

EXAMINING UNITY AND SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISEMENTS (PSAS) IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract: *The advancement of new media technology has changed the flow of communication for many advertising companies and organizations to strategically deliver their messages to the key audiences. The conventional method of communicating advertising messages is quickly coming to a tipping point, although it is still heavily used in print and broadcast media. As such, today's producers and advertisers seek to find new evolving forms of media, in which shifts their strategy to the online advertising platform. The same applies to public service advertisements (PSAs) that produce pro-social messages. In this present paper, we are interested in examining audience responses towards the pro-social messages of unity and social cohesion through a series of focus group interviews among ethnically-diverse adults. The findings suggest four types of frames – nationalistic frame, political frame, cultural identity frame, and episodic frame. These frames were used by audiences in their interpretation of PSAs promoting unity and social cohesion messages. This study thus not only expands the work of PSAs within the Malaysian multicultural context, but also contributes to framing theory by examining the consumption of meaning in the digital age.*

Keywords: *Public Service Advertisements (PSAS), Social Cohesion, Unity, Multicultural Context, Digital Age*

Introduction

With the rise of mass media in a digital format, computer-based technologies, media messages are undergoing significant changes. The emergence of the Internet and social web has facilitated many advertising companies and media organizations to strategically deliver their messages to the key audiences. The new media can thus have a profound influence on the attitudes, values and certain ideology of people towards the constructed messages (Lu, Chu, & Shen, 2016). Different from the media in the Western societies, almost all traditional media in

Malaysia are state-owned and are controlled by the ethnic-based political party system (Anuar, 2014; Khattab, 2006). In this case, it is thus important to understand how the media produce the pro-social messages on unity and social cohesion and how people of different ethnic groups make sense of such messages.

Previous findings acknowledged that the characteristics of young adults are changing from traditional media users to those of more global and sophisticated audiences due to the advent of digital technology, the level of knowledge of media, and the changes of demographic characteristics (i.e. age, level of education, or socioeconomic background) (Danesi, 2013). In correspondence with the changing media technologies and heightened media literacy, audiences are seen more active in their interpretation of media text (Baboo, Pandian, Prasad & Rao, 2013). Moreover, with the existence of different sources of information, the easy access to the new media (Internet) as well as the smartphones, Yang and Ahmad Ishak (2015) have also suggested that audiences will be more open to discussing some issue, particularly on the multi-ethnic relationship. For that, we argue that audiences in the digital age may have a different interpretation of messages which can lead to contradicting and complementing frames (the latter results from interpreting different PSAs). The advertising, moreover, is not only directed to one particular audience but the whole population. This is how Halloran (2007) discussed the ‘eavesdropping audiences’ because it is almost impossible for the mass media especially with the new media technology to address advertising messages to segmented audiences as other groups may also expose to such messages. As such, there may be differences in the way that different age groups interpret the PSAs especially with the rise of communication technology.

There have been several studies examining the use of communication technology for national development (Taylor, 1996; 2000) rather than on unity and social cohesion messages. For example, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Malaysia has focused more on national development objectives such as improving the system of government and administration, accelerating the growth of worldwide manufacturing and creating more sustainable industries (Salman, 2010). Other examples have also shown that the major development of ICTs is the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) which aims to build a world-leading technology environment to facilitate the evolution of Malaysia into a knowledge-based society (Muhamad, 2015). The aim of the present study, however, is to fill the gap in the literature and thus explores how PSAs in this digital age promote unity and social cohesion to the Malaysian multicultural society. Although the idea of unity and social cohesion is much more related to the government ideology or policy, this study is designed to understand unity, not from the government perspective, but focusing on the public perspective between both young and older adults in the era of new media technologies.

