

## **MEDIA CONSUMPTION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS: A LOOK AT LABELS AND NORMS IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

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### **Abstract**

Globalisation has been criticised for challenging national sovereignty and cultural identities. Although its cultural homogenising tendencies have met with scepticism by many, one cannot deny the onset of a new global culture with the media environment bracketing it. In Malaysia, the privatization policy of 1985 brought active participation of the commercial sector into the media industry. Today, transnational television programmes are no longer predominantly from the United States but there are a significant number from other countries including Asian. This paper explores the patterns and consequences of media consumption on the labels and norms of young adults. A focus group study of thirty multi-ethnic young adults (20 to 25 years old) delved into labels and norms. The findings revealed that the young adults preferred media content with recurring cultural themes, action and reality genres and everyday socialization is also along ethnic lines. One Malaysia is indeed a timely and much needed policy.

### **Abstrak**

Globalisasi telah dikritik kerana mencabar kedaulatan budaya dan identiti nasional. Walaupun ramai tidak dapat menerima kecenderungan hegemoni budaya, namun tidak dapat dinafikan kemunculan budaya global yang baru yang dipupuk persekitaran media. Di Malaysia, polisi penswastaaan pada tahun 1985 telah membangkitkan penglibatan aktif sektor komersil kedalam industri media. Kini program televisyen tran-nasional tidak lagi di dominasi oleh Amerika Syarikat tetapi oleh negara-negara lain termasuk Asia. Artikel ini meninjau pola dan kesan konsumsi media terhadap label dan norma generasi muda. Satu kajian kumpulan fokus yang mengandungi 30 orang generasi muda daripada pelbagai etnik (20-25 tahun) telah menyelami makna label dan norma. Hasil kajian mendapati generasi muda gemar dengan kandungan media yang mempunyai tema budaya yang mengulangi tema-tema budaya, aksi dan etnik sepertimana dalam sosialisasi kehidupan seharian mereka. IMalaysia adalah satu polisi yang diperlukan dan ia diperkenalkan tepat pada masanya.

*Keywords: Media consumption, young adults, labels, norms, identities*

### **Introduction**

Today's generation of young people all over the world are part of the global citizenry by virtue of their personal and nation's participation in a whole spectrum of economic, cultural, environmental and political activities across the globe. Globalisation has been viewed as "the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole"

(Robertson, 1992, pg. 8). It has been criticised for challenging national sovereignty and cultural identities, often times making globalisation a euphemism for cultural imperialism. Although its cultural homogenising tendencies have met with skepticism by media scholars and policymakers, one cannot deny the onset of a new global culture with the media environment bracketing it. Global media and in particular television with global communicative networks and social structures not only support but make it possible to bring distant images and content from one part of the globe to another within seconds. These immediate mediated experiences have somewhat led to the reduction in distance between individuals, societies and nation states in terms of both time and space (Giddens, 1999).

In Malaysia, the privatization policy of 1985 and the launching of Malaysia East Asia Satellite (MEASAT 1) in 1996 and subsequently the introduction of the first direct-to-user (DtU) broadcasting services marked a major shift in the Malaysian communication policy. It ends the era of public broadcasting domination thereby, changing the local mediascape indefinitely. With the on-going transformations of the local mediascape that provide for increasingly greater access to transnational media consumption of various cultures and languages, various aspects of everyday life such as values, norms and beliefs are continuously questioned and challenged. According to Giddens (1991) media provide a cultural space that belongs to no one and yet to everyone. Anyone who identifies with that symbolic environment can articulate his/her identity within the terms available. The looming question of foreign media content (be it old or new media) and their impact on the norms of everyday life among local young adults come into view once again.

These concerns framed the assumptions that guided the study that is, the focus group discussions of young adult television audiences. The social constructionist approach is the theoretical framework that underlines this study. Within this view, it was felt that the “interest is on programs and programming but not as texts studied in isolation from their usage as an element in everyday life” (Alasuutari, 1999:6-7). This view also pays particular attention and attempts to understand more about the mediascape. Through focus group discussions with thirty young adults (20-25 years old), it is hoped that the findings presented in this paper will shed some light on the role of media (television) on the everyday lives of young adults in multiethnic Malaysia.

### **Malaysian mediascape**

As of 1985 when the first private television station TV3 began its services, the local media industry began to undergo changes. These changes included the rise in production houses that generated more local production of various genres, more trained personnel in the industry whether as broadcasters or production personnel, and more foreign programs that led to the demand of higher quality programs (local and foreign) to be aired on public and private stations. These changes have continued till today with the licensing of more private stations.

