"Beer is Haram!" Representation of Islam by Online Newspapers in Malaysia on the Issue of Better Beer Festival & Oktoberfest

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ABSTRACT

The representation of Islam in the media has been widely discussed by media scholars. In the Malaysian context, Islam is frequently associated with conflicts resulting from political issues or actions taken by religious authorities against any organisation or individual that sparks public debate. The government is also alleged to use Islam as a hegemonic tool to continue dominating the mindset of the lower class by using religion as a political weapon to gain power and maintain the status quo. Newspapers especially those owned by the government have certain ideologies to convey to the general public in order to maintain a specific existing social order. This causes the controversial issues pertaining to Islam to be frequently discussed in the news media in tandem with the vested interest of those owning the newspapers. However, the discourse on issues involving Islam has become more daring after the emergence of digital news portals that enable hegemonic counterarguments to be discussed widely among members in the mentioned medium. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how Islam and Muslims are represented in online newspapers in Malaysia. Two samples from English-language online newspapers, namely The Star Online and Malaysiakini, were selected. By using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, the findings of this study show that Islam, Islamic political parties, and some Muslims in Malaysia have been represented as extremists and backwards by online newspapers.

Keywords: *Representation of Islam, Malaysian media, online newspapers, Islam, content analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country made up of various races and religions, but the majority of the population is Malay Muslims. The demographics of Malaysia are diverse, and this makes it inevitable for Malaysia to have to deal with problems involving minority groups and religions. The press plays an important role in conveying information and representing a particular group or religion, thus it can be an agent that contributes to either uniting or dividing a country. Therefore, it is very important to study how newspapers report on sensitive issues involving relations between communities in Malaysia, especially when it involves Islam, a religion that has long been connected with negative features in the media (Said, 1997; Muhammad Raqib & Qasem, 2020).

According to the latest data provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the total population of Malaysia is 32.63 million people, comprising 69.3% Bumiputera (Malays, and ethnic Orang Asli in Sabah and Sarawak), 22.8% Chinese, 6.9% Indians, and 1% others. With 61.3% of the population being Muslim, Islam is the most widely practised religion in

Malaysia, followed by Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), and Hinduism (6.3%) (Ridauddin, 2020).

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia, as the highest law of the country, has provided that Islam is the official religion of the country without denying the right to practice other religions (Article 3 of the Federal Constitution). Nevertheless, Hamayotsu (2015) pointed out that the race and religion of the majority (Malay Islam) have been given priority in the founding constitution of this country, while other races have been considered minorities even with the grant of citizenship to them. This has caused the minorities, especially the non-Muslims, to feel oppressed, and to feel that their rights are often restricted by the state (Jha, 2009).

Jha (2009) explained that most privileges and advantages are given to the Malay Muslims and this has marginalised other minority groups in Malaysia, thus becoming a factor leading to the occurrence of crises. In addition to the "Bumiputera" (literally meaning "sons of the soil") policies, which confer various privileges to the Malays, the widening gap occurs when the Islamization policies introduced by the government are manifested in various ways that give advantages to the Malay Muslims (Walters, 2007; Saat & Alatas, 2022). By custom, it is accepted in Malaysia that all Malays are Bumiputeras. The Orang Asli (indigenous people) in Peninsular Malaysia and the tribal peoples in Sabah and Sarawak are also included in this official definition, which is frequently used in Malaysia.

According to Rashaad (2016), sentiments of hatred towards Islam and Malays have been increasing among the non-Malay Muslim communities in Malaysia. On top of that, a significant contextual difference was clarified between Islamophobia in Europe and Malaysia (Rashaad, 2016). Islamophobia in Europe occurs when the European society perceives Islam as a threat in various forms of violence, which tend to destroy national harmony, disturb the existing customs/cultures, and bring other negative implications (ibid). However, Islamophobia in the Malaysian context is different considering that a majority of the population are Malay Muslims, which results in a struggle between political parties to attain political survival in Malaysia. Islamic discourse is gradually becoming noticeable due to the clashes between the federal government under the leadership of UMNO (the United Malays National Organization) and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) which aims to champion Islam (Neo, 2006; Osman, 2013).

