the Singapore WAY

STUDENT GUIDE

National Identity and Multiculturalism

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Chapter 11: National Identity and Multiculturalism

1. Welcome & Purpose of This Case

Welcome to a Case About Belonging by Design

In this case, you'll explore what happens when a country tries to **build unity across deep racial, religious, and cultural difference—not just through hope, but through policy**.

Singapore's approach is both admired and debated. From housing quotas to bilingual education, National Service to Racial Harmony Day, Singapore turned **multiracial tension into a national mission**—creating a shared civic identity that still respects cultural roots.

You're invited to **critique, adapt, and apply** these ideas to your own world.

Why This Case Matters to You

Whether you come from a divided society or a unified one, you've likely experienced moments when your **identity mattered more than your ideas**.

This case gives you the tools to:

- Understand how identity systems work
- Question whether unity needs to be designed
- Explore your own experiences of inclusion—or exclusion
- Think like a policymaker, a citizen, and a human being

You'll Explore:

- How Singapore's **Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP)** shaped neighbourhoods
- Why **bilingualism** became a strategy for both cohesion and respect
- What **symbols and rituals** can do to shape belonging (or alienation)
- How **identity is engineered**—and why that matters

A Thought to Begin With

"Belonging is not a feeling. It's a structure."
– Inspired by urban theorist and civic designers

This case challenges you to look beyond slogans and culture wars—to ask how **your country, your school, or your city could better make room for everyone.**

2. Case Background

Singapore's Challenge: Many People, No Shared Identity

In the 1960s, Singapore was deeply divided. The country had:

- **Racial riots** that left lives and trust shattered
- **Ethnic silos** where communities lived separately
- **Cultural suspicion** across Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian groups
- A fragile, new independence that could easily collapse

The leaders of Singapore made a bold decision: **unity could not be left to chance.** It had to be designed, planned, and practiced.

How Unity Was Built: Systems, Not Just Slogans

Over time, Singapore introduced a range of policies that turned multiculturalism into **a lived, daily experience**:

Strategy	What It Did
HDB Ethnic Integration Policy	Ensured mixed-race public housing blocks to avoid segregation
Bilingual Education Policy	Required all students to learn English and their mother tongue
National Service (NS)	Created a shared civic experience among young men across groups
National Pledge + Racial Harmony Day	Provided emotional and symbolic unity across generations

Instead of enforcing sameness, Singapore **created systems that made interaction and shared experience inevitable**.

Singapore Today

- Over **80% of the population lives in integrated HDB flats**
- Most citizens speak English but retain ethnic languages
- National Service and Racial Harmony Day are major milestones
- Public life is structured around **civic equality, not cultural dominance**

But challenges remain: Is the unity authentic? Do minorities feel fully included? Is the system flexible enough for future generations?

This case gives you a behind-the-scenes look at how a country tried to answer one of the hardest questions:

"Can we all live together—and actually feel like we belong?"

3. Learning Objectives

This case isn't just about Singapore—it's about **you**, your neighbourhood, your nation, and the spaces where you feel like you **do or don't belong**.

By the end of this case, you'll be able to:

Understand:

- How Singapore used **policy tools like housing quotas, bilingualism, and civic rituals** to build national unity
- The **difference between multiracialism, multiculturalism, and assimilation**
- Why **symbols and shared experiences** (like National Service) matter in identity-building
- How identity isn't just emotional—it's **engineered through systems**

Analyze:

- How government choices can **unify or divide a population**
- The trade-offs between **cultural freedom and civic cohesion**
- The **risks of no design** (e.g., ghettoization, exclusion, symbolic erasure)
- How housing, education, and public holidays shape who belongs

Apply:

- Examine the identity systems in your country, school, or city
- Propose a new **ritual, policy, or shared service** to build unity
- Reflect on how **your own identity has been shaped by space and symbols**
- Compare global models of inclusion (e.g. Singapore, Canada, Rwanda)

You'll Be Ready to Discuss:

- Should the state regulate where people live, what they speak, or how they serve?
- What makes a civic symbol powerful—or performative?
- Can integration happen without erasing identity?
- What does **belonging** actually look like in your daily life?

