key demographic data to explore differences in results such as gender, age, and ethnicity. Singapore is a country made up of three primary ethnic groups: Chinese Singaporeans, Malay Singaporeans, and Indian Singaporeans; Eurasians are sometimes included as an ethnic group. The integration of demographic data such as ethnicity can bring a different perspective, as it can help us determine potential correlations between ethnicity and emotions towards the national flag. This huge undertaking will require additional resources and local collaboration to provide results that are representative of the broader population.

Overall, flag research in Southeast Asia is still in its infancy; further discussion is necessary to establish stronger connections and conclusions (Guenter 1999; Becker et al. 2017). For example, Guenter (1999) explored flag use in Singapore while Becker et al. (2017) focused on concept association towards the national flag. But there is still much more research to be done. Continued efforts regarding flag knowledge and symbolism could help aid future connections to values such as patriotism and nationalism. If future research also expands to consider the sentiments and emotions the national flag has on Singaporeans, the results can shed more light on the conservatism and hierarchical values that characterize them. Finally, there is a need to expand vexillology research in general. As White Smith, founder of vexillology, noted, the discipline does not have an "adequate conceptual framework" (Smith 2016). Therefore, studies like this should be replicated and expanded to better understand the appropriate frameworks that can continue positioning vexillology as a scholarly discipline.

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## DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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#### Appendix A. Flag Knowledge Questionnaire

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Country of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown (where you live or were raised):  
\_\_\_\_\_

Country of completion (or currently completing) of highest degree:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Level of school completed (or currently completing): primary school secondary school  
undergraduate degree graduate degree (master's or doctoral) didn't finish school  
some college (didn't finish)

1. Do you know the flag of your country of birth? (If you know the flag please proceed to question #2. If you do not know the flag proceed to question #6 )

- a. Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
b. No \_\_\_\_\_

2. Draw the flag and mention all of the colors of each part. (If the flag has a shield, seal or logo draw a shape where it's supposed to go on the flag. No need to mention the colors).

3. Explain the symbolism of the flag. (If not known please write "not known").

4. How important is this flag to you?

Very important  
Important

Neutral  
Not important  
Don't care

5. What does this flag mean to you? (Explain)

6. Does your hometown have a flag (If it does, mark "yes" and proceed to question #7. If not known please write "not known").

\*If you answer no, you have completed this part of the questionnaire.

a. Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
b. No \_\_\_\_\_

7. Draw the flag and mention all of the colors of each part. (If the flag has a shield, seal or logo draw a shape where it's supposed to go on the flag. No need to mention the colors).

8. Explain the symbolism of the flag. (If not known please write "not known").

9. How important is this flag to you?

Very important  
Important  
Neutral  
Not important  
Don't care

10. What does this flag mean to you? (Explain)