

# ASEAN DELIGHTS: A STUDY OF ASEAN PROGRAMS ON MALAYSIAN TV

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## ABSTRACT

*Asean has been recognized as a regional pact with tremendous economic and political influence since its inception in 1967. However, the formation of Asean is not solely for economic development but also to promote social synergy among the member countries. It is without a doubt that mass media has the ability to promote a climate of change to the Asean countries as well as to bridge the gaps. The mass media is an important channel to disseminate messages that help the masses to adopt new ideas. Very often the mass media particularly the broadcast media is used as a source of providing entertainment and promoting the Asean cultures. As such, it should be interesting to examine the profile of Asean program aired on Malaysian TV. This will help us understand the types of Asean programs aired and the frequency of its airtime. The paper will also identify the countries of origins of these programs. The study will focus on the program schedule over the government-owned Televisyen Malaysia (RTM 1 and RTM 2), Sistem Televisyen (M) Berhad (TV3), Natseven (NTV7) and TV8 and the paid channels (ASTRO).*

*Key words:* Asean, mass media, Asean programs, Asean cultures.

## INTRODUCTION

Asean or The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was established on 8th of August 1967 in Bangkok. There were originally five founding member countries, i.e. Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam later joined the pact on 8th of January 1984, Vietnam on 28th of July 1995, Laos and Myanmar on 23rd of July 1997, and Cambodia on 30th of April 1999. The pact is significant since the region has a population of about 500 million, covers a total area of 4.5 million square kilometers, and yields a combined gross domestic product of US\$737 billion, and possesses a total trade of US\$ 720 billion.

The association was established to realize two purposes. Firstly, to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavors in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian nations. Secondly, to promote

regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter. In accomplishing the purposes, Asean has formed a few subsidiaries to initiate political and economic cooperation amongst the member countries. For instance, the Asean Security Community was established to bring Asean's political and security cooperation to a higher plane to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment (Kotler et al., 2007).

In 1997, the Asean Vision 2020 was launched. It paves the way for establishing Asean Partnership in Dynamic Development, aimed at forging a closer economic integration within the region. The vision statement also resolved to create a stable, prosperous and highly competitive Asean Economic Region, in which there is a free flow of goods, services, investments, capital, and equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities. Subsequently, The Hanoi Plan of Action, adopted in 1998, serves as the first in a series of plans of action leading up to the realization of the Asean vision.

At any rate, Asean cooperation has resulted in greater regional integration. Today, Asean economic cooperation covers the following areas: trade, investment, industry, services, finance, agriculture, forestry, energy, transportation and communication, intellectual property, small and medium enterprises, and tourism. Eventually, The Framework for Elevating Functional Cooperation to a Higher Plane was adopted in 1996 with a theme: "Shared prosperity through human development, technological competitiveness, and social cohesiveness." Functional cooperation is guided by the following plans:

- i. Asean Plan of Action on Social Development;
- ii. Asean Plan of Action on Culture and Information;
- iii. Asean Plan of Action on Science and Technology;
- iv. Asean Strategic Plan of Action on the Environment;
- v. Asean Plan of Action on Drug Abuse Control; and
- vi. Asean Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime.

In realizing social cohesiveness through plan of action on promoting culture and information, Asean should utilize available media in the region. One of the means is through broadcasting media particularly TV programs. Malaysia for instance has been trying to promote understanding of the culture of Asean people by airing programs especially drama from various member countries via its national and paid TV channels. Amongst the popular drama aired on Malaysian TV are 'Cinta Terbagi 5' (Indonesia), 'Cinta Berkalang Noda' (Indonesia), 'Cinta SMU III' (Indonesia), Bawang Putih Bawang Merah (Indonesia) which was also the highest rated Asean program with some 3.8 billion viewers (*Mingguan Malaysia*, 28 Jan. 2007), Malim Kundang (Indonesia), 'Phua Chu Kang' (Singapore), 'Holland Village' (Singapore), 'Gentlemen' (Thailand), 'The dark Night' (Thailand), 'Sana'y Wala Ng Wakas' (The Philippines), and 'Habang Kapiling' (The Philippines). But how effective are the programs in achieving its aims? Do the programs

succeed in promoting the understanding of ASEAN culture amongst the viewers? Thus, this study attempts to identify factors that influenced the viewers to watch such programs and their perceptions of the effect of the programs.