This case gives you the tools to see **identity as a system**, not just a story—and maybe even redesign that system for someone else to belong, too.

4. Pre-Class Preparation

This session works best when you come in **ready to connect personal experiences with public systems**—and willing to ask bold questions about identity, fairness, and design.

What to Read

- **Chapter 11 of *The Singapore Way*** by Maher Kaddoura
  Pay attention to:
    - How Singapore used **housing, language, and ritual** to create shared identity
    - The **Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP)**—how it works and why it matters
    - The **role of National Service and the National Pledge**
    - The emotional logic of **Racial Harmony Day**

Optional Short Videos (Highly Recommended)

Title	Why It's Useful
Why HDB Quotas Matter (CNA)	Shows how race and housing are connected in daily life
The Singapore Pledge: More Than Words	Explains how symbols are used to teach unity
Bilingualism in Singapore: What It Means	Explores how language policies reflect identity
National Service – A Shared Sacrifice	Youth stories about the meaning and burden of NS

Reflection Questions (Write Brief Notes or Think Through)

Choose 2–3 that speak to your experience:

1. **Have you ever felt like your identity helped—or hurt—your access to public space, school, or housing?**
2. **What civic symbols (flag, anthem, pledge) matter to you? Why or why not?**
3. **If your country designed a national ritual tomorrow—what would it be, and who would it include?**
4. **Would you support housing integration policies like Singapore's in your city? Why or why not?**
5. **What part of your identity do you wish was more visible—or better understood—by your nation?**

Optional Identity Systems Self-Check

Before class, map these in your country or city:

System	Is it inclusive? Why or why not?
Housing	
Education	
Language Policy	
National Holidays	
Shared Civic Service (if any)	

Come to class ready to ask:

"What does it take to live together—not just side by side, but **side by side with pride**?"

5. In-Class Participation

This case invites you to **design the systems of belonging**, not just study them. In class, you'll step into the roles of policy designer, storyteller, and civic thinker—asking what kind of nation can truly hold all of its people.

What to Expect

Activity	Purpose
Case Dialogue	Unpack how Singapore used design to shape identity
Group Challenge: "Design for Belonging"	Build a system that helps different people feel they all belong
Debate: "Is Integration Fair?"	Explore both sides of housing quotas, shared service, or national symbols
Civic Symbol Redesign	Rethink pledges, holidays, or uniforms in your own country
Identity Mapping or "I Belong When…" Wall	Connect personal experience with public systems of inclusion/exclusion

How to Participate Meaningfully

- Use examples from the case: housing quotas, National Service, Racial Harmony Day
- Speak from both **your context** and your **imagination**—how things are, and how they could be
- Be open to **disagreement**—this case surfaces complex emotions
- Stay solution-focused: Ask "What would it take?" more than "Why it won't work"

Questions You Might Explore

- Can unity be built **without** control or structure?
- Is it better to **live together in mixed spaces**—or preserve community autonomy?
- What makes a civic symbol (anthem, pledge, uniform) **authentic** to you?
- If you redesigned your country's integration policy, **what would change first?**

What You'll Be Assessed On

Participation Criteria
Contribution to discussions and group work
Use of evidence from the Singapore case
Willingness to reflect personally and listen respectfully
Creativity and realism in design thinking
Connection between systems and lived identity

This class is not just about theory. It's about **who we are, how we live together, and what kind of home we want to build—for everyone**

6. Assignments

These assignments are your chance to apply what you've learned about identity design, inclusion policy, and belonging—through analysis, creativity, and personal reflection.

Choose one or more depending on your course requirements:

Option 1: Essay – "Belonging as a System"

Length: 1,200–1,500 words
Prompt:
Pick one identity system in your country (housing, language, education, national holidays, or service). Analyse how it currently works and propose one redesign that would promote real inclusion.