A Conceptual Explication

Public Service Advertisements (PSAs) in Malaysia

The use of mass media such as Internet, television, radio, newspapers as well as billboards, posters, and banners can be a powerful tool for communicating not only information about products and services, but also pro-social messages (Embong, Jusoh, Noor, & Seng, 2016). This paper only focuses on PSAs as a vehicle for promoting unity and social cohesion within a Malaysian culturally diverse society. Aimed at influencing and shaping audiences’ attitudes and judgments towards certain topics (Kareklas, Muehling, & Weber, 2015), PSAs can strategically deliver the messages to serve the interest of the public. Within the Malaysian

context, PSAs refer to government advertisements used to communicate not only certain specific messages for people's awareness but also to build the culture and identity of Malaysian people (John, 2015). There are other identified functions of the PSAs such as promoting the idea of unity and social cohesion (Embong et al., 2016; Sabariah Mohamed Salleh, 2013) and instilling the spirit of patriotism through love for the country (Anuar, 2014) among Malaysians of diverse ethnic groups. However, it is believed that moving this study beyond traditional boundaries will lead to a more informative and broader scope of research by looking into the specific issue through multiple frames interpreted by audiences especially living in a country that comprised of a multi-ethnic society.

Unity and Social Cohesion

The term unity in this paper refers to a concept that the elite power uses in Malaysia to promote unity among people of different 'races' in Malaysia. In this paper, however, the term 'ethnic groups' and 'ethnicity', referring to groups of people living in Malaysia with their own distinctive culture and religion. The reason for not using the term 'races' is that it has always been a problematic and controversial term not only used in 'Western cultural history' (Spencer, 2014) but also by Malaysia's elite power. In addition, the term social cohesion according to Shamsul and Yusoff (2014) discusses the situation in which a *nation* can live continuously in the 'state of stable tension'. By the 'state of stable tension', this paper agrees with Shamsul and Yusoff (2014) In the 'state of stable tension', this paper agrees with Shamsul and Yusoff (2014) that the nature of relationships can coexist in order to create different patterns of social interaction between ethnic groups (for example, relationships can be close and distant, pleasant and brittle, respected and neglected) but still under control and stable without riots or massive ethnic struggles.

How Unity and Social Cohesion are Expected to Achieve in the Digital Age

Previous studies have shown that online video advertisements are more interactive than offline media (Li & Lo, 2015). The interactive features of the ads receive more attention from the audiences as compared to the traditional advertising because the ads not only provide frequent and strong exposure to their messages, but also user-friendly (Li & Lo, 2015). For examples, the video ads that are disseminated and diffused via online system enables users to watch, provide ratings (such as liking or engaging with the content), share the video content and posting comments (essentially praises or complaints about their experience with the ads/products) (Hallahan, 2015). Apart from the online commercial advertisements, a number of patrons have started looking for media such as websites and blogs to get some advice, expert opinions, and commentary concerning their health and wellness (See for examples, Kareklas et al., 2015; Van Gorp & Vercruyse, 2012). Contemporaneously, one of the strategic approaches of communicating social or health messages to the people is through online PSAs (Kareklas et al., 2015).

Previous studies show that public communication campaigns such as the neighbourhood campaign have been used by the government to communicate messages of unity and social cohesion to Malaysian ethnic groups as part of national development (Taylor & Kent, 2009). This campaign has been used to improve ethnic relations and promote unity by fostering closer community integration (Shamsul & Yusoff, 2014). While these communication campaigns helped to foster relations between different ethnic groups, the results did not correspond to the organizers' intentions (Taylor & Kent, 2009). These authors suggested that the government campaigns did not target the various ethnic groups in Malaysia because they favored only one

group. In essence, these authors concluded that the government could not create consistent messages consistent with the objective of the campaign (Taylor & Kent, 2009).

Of the previous research on media messages, advertising and campaigns, there are still a number of important lines of research not related to the specific work of PSAs in their studies and very few studies carried out in the digital age on Malaysian PSAs. By examining the PSAs promoting unity and social cohesion to the Malaysian multicultural society, particular dominant frames that are imposed by the elite power the so-called frame-makers to present related national issue are explored and the views of grassroots ethnic groups are taken into account equally. That will be the main focus of this present paper. Consistent with the research aims of this study, two research questions are examined:

RQ1: What types of frames emerged from the audience's interpretation of the Malaysian PSAs in this digital age?