Malaysian television audiences today have the option of satisfying their viewing palate daily from either one of the six free-to-air stations (RTM 1, RTM 2, TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9) and one satellite station (Astro). Astro today offers its 2.65 million subscribers or some 45 percent of television homes a total of 82 television channels an increase from 22 channels during its inception in 1996. The commercialization of the media industry has seen various players such

as those with government funding, backing or political affiliations to local businessmen with international partners. All of these media players including the two government owned stations RTM 1 and RTM 2 have since their inception strived to have the competitive edge through creative programming so as to have a share of the local audiences. In 2009, Malaysians spent more than three hours or 50 per cent of their leisure time to watch TV compared to less than 10 per cent for the print media (adoimagazine.com, 2009)

These stations have brought forth various program genres that are either locally produced, imported wholly or adapted locally. By adapting is meant the copying of popular genres and genre formats from foreign programs into the local languages. These programs are either franchised or copied materials. Nevertheless, they appealed to the local audiences just as they did with their original audiences. The various local stations broadcast programs in several languages that is; Malay, English, Chinese (dialects included), Indian (dialects included) and others including Indonesian, Spanish, Japanese, Filipino and Korean (with subtitles).

RTM 1 being the national broadcasting station airs predominantly programs in the Malay language while RTM 2 its counterpart was identified as the vernacular national station and therefore airs in Tamil, Chinese and English. The commercial stations namely TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9 airs in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil. Meanwhile the satellite station Astro airs in six different languages that is, 43 channels in English, 20 channels are in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), 13 channels in Malay, nine channels in Tamil, one channel in Korean, one Channel in Indonesian, two channels in Arabic and drama programs in various languages including Spanish, Filipino, Japanese and Thai.

While Malaysian mediascape has changed dramatically over the years, it appears some characteristics have remained somewhat the same. For example, television programs are still broadcasted in various languages especially according to the three major ethnic groups reflecting the plural society of Malaysian population. Although efforts were made in the 1980s to streamline the usage of national language (Malay language) in the broadcasting industry to create national unity among multi ethnic Malaysian population, it failed to realise its objective due to diverse needs of different segments of television audience. There seems to be a correlation between the ethnic background of the audience and the language of the TV programs they watch. While Malay programs are most popular among the Malay audience, TV programs in the Chinese and Tamil languages are most popular among members of the Chinese and Indian communities respectively.

### **Media consumption among young people: Focus group discussions**

In order to understand further the role of television programs in the everyday lives of their audience, thirty young people were gathered in small groups of five to discuss the issues. Guided by the social constructionist viewpoint on doing reception studies of audiences, the discussions were further defined by looking at the entire interaction as the object of analysis. The informants were organised so that they shared homogeneity factors that bring them together. These were the demographic variables such as age, residential location, education level and ethnicity. Thus the discussion sessions were more like a “conversation” where the interviewer receded into the background as the informants began to talk back and forth, asked questions and clarification from each other and continued the conversation.

***i). gathering of informants***

Six groups of young people between the ages of 20 and 25 were formed in two areas that are in Kuala Lumpur (city) and Port Dickson (small town). The informants were selected based on several criteria including, age, gender, ethnicity, family socio-economic status, locality, satellite television (Astro) subscription and the availability of all other free-to-air stations either direct or through Astro services. This particular attention to the criteria of receiving all channels is important so as to ensure that all informants have the same potential with regard to selection of channels and programs. All informants have minimum STPM or A-levels equivalent educational qualifications. One third of the informants are attending the public universities, one third are attending private universities and colleges while the remaining one third is working.

***ii) focus group interviews***

Each group has five informants with a combination of either two males and three females or three females and two males. There were two groups of Malays, two groups of Chinese and two groups of Indians. The reason for the sets of ethnic groupings is merely to allow for more free flow of discussions between the various informants and it is also to ensure that informants are not restrained to express themselves with the other ethnic groups. Two sessions are conducted with each group.

The focus group discussions are conducted using a thematic based interview guide and each session was between 40 to 50 minutes. The data gathered is transcribed and organized according to the frame of analysis that is constructed based on the assumption statements that are derived from the research questions.

