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Gracia Chiang

They are irate customers and they have found a way to air their grievances – on Facebook.

Some 2,000 people have joined a group called "I am Singaporean and tired of service staff who can only speak Mandarin" on the popular social networking site.

At least 20 establishments – from big-name supermarkets and foodcourts to retail shops – have been singled out by members who

have come forward to share frustrating experiences at these outlets.

Started in August by undergraduate Kavita Devi Thamilselvam, 22, the group has drawn many non-Chinese as well as Chinese who are not fluent in Mandarin.

"It's as though non-Mandarin speaking customers are not valued. It makes us feel like foreigners in our own country," Ms Kavita told *The Sunday Times*.

Another member of the group, Ms Nor Hafiza, 28, said she once had to approach four different sales assistants at a supermarket before a Singaporean employee was able to answer her queries.

The early childhood educator was surprised one of them even asked if she could speak Mandarin.

"When you are serving a multiracial community, it's important to have employees who can speak English," she said.

Most members in the group said they are not against hiring foreigners, but are frustrated at the lack of English training given to them.

Ms Kavita said she had initially set up the group so that like-minded customers would have an outlet to vent their frustration.

But she now wants to take the group's feedback to the establishments. Industry watchers empathised with such sentiments.

"This sends a clear signal to the operators that it is important to ensure the competency of their service staff," said the president of the Consumers Association of Singapore, Mr Yeo Guat Kwang.



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While some foreign service staff like Ms Helen Chen, a China national working at Haagen-Dazs, can speak English well, others struggle with the language.

Singapore Retailers Association executive director Lau Chuen Wei felt that English tests may be a good idea to ensure a minimum level of English proficiency.

"If such tests can be implemented for domestic helpers whose contacts are largely confined to the families that they work with, what more for those whose contacts are with the larger community?"

First-time maids have to sit for an English entry test to ensure that they have basic numeracy and literacy skills to do household tasks and adapt to life here.

When *The Sunday Times* did its own tests on five big businesses listed on the Facebook group, three – Giant, Kopitiam and Food Republic – did not fare well, while two – Ha-

agen-Dazs and Takashimaya – passed with flying colours.

When contacted, all except Takashimaya said they have already been conducting some form of English classes for staff.

Companies explained that recruiting English-speaking service staff in both F&B and retail industries is already challenging enough, as many people shun such jobs.

Most added that employees from China form barely 10 per cent of their total staff strength. Service-sector companies are allowed to employ foreign workers on work permits – up to 50 per cent of the company's total workforce.

Said a spokesman from supermarket chain Giant: "It will take some time for them to learn a new language...We hope the Facebook group can give our staff a bit more learning time."

graciac@sph.com.sg

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