RQ2: How are the messages of unity and social cohesion in these PSAs perceived by the intended audiences in this digital age?

Framing as the Theoretical Framework

Overview of Framing Theory

This paper adopted a framing theory because of its potentiality for examining audience interpretations of PSAs towards unity and social cohesion. Previous studies on framing have concentrated a lot on traditional media such as the analysis of mainstream and alternative newspapers (Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2015), media contents and images on health issue (Van Gorp & Vercruyse, 2012), and the effect of framing and visual imagery (Seo, Dillard, & Shen, 2013). Yet, very few studies examine the framing process at micro-levels (i.e. how the audiences interpret and make sense of a specific topic) (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011).

In current mass communication research, 'framing' is without any doubt has become a buzzword due to its ambiguity of understanding the concept. Entman (1993) declared framing as a 'fractured paradigm' due to the ambiguous concepts of 'frames' and 'framing', how frames are used as a text, and how frames are used in understanding the media effects. As a result, the understanding of framing becomes more complex when numerous definitions and approaches are being used across the field (Cacciatore et al., 2015; Van Gorp, 2007; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). One result of these contested understandings is that the meaning of framing can differ depending on the research questions being asked, the level of analysis undertaken, and/or the basis of researcher's interest (Hallahan, 1999). Having identified the complex understanding of framing, the next step is to articulate the concepts of framing that are relevant to this study.

In response to the previous claim, the concept of framing will be first unpacked to resolve the complexity of framing from different viewpoints. The keyword frame was used both as a verb (to frame) and as a noun (a frame) by several scholars to explain (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Hallahan, 2001; Van Gorp, 2007). When using frame as a verb, Entman's (1993) definition of frame articulates that: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Technically, the theoretical underpinning of framing theory is that the media give attention to certain events (selection) when delivering information and provide important meanings (salience) that refer to those events (Van Gorp, 2007). On the other hand,

the 'frame' when is used as a noun refers to "a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, and links them. The frame proposes "what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143) and, therefore, emphasizes certain aspects of the issue and diminishes others. This concept of frames indicates how a news story, for example, is presented through the media, and thus tell audiences how to interpret it's meaning (Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano, 2009; Entman, 1993).

Methodology

Inspired by the work of Van Gorp (2007), this paper extracts some key frames through six focus group interviews of different Malaysian ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian). We used the purposive sampling to recruit participants as they were selected according to the residential area (both suburb and urban Kajang district) and the generation age (young and older adults). The focus group interviews were used to gather data from both young and older adults to discover their responses towards the PSAs promoting unity and social cohesion messages in the digital age and were analyzed using audience frame analysis. The audience frame analysis refers to the way in which its members make sense of issues based on their thinking, feeling and experience and thus process these issues (Fahmy, 2010). Methodologically, this study integrates the frame matrix structure (combining both framing devices and reasoning devices) (Van Gorp, 2007) not only to understand how audiences are involved in constructing meanings, but also to see how they express the disagreements towards a given issue (Buttny & Hashim, 2015) in this digital era. For example, a previous study revealed that participants use their knowledge and experiences to tell stories or talk about past events (agree and disagree about an issue) and what in the future might / should be said (Buttny & Hashim, 2015).