Your essay should include:

- Brief context on the system and who it helps or harms
- Comparison with a Singapore example (e.g. EIP, NS, Pledge)
- A bold, practical idea for redesign
- Emotional and political considerations (who would support/resist)

Option 2: Policy Pitch – "Designing Unity"

Format: 4–6 slide deck or 1-page infographic
Prompt:
Imagine your country is relaunching its national identity strategy. Propose one new:

- Civic ritual (holiday, pledge, anthem)
- Shared service (e.g. inclusive National Service or volunteer year)
- Integration policy (e.g. education, housing, language)

Must include:

- Name and tagline for your idea
- Design principles and emotional logic
- Potential resistance and how to address it
- Visual or slogan (optional but encouraged)

Option 3: Photo Essay – "I Belong Here When…"

Format: 3–5 images + 300–500 word narrative
Prompt:
Capture the spaces, people, rituals, or designs that make you feel included—or excluded—in your community or country.

Tell the story of:

- Why this image matters
- What it says about your place in society
- What a redesigned version of that system might look like

Bonus: Link it to something you learned from Singapore's case.

Option 4: Reflective Journal – "My Identity Map"

Format: Personal essay, drawing, or voice note
Prompt:
Trace your civic identity across these themes:

- Language(s) you speak—and what they mean to you
- Spaces where you feel safe and seen
- Symbols that make you feel proud—or erased
- What "national unity" feels like to you now
- One policy you would create to help someone else feel they belong

These assignments are a way for you to show not just what you know—but who you are, and what kind of world you want to help build.

7. Reflective Practice

This section is about making space for your **inner voice**. Beyond policies and systems, we all carry memories, feelings, and beliefs about identity, inclusion, and nationhood.

Use these prompts to reflect more deeply—through journaling, voice recording, art, or conversation.

Personal Reflection Prompts

Choose 2–3 to explore in any format:

1. **"I feel I belong when..."**
   Describe a space, gesture, moment, or symbol that made you feel seen and safe.

2. **"A time I felt erased or invisible..."**
   Was it in school? Online? In your country's symbols or laws?
   What made that moment real—and how could it be changed?

3. **"If I could redesign one part of my country's identity..."**
   What would you start with: the flag? The anthem? A shared service? A housing policy?

4. **"My languages are..."**
   List them. Then reflect: Which ones are celebrated? Which ones are ignored? What does that tell you about your nation?

5. **"The story my country tells about people like me is...**
   What's missing? What feels true? What needs to be rewritten?

Quick Self-Reflection Tool: Identity & Inclusion Compass

Rate each from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree):

Statement	Score
I feel my full identity is respected in public institutions	
I can see myself in national symbols or public spaces	
My culture is treated with dignity in schools and media	
I understand how systems shape belonging—not just emotions	
I feel able to help others feel included, too	

A Thought to Carry With You

**"National identity is not what we're born with.
It's what we build every time we choose to include."**

This case isn't just about Singapore.
It's about the story you carry—and the society you help shape.

8. Glossary of Key Terms

These are key terms and concepts to help you talk—and think—more clearly about identity systems, belonging, and public design.

Term	Definition
Multiracialism	A governance model that recognizes distinct racial groups but emphasizes civic equality (e.g., "regardless of race, language, or religion"). Central to Singapore's identity approach.
Multiculturalism	A policy stance that supports public expression of multiple cultures, often side by side, without requiring assimilation.
Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP)	A Singapore housing policy that sets ethnic quotas in public housing blocks to promote diversity and prevent ethnic enclaves.
Bilingual Education	A national requirement in Singapore that all students learn both English (as a neutral working language) and their ethnic mother tongue (to preserve culture).
National Service (NS)	A mandatory military or civic program in Singapore for all male citizens and permanent residents, aimed at building shared national identity.
Racial Harmony Day	A national day of reflection and education in Singapore, marking the 1964 race riots and reaffirming civic unity.
Civic Ritual	A repeated, symbolic act (e.g. reciting the pledge, saluting the flag) designed to reinforce national belonging and shared values.
Belonging Infrastructure	The visible and invisible systems—like schools, housing, language policy, and holidays—that create a sense of inclusion or exclusion.
Identity Design	The process of intentionally creating or reshaping systems, symbols, or policies to reflect shared values and diverse lived experiences.
Assimilation	A model that expects minority groups to adopt the dominant culture, often losing their own traditions in the process. Contrasts with integration or multiculturalism.

