Airing our dirty linen: Why S'poreans abuse shared assets

Some Singaporeans cannot look after things, it seems.

Cases of shared services being misused are not new, with photos of bicycles upended in fields and supermarket trolleys abandoned in void decks having gone viral on social media in the past.

The latest targets of misuse are unstaffed 24-hour launderettes, and specialists in social behaviour believe such problems are not going to go away any time soon.

Some Singaporeans have a misplaced sense of entitlement, according to psychiatrist Lim Boon Leng. They do not see shared spaces as belonging to them, "so they don't care about messing up the place for the next user", he explained.

"In some cultures, there is strong pressure to conform, be it in a civic manner or to be polite," added Dr Lim, referring to countries like Japan and South Korea. "However, there isn't a culture of such social pressure in Singapore."

In Japan, a sense of civic-mindedness is instilled at an early age. For instance, children grow up knowing they have a duty to keep a place clean, and cleaning their school's compound is a daily routine.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said people in developed countries, such as Singapore, "are expected to be civic conscious".

"Hence, misbehaviour of the sorts described falls far short of the norm expected and practised in developed countries," he added. "Perhaps, they have learnt that one needs to do the right thing only when there is a risk of getting caught."

Dr William Wan, general secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement, believes such inconsiderate behaviour is "a negative offshoot of unbridled competitiveness, which has largely helped Singapore achieve economic and material progress very fast".

"Yet, that also shows a failure to understand and carry on with the community and personal values of our pioneers," he said.

But all is not lost.

While there are instances of people abusing shared assets, Dr Wan emphasised that "the majority in our society do handle these assets responsibly and with consideration for others".

Sociologist Paulin Straughan also believes inconsiderate users are in the minority, "because if they are not, these businesses will have to shut down".

She cited unusual norms Singaporeans have successfully adopted, such as the "queue culture".

"We didn't always behave in such orderly behaviour when waiting in line. In the beginning, there were staff to remind us to queue," she said. "Now, it is unusual not to find a line when there are many waiting.

"And if we see someone 'cut queue', most of us will not hesitate to inform the culprit where the end of the line is."

Prof Straughan explained that education is needed on the proper user etiquette, such as having staff on site in the early months to remind customers of the dos and don'ts.

She encouraged bystanders to step up and stop those carrying out the irresponsible behaviour. "We need to ensure that the majority set the norms of expected and acceptable behaviour," she added.

Calvin Yang