

Smile, S'poreans no longer 'least emotional'

But experts say leap in 'positivity' index shows Gallup poll is flawed

By AMELIA TENG & LIM YI HAN

JUST a year after being labelled the world's most emotionless society, Singapore seems to have experienced an astonishing turnaround in the feel-good stakes.

International polling firm Gallup has now singled out the Republic as having the biggest surge in "positivity".

This means Singaporeans are likely no longer the least emotional nationality - a tag that caused disbelief and soul-searching following the poll results last year.

But it might be a little early to start jumping for joy - because the latest data forms only part of Gallup's overall emotions index, which has not yet been released.

And experts say the fluctuation in the results casts yet more doubts over its methodology.

Gallup tracks emotions in different countries using several rankings. As well as the overall index, there is a study of negativity and another tracking positivity - the one released yesterday.

It found 70 per cent of Singapore respondents reported experiencing positive emotions last year, up from 46 per cent in 2011.

This is the biggest jump among the 143 countries surveyed and catapults the Republic from the bottom of the table to the top half of the "positivity" league.

Gallup said it could be due to the "unprecedented attention" given to the 2011 study, which may have influenced Singaporeans' response to the latest survey.

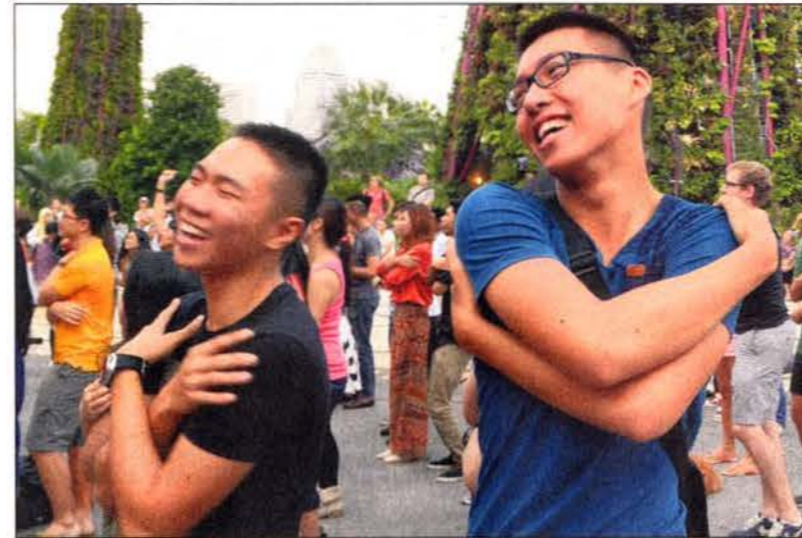
"The rise (in positive emotions) took place among all demographic groups, even as other societal measures remained steady," it added.

Latin American nations Paraguay and Venezuela continued to top the index, while Syria and Iraq were ranked the lowest.

Experts say the findings raise more doubts about the poll's credibility. "Social conditions have not changed that much, but the results had a wide fluctuation," said National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan.

"This begs the question whether the survey is measuring what it claims to measure," she pointed out, adding that quantifying emotions is one of the most challenging concepts for sociologists.

MP Baey Yam Keng, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Culture, Community and Youth, told The



People attending a happiness event last month. Singapore enjoyed the biggest jump in "positivity" among 143 countries polled. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Straits Times that the "big fluctuation says something about the survey". He added: "I think Singaporeans are forward-looking, but people sometimes tend to pick up on the negative things."

Professor David Chan, director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at Singapore Management University, said media attention alone could not explain the increase. He pointed out that the Republic's positivity rankings were nearly as high in 2009 and 2010, even without publicity. What the Gallup survey interprets as "emotional well-being" is in fact "emo-

tional intensity" - not the same.

"The Gallup rankings of Singapore do not tell us anything about Singaporeans' happiness or well-being in the recent years."

Meanwhile, many citizens found the results hard to believe. Said copywriter Ang Jinglin, 25: "How can it surge so much within a year? I don't think anything has changed in the past year."

Social entrepreneur Tong Yee, 39, said he was "surprised", but that "commentaries in the media may prompt people to reflect".

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