Ahmad Fauzi (2018) explained that the ruling party, especially the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition party, often uses controversial issues involving religion and ethnicity to strengthen its grip on power and maintain the status quo, especially after the coalition began to receive less support from Malaysian citizens after the 12th general election which took place in 2008. Consequently, Islam has been used as a tool by the state to continue dominating the lower classes by using religion as a political tool to gain power and maintain the status quo (Wan Norshira, 2019).

Due to this development, topics concerning Islam have been sensationalised and have become the subject of debate in Malaysia's local media, notably by English-language outlets that cater to the middle classes. With the development of the internet, the representation of Islam has also broadened, creating a platform for counter-hegemony to occur. People are increasingly daring to express their thoughts more freely, and this act of counter-hegemony is demonstrated in their writings, especially in online news portals.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Islam has been represented in Malaysia's English-language online news portals, using the Oktoberfest and Better Beer Festival 2017 as the case study. It is critical to investigate how Islam has been constructed by online news portals because media representation can create a bad perception among society and because Islam has historically been related to extremism and terrorism on a worldwide scale. This issue was chosen as a case study because it received widespread attention on social media and online news portals in Malaysia. This issue also received adverse reactions among non-Muslims in Malaysia (Daud, 2017).

Case Study-Oktoberfest and Better Beer Festival 2017
The Better Beer Festival has been an annual event held in Malaysia since 2012. Originally scheduled to take place on October 6 and 7, 2017, at Publika, Kuala Lumpur, it was cancelled by the government along with "Oktoberfest", an alcohol festival that originated in 1810 in Munich, Germany, which has always been considered an important event in German society (The Better Beer Festival 2017 was cancelled due to "political sensitivity", 2017).

A week after Riduan Mohd Nor, a member of the PAS central committee, railed against the event, branding it as a "vice party", the cancellation was announced by the Kuala Lumpur City Council (DBKL). DBKL had refused to grant these alcohol festivals an organising licence due to security reasons. That was not the first time PAS had acted in this manner; in 2014, they opposed a similar Oktoberfest celebration, which led to the event's relocation to an outdoor parking lot at the One Utama Shopping Complex, Kuala Lumpur.

The cancellation was anticipated to have a significant impact, as the Better Beer Festival was Malaysia's largest craft beer festival, and it involved an extensive roster of partners and sponsors. The two-day event was organised to bring in more than 250 different beers from 43 independent breweries in 12 different nations. The Better Beer 2017 was planned to feature a wide variety of small-batch brews, festival fare, and a jam-packed live music schedule, as well as a number of food vendors and local bands to amuse the crowd with a combination of pop hits, R&B, and jazz.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Media Ownership and Control in Malaysia
It is important to note that before the 14th General Election (GE14) in 2018, the Malaysian mainstream media was primarily controlled by the ruling party; for instance, a giant media corporation known as Media Prima Berhad constituted an umbrella of a group of television networks, radio stations, and newspapers (Netto, 2002; Nain & Wang, 2004; Muhammad Raqib, 2021) was connected with the ruling political party, UMNO. On top of that, Media Prima Berhad also owned English newspapers including the New Straits Times and Malay Mail. In fact, this corporation was deemed the largest media group in the country based on the fact that they hold 54% of Malaysian viewership and 29% of the market share (ibid).

UMNO also owns the Utusan Melayu Group which published a total of three daily newspapers in the Malay language. Meanwhile, The Star, a daily English newspaper, is owned by a political party called the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). MCA is a political party in Malaysia that seeks to represent the Malaysian Chinese ethnicity; it is one of the three major component parties of the ruling coalition in Malaysia known as Barisan Nasional (BN), the other two being UMNO and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). In addition, MCA also owns many other media companies, namely Sin Chew Jit Poh, Nanyang Siang Pau, China Press, and

Guang Ming Daily. Similarly, MIC also owns several media outlets which include Malaysia Namban, Makkal Osai, and Tamil Nesan (ibid). Being one of the component parties of BN, MIC has for long positioned itself as a representative of the Indian community in Malaysia.