By extending frame analysis on audiences as suggested by several scholars (Cacciatore et al., 2015; Fahmy, 2010), this study does not take for granted the meaning suggested by the government concerning unity and social cohesion. Rather, this paper seeks to discover how people of multi-ethnic society also provide their own interpretation of meaning concerning such messages (micro-construct' frame). All the focus group interviews were recorded using an audio-recording device and we produced verbatim transcripts for analysis. Using Atlas.ti, a comprehensive coding structure was developed from focus group interview data and then analyzed using audience frame analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The use of audience frame analysis in analyzing focus group interviews for this study distinguish *four types of frames* – nationalistic frame, political frame, cultural identity frame, and episodic frame and how the participants used different frames in interpreting the messages of unity and social cohesion in the PSAs. These multiple frames show that some frames are dominant over the other; some frames are conflicted within each other, and some frames are complimentary of each other. As such, our findings did not only discover the different types of frames but also reveal how these four frames were used by participants in their interpretation of PSAs promoting unity and social cohesion messages. The next paragraph explains each of the frames.

Nationalistic Frame

The framing of issue reflects on how people picture their interpretations of social realities based on a particular issue (such as unity and social cohesion) that has been given attention by the media (Hallahan, 2008; 1999). What is important pertaining to issues is how a problem, concern or topic is presented to enable the public to understand the problem at hand (Hallahan,

1999). Participants who interpret PSAs in light of nationalistic frame can be said to share the ‘commonalities’ with the creator of ads in terms of the social objective. Some illustrative data are presented below:

*Participant G3-PP: Yes, I do agree. **They are good ads because they show the message of unity among people of different ethnics.** This is what the government wants.*

*Participant G1-PN: The ad is a medium to educate people...like what we have seen, oooo like this...we should have done it. The ads are more to educate. **So it is the government hopes that the community can be like that. So it is one of the steps to educate the people to be united.***

*Participant G3-ND: **To me aaaaa...the ads are one of the ways to educate the public.** So, what the government is doing is good for example, showing the harmonious relationship in a multi-ethnic society, what are the good things to do for example the train ad just now, the ad about helping other people. To me...there’s nothing wrong with the message. **The government wants people to be more united.***

*Participant G1-ZR: All the ads we watched just now, the earlier part such as billboards and few others, **I think the ads are all good because they want people to be united and for the ‘unity’.** The main motive of the authorities made those ads is for the ‘unity’.*

Political Frame

For the purpose of this study, political frame concerns with a statement or discussion of the political issue or power relationship in relation to promoting nationalism and the means to achieve it. Participants who view PSAs through political frame can be empirically seen from some of the illustrative data as follows:

*Participant G4-RZ: **The government is trying to survive.** The government is afraid of the up-coming election.*

*Participant G4-FR: **To me, yes, it is propaganda. It is also about the political games. We can see from each of the ads that they produce this ad for certain agenda.** They have their own objective and aim...and those ads are actually targeting low educated and uneducated people. For example, people in the village or working there may think ok we have to be united and we have to dance together and whatever. To me, people in the village and those who don't have education, they may think that way. But, educated people like us; we can think something better and further.*

Cultural Identity Frame

For this analysis, cultural identity frame concerns with how participants perceived ways of life of groups of people, the ways that individual treat one another, and the ways people are culturally or ethnically portrayed in the media. Some illustrative data which are empirically analyzed are shown below:

Participant G4-YY: Yeaaa...ehmmm **I can see most of the ads, they start with the Malay first, then only Chinese, then only Indian,** why can't they put an Indian first, or maybe Chinese first, aaa maybe mix or everything aaa...they can come up with a nice ad that doesn't categorize that Malay come first, then Chinese, then always the minority like Indians, they will put them last. I always wonder why.

Participant G3-TH: But I don't think the ad is for our generation...aaa, I mean for young people especially. You know what, I feel like watching an old ad like during the time of P. Ramlee (a popular celebrity in the 60s and 70s). In that ad, people are identified through skin color, for example, an Indian with dark skin, the Chinese guy with fair skin, while the Malay with his brown skin. Even the conversation among them is also obvious because of the Indian dialect. Now, there are many Indians can speak Bahasa very well. What I can say here...**the ad is trying to identify people according to their ethnic groups such as through their skin color and the use of dialect.** But aaaa...those criteria don't necessarily refer to that particular ethnic group.