Pro Tip:
Try to use 3–5 of these terms in your essay, discussion, or design project. They'll help you **think clearly and communicate powerfully.**

9. Additional Resources

These materials offer deeper insight into **identity systems, multicultural policy, civic design, and national cohesion**—both within Singapore and around the world.

Readings & Reports

Title	Source	Why It's Useful
Race, Language and Religion in Singapore	IPS (Institute of Policy Studies)	Provides in-depth data on how Singaporeans view identity and inclusion
Multiracialism in Practice	LKY School of Public Policy	Explains how housing, education, and national policy shape cohesion
Designing Belonging	Stanford d.school	A creative guide to designing spaces, services, and symbols for inclusion
Multiculturalism vs. Assimilation	Brookings / OECD	Helps you compare identity models across different countries

Videos & Documentaries

Title	Platform	Focus
HDB & Harmony: Why Singapore Mixes Races in Flats	CNA Insider	Housing integration explained with real voices and visuals
The National Pledge	Gov.sg	Explores the meaning, history, and emotional power of civic rituals
National Service at 50	CNA / Straits Times	Stories of shared sacrifice, social trust, and bonding in Singapore
Belonging by Design	TEDx Talk	How architecture, symbols, and systems create inclusion
Living Together in Difference	World Economic Forum	Youth leaders discuss identity, pluralism, and unity in global cities

Useful Tools and Data Sources

- https://www.hdb.gov.sg – Learn how Singapore's housing system works
- https://www.moe.gov.sg – National education and bilingual policies
- https://ipscommons.sg – Identity, race, religion, and civic studies in Singapore
- https://worldvaluessurvey.org – Global values data: belonging, pride, tolerance
- https://ourworldindata.org/cultural-diversity – Maps and stats on languages, religions, and ethnic groups

Other Countries to Explore for Comparison

Country	Why It's Relevant
Canada	Legal multiculturalism, emphasis on public respect for diversity
Rwanda	Post-conflict civic identity built through shared national narrative
Mauritius	Religious and ethnic pluralism with rotation in leadership
India	Complex mix of regional, linguistic, and caste identities—under tension
New Zealand	Bicultural identity with increasing multicultural recognition

These resources will help you **research deeply, reflect personally, and design boldly.**

10. FAQs & Support

This section answers common questions and offers practical guidance as you work through this case—whether you're writing, designing, reflecting, or speaking from your own identity experience.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1: What if I disagree with Singapore's approach?

A: That's totally fine. This case isn't about agreeing—it's about understanding. Your job is to **analyze the design**, not praise it. Ask: *What worked? What didn't? What would you adapt in your country or context?*

Q2: Isn't it wrong for the government to regulate identity?

A: That's part of the debate. But remember: **inaction is a design choice too.** If identity systems are ignored, they often become exclusionary by default. The key question is *how* to regulate fairly, not *whether* to.

Q3: What if my country has no national identity system at all?

A: That's exactly why your perspective matters. You can design what's missing—be it a civic ritual, a policy, or a better symbol. Use this case to **fill in the gaps** with creativity and care.

Q4: Can I talk about my own experiences of exclusion or pride?

A: Yes—those moments are real data. Just remember to connect them to systems, not just stories. Ask: *What policy made that moment happen—or fail?*

Q5: How do I make my project stand out?

A:

- Be bold and realistic
- Use real quotes or visuals from Singapore
- Show empathy for multiple perspectives
- Design something that you'd be proud to implement in your own country

Where to Go for Help

Need Help With...	Go To...
Understanding the Singapore case	Re-read Chapter 11 + class slides or videos
Finding case examples	See "Additional Resources" section
Structuring your project	Refer to assignment formats in Section 6
Connecting ideas to your context	Ask peers, professors, or research local examples
Getting support or feedback	Your instructor, TA, or class forum / peer groups

Final Words of Encouragement

**"You don't need to have one story to be one people.
You just need one place where everyone belongs."**

Let this case remind you: identity is not just personal.
It's **public, powerful, and ready to be redesigned—with you at the table.**