## THE STUDY

A survey was conducted using a set of self-administered questionnaire as instrument to elicit information on the respondents' perception of the programs aired through the national and paid TV channels. The respondents were randomly selected among those residing in Selangor. In this manner, they represented all walks of life, a combination of various races, genders, age groups and professions. The distributed questionnaires were collected several days later. A total of 200 questionnaires were circulated. However, only 193 useable questionnaires were returned. The study instruments comprised of two parts. The first part was designed to obtain information on the respondents' demographic profiles whereas the second part was to extract their perceptions and views on the TV programs aired.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study finds that the younger audience were more attracted to the Asean programs and from the demographic profile of the respondents in the study nearly half of the respondents were in the aged group of 25 years and younger with 40 percent representing the aged group of between 20–25 years old and 25 percent of whom were 25 years and younger. It was also suggested that more female (56 percent) than males (44 percent) watched these programs. They were mostly still single (70 percent).

As these were programs bought by the local television stations from different Asean countries therefore both the Malays (43 percent) and the Chinese (45 percent) were found to be equally interested in watching the program. As both races were of equal number, therefore this was also reflected in their religious belief with Muslims (47 percent) and Buddhists (40 percent) that were also representative of these two races. However, there was only a small group of Indians (9 percent).

The airtime of these programs which was during the daytime may be the contributing factors that attracted nearly half of the respondents who were students (54 percent), a small group of 21 percent who worked in the private sectors and about 10 percent were working in the government sector. While housewives made up of only seven percent. This may be due to the fact that time when these programs were aired may not have been suitable for some of them who may have to attend to their household chores. Obviously this is contrary to the assumption that women who were housewives spent most of their time watching TV.

Women who stayed at home and have children may not be able to spend their time watching television. Some of them may have to chaffer their children to and from schools. Today, with the different after school activities that children were involved in the responsibilities of a mother has also changed tremendously. For example a case in point, a stayed-at-home mother with three children aged between six to 11 years old may be busy as early as six o'clock in the morning and the chores never ends. The children have to be sent to school in the morning. The children would be home briefly for lunch and would later probably attend paid tuition classes or Quranic lessons.

In terms of educational background, nearly half of the respondents (40 percent) have completed the lower and upper secondary levels. There were 35 percent who were pursuing their bachelor degree and 14 percent with a diploma certificates.

The highest number of respondents (18 percent) earned in the RM 1001 – RM 2000 brackets. However, almost (54 percent) were reported as not having any income and as more than half (54 percent) who were also students, thus this clearly was also the group of respondents who were not earning any monthly income. However, 62 percent hails from the rural area while 38 percent were from the urban area.

**Table 1: Distribution of Percentages of the Profile of the Respondents**

Item (N=193)	Percentage
<b>Age</b>	
< 19 years old	26
20 – 25 years old	40
26 – 30 years old	12
31 – 40 years old	12
> 41 years old	9
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	44
Female	56
<b>Marital status</b>	
Married	30
Single	70
<b>Race</b>	
Malay	44
Chinese	45
Indian	9
Others	3
<b>Occupation</b>	
Students	54
Government	10
Private	21
Housewives	7
Retired	4
Others	4
<b>Education</b>	
Secondary education	48
Diploma	15
Bachelor	35
Masters	2
<b>Income</b>	
Nil	57
RM 1000<	14
RM1001 – RM 2000	18
RM2001 – RM 3000	7
RM 3001- RM 4000	4

**ISSUES OF CONCERN OVER THE ASEAN PROGRAMS**

The influx of the Western contents on Malaysian TV have obviously caused great concerned from the public due to its cultural differences and programs that were filled with sex and violence. Thus, the Broadcasting Act 1988 has outlined that at least 60 percent of television

programming had to originate from local production companies owned by ethnic Malays. Later, in the revised Act 1997, it was increased to 80 percent. However, the decline in advertising expenditure in the television sector has probably seen a reduction in the local production budget. As Asean countries share similar cultural values, therefore the Asean programs aired on Malaysian TV were then deemed as suitable to the Eastern audience, yet respondents still have some reservation of these programs. They were still concerned whether these programs aired by the local television stations were suitable to the Eastern culture. The mean score showed a moderate 2.67. Thus, suggesting that while they watched the program yet they were still concerned of the value portrayed by the programs and felt that the television stations should lower the intake of foreign program. In fact, there have been various discussion conducted in relations to the Indonesia drama. In fact it was suggested that Indonesian program such as the popular “Bawang Merah Bawang Putih” was deemed as inculcating negative impact on the audience. This was especially due to the fairy god mother character which was considered unIslamic.