***iii) frame of analysis***

For this study, data were organised into three categories that is media use, media content and media impact. It is felt that the first two categories make up the components of media consumption while the third category is the impact of media consumption. The media content especially in the information part comprise of information that provide a media profile of the informants. The media impact gave insight into what the informants' may have gained and have included into their everyday lifestyle from any media content. It also included their aspirations and assumptions. The data was therefore organised according to the following categories;

- Media use: duration, time, location
- Media content: channels, genre, languages, information
- Media impact: labels and norms

**Construction of meanings: The analysis**

The group of thirty young people revealed that various media and communication gadgets such as the radio, Mp4, iPod, blackberry, latest hand phones with cameras, television, personal computers and laptops with Internet are common features in their personal everyday lives. Every one of them owned a "latest" hand phone or blackberry, a radio or Mp4, laptop or personal computer either at home, college or place of work. A few resort to using the computer

at cybercafés. As for television, most share with other family members, housemates or college mates. The usage of these items is on a daily basis. As for television viewing, the informants mentioned that they have reception for all the available channels.

- *media use*

The informants either live at home with their parents and siblings or reside in apartments and dormitories of the local universities. For those living at home then television viewing is in the living room in the company of family members. However there are times when they watched a program with their friends, as was the case with the recent Thomas and Uber Cup badminton matches and the various European football league matches. For those residing in the universities, daily viewing is at the colleges or libraries in the company of peers. During the weekends and term breaks they would watch television with their family members and hometown buddies.

On an average week, these informants noted that they view television programs between 2 to 3 hours either direct from the box or on the internet. The number of hours increased slightly during the weekends from between 4 to 6 hours.

*About 3 hours at night only*

*In between my work at the library maybe 1 hour and 1 hour or so at the dorm*

*I'd say 4 hours and more if there's a sports event*

*Sometimes 5 hours but not at one stretch...2 hours and break*

As mentioned earlier, informants watched television at home with other family members, housemates and at the colleges with their peers. Many remarked that it is more comfortable watching certain programs with their peers. A large number also watch DVD's on the television sets. They mostly watch movies usually Western and Chinese movies. The Indian young men remarked that watching Tamil or Hindi movies are reserved for the cinemas either "on dates" or friends.

*Best effectlah in cinema. At home...too many people and too many talking*

*...I like to see the hero all punched up and then he dance and dance...macho*

As for television programmes, the informants noted that;

*I prefer watching the dramas with my friends in college because of the love scenes, gets to be uncomfortable with my father and younger sisters*

*Me too...with my house mates after work...we just baring and TV is on....*

*Sometimes even in the afternoon on weekends the Hindi or Mat Salleh show acts that are so embarrassing like women sitting on top of men and moving their hips...we know what that means even on Hallmark dramas like last Sunday at 9pm! With friends best lah...we just laugh...at home...segan sikit*

*Watching TV is a family time for us...half the time we talk and do other things like*

*eating even dinner while watching it. So we watch mostly news, sitcoms, reality show or games*

*Ever since I was small I watch TV with my mom, my dad sometimes and also with m younger brothers. Yes, I agree that the sex bits are most uncomfortable and worst my dad would change channels...more obvious actually*

It is interesting to note that although violence is a concern by western audiences (Federman, 1997) nevertheless these local young adults seemed oblivious to the violence on-screen. Perhaps, the editing fingers of the censorship board have left their “patent” on these segments and what is aired on screen is less violent. It is the sexual content that leaves much to be desired. In general, young people in Malaysia relied on mass media and intimate human relations (eg. friends) concerning sexual information as sexual education at schools was minimal, if any, to a certain extent in providing knowledge on sexual lifestyle as one informant said:

*I obtained information on sex from the internet...and these images could reach our cell phone, we could easily download.*

*we have conversations about sex with our girl friends only. We do not discuss with our parents”. It is too embarrassing to discuss sex with our parents especially our father. We feel comfortable discussing with friends of the same sex.*

The young adults pointed out that young people do not ‘discuss’ with their parents about sexuality and as mentioned earlier they are not free to discuss matters pertaining to sexuality with parents as it is always thought to be a shameful subject. However, even if young people discuss about sexuality within family it would be between siblings. Issues of sexuality are observed in silence and young adults learned more through friends and the media. Matters pertaining to sexuality are discussed with friends of the same sex. ‘Sexuality’ from the observation of young adults is passionate kissing and hugging of opposite sex which they consider heavy materials. One informant defines sexuality as:

*“a boy and girl having sex. Mostly about one guy and girl having sex”.  
virginity is something sacred that should be maintained; being a virgin until marriage is important.*

They feel embarrassed to watch such scenes when their parents are also watching and what they will do is to move their eyes from the scene or pretend to walk away from the television room or switch the television channel. They said,

*it is embarrassing to watch obscene scenes when our parents are also watching television with us...watching those scenes with their younger brothers or sisters is simply fine but not when their parents are around.*

When asked how they felt witnessing a couple kissing in public, the words the respondents mentioned were “disgusted”, “embarrassing”, “dislike” and “uncomfortable”. They felt that

kissing act is immoral which should be done in private and it is not within the scope of their culture and that they are bound by our rich culture and strict religion, not only Islam but also Buddhist and Hindus.