Participant G2-TN: No. Basically, **the method they use is too stereotyping. Marks every of the races in a stiff way... Not realistic because the selling point is wrong.** It does not achieve 'national unity'. It is a waste of money. It marks different ethnic in a negative way. For example, Indians are bad guys.

Participant G1-SHH: **The ads focus more on Malays. The rest (another ethnic group) look like additional characters.**

Participant G4-RZ: My focus is about the video ads, the animation ones (Pak Abu and everything) ...aaaa is it really about 'national unity'? If it is about 'unity', **why an Indian must be black and has an accent...why must the Chinese be like the stereotype extreme you know...are Indians like that...are Chinese like that...are Malays like that?** You know...it's like aaa 'unity'...why must they show this race is like this and this race is like this. **And then when unite...the Malay culture is dominant. Then the rest are sunk.** You see...is it really 'national unity'?

Episodic Frame

Episodic frame encompasses situational factors and ongoing personal experiences that reflect how people create the meaning of an issue or event (Gross, 2008; Hallahan, 1999; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kendall, 2011). The episodic frame not only involved individual personal experience, but also engaged people's emotions towards an issue or event (Gross, 2008; Hallahan, 1999; Kendall, 2008). Some illustrative data are provided below:

Participant G1-BD: Based on my experience...I have been working with Indian and Chinese people. **I'm not saying that the ads do not reflect the real situation at all, but the ads that we have watched, they are too perfect.**

Participant G3-NT: **I think the message from one of the ads (referring to the ad in the KTM train), it is convincing. Yes, it is true. It is happening in our society.** People are no longer care about the others (those who should be given

seat). Although we can see the 'priority seat' signs in the train instruct people to vacate the seats for disabled people, pregnant women, elderly passengers, and those who are carrying infants, but people don't bother with the signs.

*Participant G1-SHH: **The ad relates to our life experience. Like the ad in the train.** It happened to me as well. I felt hurt. But I said nothing at that time. At least, in the ad, that person realizes what he did was wrong.*

*Participant G1-DN: **I also agree with the opinion that the culture in the ads is different with the real culture. It is not the same.** For example, in the city, we are busy...if the ad talks about the real culture of the people...aaaa the culture of the current situation, today's scenario, what is our culture all about...aaa. Insyallah (If God Wills) ...hopefully the ads can be effective.*

In examining the responses between young and older adults, these two different age groups are not quantifiable in terms of numbers and percentages. In fact, the focus group interviews with two groups of older adults were conducted compared to four groups of young adults participated in the focus group discussions. From the analysis, what can be concluded is they were differences of views on how young adults and older adults frame unity and social cohesion in PSAs. Although young adults are considered as active audiences in exchanging and communicating meanings (Baboo, Pandian, Prasad & Rao, 2013), older adult participants were more critical than young adult participants in terms of their responses towards the PSAs. The way older adults frame the PSAs was more about the discourse of politics compared to young adults, which were more on the discourse of identity and culture. The findings are treated as moment-to-moment discourse.

Conclusion

The theoretical and methodological approaches that were adopted in analyzing the six focus group interviews were adopted from framing theory, in specific, audience frame analysis. The purpose of this paper was to examine how the audiences interpret the message of unity and social cohesion from PSAs. The four themes that emerge from the findings: 1) nationalistic frame; 2) political frame; 3) cultural identity frame; and 4) episodic frame show that the existence of multiple frames does not necessarily lead to competing for other frames, rather each frame co-exist and complement one another and even align in a mutually supportive manner. Undeniably, the analysis also found that dominant frame appears in the advertisements which may influence the pattern of interpretation to think about unity and social cohesion in a specific way and may also influence other frames to be overlooked and overpowered. This is how the concept of framing highlights the way the meanings of unity and social cohesion are constructed is, through emphasizing certain aspects of reality and de-emphasizing others in the digital age.

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