Furthermore the assumption was that the less foreign program aired by the TV stations will also help support the local TV production. Respondents have in fact agreed that in order to support the local drama/ film industry, stations should lower their foreign programming (mean= 2.34). Although some of these foreign programs were interesting and entertaining programs yet, respondents were still concerned as they felt that there were less informational program aired today (mean=2.23). Similarly, they had also expressed their concerned regarding educational program which they felt is getting less airtime.

**Table 2: Distribution of Mean and SD Related to Issues of Concern Over Asean Program**

Items (N=193)	Mean	Std Dev
The program aired is suitable for the Eastern culture	2.69	.75
There should be less foreign program to support the local drama/ film industry.	2.34	.91
There is less informational program on air today.	2.23	.78
There is less educational program on air today.	2.01	.78

Strongly agreed=4, Agreed=3, Disagreed=2, Strongly disagreed=1

## VIEWS REGARDING ASEAN PROGRAM

Asean countries were considered to share similar culture and respondents were surveyed on their general views regarding the Asean programs aired by the local television stations. Amongst the five items included, respondents agreed that Asean drama/film portrayed the culture that was similar to that of Malaysia (mean=2.78). However, they do not show a strong perception that these programs were of similar cultural values. Clearly, this suggested that while the belief was that Asean countries shared the same Eastern values yet, the findings showed that the respondents do not share that opinion. Obviously only a small group of

respondents who were of the opinion that Asean drama/film portrayed similar culture to that of Malaysian. Similarly, respondents have also shared their disagreement that these Asean programs showed high moral value (mean=2.76). This is the case as some of the program aired showed no differences from that of the Western production. For instance, many of these programs shared the same story line as that of the Hollywood soap operas that were filled with vindictive characters, sex and violence scene. Not surprisingly only a small group said that these programs are suitable for all aged groups (mean=2.68) however a larger group still feel that these programs are not suitable for viewing by all aged groups. In fact, Asean programs were found to be unsuitable for children's viewing (mean=2.35). Although the sharing of the culture was low, yet Indonesian programs have the most similarities to Malay culture. For example the drama "Bawang Putih Bawang Merah," and "Malim Kundang" was highly accepted because the audience was familiar to the storyline.

It has been a common practice by the television stations in the country to have foreign programs dubbed into the Malay language. Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) aired many Japanese animation programs in the Malay language in the seventies and still have dubbed foreign programs aired today. Some of these Asean programs were also dubbed into the Malay language and respondents seem equally divided between enjoying these programs in the original language or the dubbed version. However, there was a small group who agreed that they find programs dubbed into the Malay language were more enjoyable (mean2.65). Consequently, they have no complaint of the dubbing product and found that most of these dubbed programs were well produced (mean=2.47). Some respondents are of the opinion that Asean drama / film have better quality than the local drama/ film production (mean=2.26).

**Table 3: Distribution of Mean and SD Related to the Views on Asean Drama/Film.**

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Items (N=193)	Mean	Std Dev
Asean programs portrayed similar cultural values to that of Malaysia.	2.78	.66
Programs aired contain high moral value.	2.76	.68
Asean programs are suitable to all age groups.	2.68	.75
Preferred to watch Asean programs dubbed in the Malay language.	2.65	.97
The dubbing was well produced.	2.47	.80

Strongly agreed=4, Agreed=3, Disagreed=2, Strongly disagreed=1

**FACTORS ATTRACTING AUDIENCE TO ASEAN DRAMA / FILM**

Asean countries share rich Eastern cultural values. While there were some similarities between these countries yet there were also differences that contributed to the uniqueness of some of these countries. These were among some of the characteristics of Asean drama/ film that have been found to attract audience. Respondents found the cultural values

portrayed in these drama/ film (mean=2.51) as an attraction towards these Asean production. Indonesian drama particularly has shown a strong impact on the audience. Compared to the other Asean programs aired by the local TV stations, Indonesian production showed the closest reasonable and similarity of the culture. However, audience sometimes still have to depend on the subtitles since the Indonesia language can also be difficult to understand.

The scheduling of these programs has also helped in increasing the ratings. The airtime for most of the programs was during the day time. One such example was the Indonesian produced drama, "Bawang Putih Bawang Merah," which had generated much talk and the ratings had also surpassed of the highest rated Buletin Utama. Interestingly, Asean drama film was found to be of better quality production and hence this has also attracted viewers to the program (mean=2.26). Coupled this with great action (mean=2.21) and what we have was interesting drama/ film that our local drama/ film was unable to compete (mean=2.18). While the mean scale findings on such factor were low yet the local drama/ film industry should take heed of this comparison.