- ***media content: genres, channels, languages, information***

There are several genres that are popular with these young adults. These include the sitcoms, documentaries, reality either race, extreme sports and even weight loss, musical, romance theme (mostly females), action and investigative and the movies. Cartoons surprisingly are not just for kids anymore but rather a popular choice among these young people.

*Amazing race, Fear Factor, Ripley's, Survivor and local ones too like the Explorace*

*American Idol, Mentor, Akademi Fantasia most boringggg...*

*I like the comedies as they make me happy after a tiring and sometimes boring day...like Glee, 30 Rock, Pua Chu Kang, Senario even the reruns are okay*

*I only watch Astro so I watched Discovery, Travel and all the Chinese channels for the dramas, sitcom and movies cartoons like Samurai Jack, Disney ones and even cow and chicken*

*Me too...Chinese channels like Wah Lai Toi Phoenix, Shuang Xing II, TVB 8 Mostly the Chinese channels because I like watching shows in my language. Also Korean drama*

*TV 3 is my favourite...new shows of all types in English and Chinese TV 3, Vaanavil and all the HBO, Cinemax, Hallmark...the movies and dramas NTV 7 and TV 3 for the new shows in English and Chinese but for Chinese shows better for the Astro package. Sorry to say...but I don't watch the Malay shows except for Pua Chu Kang That's not Malay but English in Malaysia lah Singapore lah, you all wrong...*

Overall, these informants all have a preference for programs in English that are imported from the United States rather than those from Britain. Many remarked that other than the comedy *Mr. Bean* many just do not get the humour in the British comedy. They attributed it to their somewhat limited command of the language (which is ironic since they are proficient in English) and knowledge of the English culture. Many felt that they know more about the United States having gained the information from the television programs, internet, magazines and the newspapers. All informants from the three ethnic groups seemed to agree on this point.

However, they differ along ethnic lines when asked to list their top programs as well as their top channels. The Malay informants identified TV3 as their favourite channel with NTV7 and the Astro's SWR, RIA, PRIMA and the movie channels. The Indians listed NTV7, TV3, and Astro's Vaanavil, SWR, Discovery, AXN and the movie channels. The Chinese informants on

the other hand listed Astro's Wah Lai Toi, Xiao Tai Yang, and TVB8 as their popular channels followed by NTV7 and Astro's movie channels.

It is noteworthy that all the informants seemed to agree that TV3 and NTV7 are their two most popular channels. However, the Chinese informants pointed out that their preference for NTV7 is not just for the English language programs but more so for the Chinese language programs. This view is unlike that of the Indians and Malays whose preference for TV3 and NTV7 has more to do with the English language programs but more for the content such as reality show *America's Got Talent* and musical sitcom *Glee*, the two top television programmes in the United States.

*I like NTV7 the western but more the Chinese  
I don't watch any Malay drama or show...no reason  
I watch Hindi movies a lot because of the dancing and the beautiful actresses and actors. I also watch English language drama and a little of Malay*

*Mostly Chinese and then English  
In the library, I have no choice because the Chinese drama is on so I just watch and it's good*

- **media impact: labels and norms**

It is noteworthy that the consequent of watching Chinese programs originating from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong and local Chinese language programme have given rise to new sense of "Chineseness" among the Chinese informants. The same goes for the Indians. There is pride in being Indian and part of the culture that produced great heroes, alternative lifestyle of yoga and vegetarian, and movies like *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Gandhi*, *Nehru* and Bollywood dance steps etc.

*I use to feel inferior before because of my darkness but now I am okay cos Indians are the new heroes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century....*

*Look at everybody in the world...all wanting to visit India...my grandparents come from there...*

*I am ok living here but these privileges for bumis must stop sometime soon*

In addition, the Chinese informants expressed their satisfaction in the Chinese language programs especially the drama, sitcom and musicals since they cater to their need for cultural information and to be entertained by their favourite international Chinese artistes. Many informants felt that they learn many new cultural stories and practices from the dramas. However, when asked whether they would prefer to reside in those countries or not, they responded with a firm "No". Given a choice they would reside in either Australia or United States.