**Table 4: Distribution of Mean and SD Related to the Factors Attracting Audience to Asean Drama/Film**

Items (N=193)	Mean	Std Dev
Attracted to the culture.	2.51	.75
Suitable airtime.	2.47	.74
Asean drama/ film are of better quality.	2.26	.85
Great action.	2.21	.76
The local drama/ film production are still unable to compete with the ASEAN drama/ film.	2.18	.78

Strongly agreed=4, Agreed=3, Disagreed=2, Strongly disagreed=1

## ASEAN PROGRAMS VERSUS MALAYSIAN PROGRAMS

Although Asean programs were deemed as entertaining and of a better quality production than the local Malaysian drama/ film, yet when asked to chose between these programs, more than half said that they would not pick Indonesian programs over Malaysian programs (mean=3.1). Similarly it was found that such programs like the Philippines and Thailand productions were also said to be least favored as compared to the Malaysian production. The mean scale shown in Table 5 for the two items were mean=3.0. However, production from Singapore was more favored than from the three Asean countries. Therefore among the four Asean countries, Indonesia showed that it was able to attract Malaysian to its programs.

There were various factors that had contributed to the Indonesian programs being well liked in Malaysia. Obviously the similarity in the language used was one of the factors. This coupled with the beautiful and good looking actors and actresses.

**Table 5: Distribution of Mean and SD Related to the Selection of Asean Programs vs Malaysian Programs**

Items (N=193)	Mean	Std Dev
Indonesia	3.1	.70
The Philippines	3.0	.80

Items (N=193)	Mean	Std Dev
Thailand	3.0	.80
Singapore	2.6	.90

Strongly agreed=4, Agreed=3, Disagreed=2, Strongly disagreed=1

**THE MOST POPULAR ASEAN PRODUCTION**

When asked to rank the most popular Asean production on Malaysian TV, 55 percent stated that they favored the Singapore’s production. This can be attributed to, “Phua Chu Kang,” the popular Singapore’s sitcom aired on TV3. Thailand’s production was at number two with 49 percent. Thirdly it was the Philippines (42 percent) and Indonesia was rank number four with 32 percent. It is interesting to note that even though the Singapore’s production was considered the most popular Asean production, yet if respondents were to choose between watching a Malaysian or Asean programs, many agreed that they would chose Indonesia instead of Singapore’s programs.

**Table 6: Ranking of the Asean Production**

Items (N=193)	%
Singapore	55
Thailand	49
The Philippines	42
Indonesia	32

**THE IMPACT OF ASEAN PROGRAMS**

Asean programs shared some of the characteristics of the Western production. Not surprisingly, some of these programs aired not only have interesting story line, yet many showed modern life style akin to that of the life style of the rich and famous. The study finds that when asked of their perceptions of the impact of the Asean programs, it was found that the respondents perceived the character’s life style were interesting to imitate (mean=3.12). Obviously, most of these characters were shown as leading a modern, stylish and trendy life style. The three items that the respondents felt would be of interest to the audience were; trendy clothing (mean=2.86), the hairstyle (mean=2.82) and the language used by the characters (mean=2.68).

Interestingly, the respondents have also suggested that the scheduling of these programs will also play an important role to influence their emotions (mean=2.46). Thus it can be suggested that programs aired later in the day will affect audience differently as compared to programs aired during the day. While the mean scale values for the three items were found to be rather low, thus there is a possibility that these items do not have a strong impact on the audience. Sometimes the habit of imitating this drama can have a positive impact on the audience. For example, some of the audience enjoys imitating the language used in the programs. Coupled this with their interest in the language, they would probably learned the language and this would definitely helped in forming a multi language community (mean=2.26).

**Table 7: Distribution of Mean and SD Related to the Impact of Asean Programs**

Items (N=193)	Mean	Std Dev
Interesting life style to imitate	3.12	.70
Trendy clothing	2.86	.76
Hairstyle	2.82	.76
Language used by the characters	2.68	.75
Influence emotions	2.46	.74
Helped formed a multi language community	2.26	.80

## CONCLUSION

Malaysian TV industry is thriving with the market growing with over 300 companies registered with FINAS (National Film). The industry will be expanding even further with the introduction of more channels and many uplink sites. Other Asean countries are also having a proliferation of channels due to introduction of pay-TV cable services, new satellite-based and new free-to-air channels. It is expected there will be huge program requirements in terms of content due to increase in number of broadcast transponders. Hence, regional viewers will have more choices. Consequently, the demand for quality program is growing rapidly and today we are seeing locals as well as ASEAN producing better program. However, whether these programs will impact the audience or otherwise, it would be difficult to answer unless a media impact study is conducted to further examine the issue.

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