*I know more about my culture now from the TV dramas and I feel that we Chinese here do not know culture. Don't watch anything in Malay...*



*I agree, now I want to visit China and Taiwan to compare  
The real customs are from China and I feel proud to be Chinese because of those  
drama*

*I like western shows also but any time I prefer watching in my language  
I am English educated but I enjoy Chinese movies, songs, it's about my culture  
I know more about their current affair than what's here...  
No, I prefer to live here anytime except for Australia and Canada  
Me too, only to visit*

### **Media consumption and implications on labels and norms: A discussion**

Malaysia with her multi-ethnic population prides herself in being able to sustain the delicate balance between the three majority ethnic groups that is the Malays, Chinese and Indians through the enactment of several policies, laws and acts that run throughout all levels of the society. There are also numerous campaigns and efforts at national and local levels to promote and instil a harmonious way of living amidst the diversity. Today, spearheaded by the slogan of *1Malaysia* the government encourages the creation of Malaysian race not through assimilation and tolerance of ethnic differences, but more towards acceptance of the reality of differences and diversity. It is hoped that the diversity will be its strength to move forward in achieving the status of a developed nation.

In a focus group study of television audiences (Latiffah, 2006) not understanding the language is a non-issue for these informants for although they comprehend the Malay language, they still opt not to view local Malay drama programmes. It is instead the themes, plots, storyline and quality of acting and production that appealed to audiences. They found in these Asian dramas an alternative to western in particular American soap dramas where the storyline carried values and concerns that are beyond their simple comprehension as well as the realities of their daily lives.

It is in the recurring themes of these dramas that relate to their norms, values and concerns that became the appeal factor. According to Cho Chul-Ho (2005), Korean television programs such as *Winter Sonata*, *Autumn Fairy Tale* and *Autumn in My Heart* left deep impressions in the hearts of Malaysian viewers of Malay or Chinese descent, regardless of race or religion. Prior to the airing of such Asian dramas, local audiences had no choice but to view American serial dramas like *Brothers and Sisters*, *Friends*, *Desperate Housewives* and the extremely popular 1980's *Dallas* and *Dynasty* with storylines that are beyond their grasp at times.

As such, these Asian programmes are popular and rival their American counterparts since they provided local audiences with their recurring cultural themes. Thus, this made the foreign content somewhat familiar and personal to local audiences. Nevertheless for better or worse, they seem to have empowered these young adults to revitalise and enhance their ethnic cultural identity that is to be Chinese or Indian first before being Malaysian.

So what does this generation of young people have to say about everyday living as Malaysians? To most of them this is a taken for granted fact of life. *I am Chinese and I am a*

*Malaysian* as one young Chinese man remarked, “*we do our part, study, and earn a living?*” Or as another young Indian man quipped, “*I know who I am...Malaysian Indian*”. These are the labels that represent them in the context of other Malaysians and also at the international level. They cannot separate their ethnic identity from their Malaysian nationality. “*...you can’t expect us to just say I am Malaysian...no no Malaysian Chinese cos there are American Chinese, American Indians etc etc...*” As for the Malay informants they happily quipped that they are Malaysians with no ethnic prefix. Those statements may be true but are they the beginnings of an indication of assertion of ethnic identity amidst all our rallying call for “1 Malaysia”?

### **Conclusion**

The shift in media policy from one of protectionism to one of privatisation that included the participation of global media counterparts have offered a wide range of channels and program genres to the young adult audiences. Although, many in the local communities still regard western-based media with suspicion and a bad influence on the young, one must recognize the fact that the media is but one of the many factors affecting cultural change in any society.

After more than 50 years of independence, the effort to create a Malaysian race with its own national identity is at a cross road. The influx of Asian television programmes on local stations or direct broadcast from satellite channels gave more young Malaysian adults wider choices in terms of their entertainment needs. But what is the repercussion of such policy on the everyday life of young adults. Will higher exposure to ethnic based language programmes increases ethnic centricism among the viewers? The labels and norms constructed based on segmentation of programming through ethnic languages could further perpetuate the plurality of ethnic groups and ethnic identity in their everyday life. This study has shown that young viewers had the tendency to identify themselves first with their ethnic and second being a Malaysian.

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