Apart from the mainstream newspapers owned by political parties, BERNAMA, a news agency funded by national taxpayers, is under the direct control of the Ministry of Information, Communications, and Culture (Lansner, 2014; Sofian, 2021). Lansner (2014) illustrated that BERNAMA was explicitly utilized as a political spreading organ by the BN party, especially during the election period.

In general, it can be argued that ownership of the mainstream media in Malaysia, especially before GE14 in 2018, was remarkably dominated by the interest in elite politics, where it can be said that the information presented to the audience is highly controlled by them. Almost all the mainstream newspapers were linked—ostensibly or otherwise—to political parties within the BN government. More importantly, this controlled ownership has caused the audience to only receive coverage that invariably supports the policies introduced by the government. However, of late, there has been an increasing number of alternative news portals that can compete with mainstream dailies (Mustafa, 2005; Wok & Mohamed, 2017; Muhammad Raqib, 2021).

The BN government has developed its own relevant regulations despite the various orientations within the local mainstream media that existed as a result of the multicultural and multireligious characteristics of Malaysian society (Mustafa, 2005; Chamil, 2012). The purpose of such regulations is to pursue both internal security and national development (Mustafa, 2005; Wok & Mohamed, 2017; Muhammad Raqib, 2021). One of these regulations is known as the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA) which was developed based on the 1948 Printing Presses Ordinance. This Ordinance served as a principal piece of legislation that drew the lines of the press industry. The PPPA stipulates that an annual license must be obtained from the Ministry of Home Affairs to legalize a regular publication published within the borders of Malaysia (Mustafa, 2005; Chamil, 2012; Wok & Mohamed, 2017; Muhammad Raqib, 2021). Moreover, the Minister of Home Affairs (the Minister) maintains the power to revoke the license for those publications that pose a threat to national security. In 1988, the PPPA was amended, stating that no judicial reviews will be accepted for suspended publications (Mustafa, 2005; Wok & Mohamed, 2017). Hence, this evolvement serves as a clear indication of the hegemony of the executive over its judiciary counterpart in Malaysia.

The PPPA has been observed to grow more powerful considering that a decision taken by the minister against a publication would be deemed final. Such a decision may involve prohibition in printing, sale, import, distribution, and/or possession of the publication (PPPA, Section 13, Subsection 13B, and Section 7(1)). In this regard, the following are the charges that will activate the aforementioned sections within the PPPA: threatening morality, public order, security, and/or national interest; conflicting with the law; and/or promoting provocative materials (Mustafa, 2005; Chamil, 2012; Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

By the same token, the Official Secrets Act 1972 (OSA) is considered to be one of the statutes that clearly limit the practice of journalism. This piece of legislation makes it legitimate for government officials not to provide any information deemed confidential to the media. The OSA has been amended several times to make the definition of an 'official secret' wider and more ambiguous (Chamil, 2012; Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

The Sedition Act of 1948 is also considered to be specifically restrictive of Malaysian journalism as well as freedom of speech generally (Mustafa, 2005; Chamil, 2012; Wok & Mohamed, 2017). Its main purpose was manifested in quelling ethnic discrimination, but its provisions were found to go beyond this purpose, based on the fact that the scope of its restriction includes any kind of policy criticism, especially after the ethnicity rampage witnessed in 1969. Overall, these legislative provisions are regarded as intimidation measures that are employed to control the critical discourse on ethnicity (Mustafa, 2005; Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

The Emergence of Alternative Malaysian Online News Portals such as Malaysiakini
Access to the Internet by individuals and households increased rapidly especially following the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Department of Statistics Malaysia reported that the percentage of households' access to ICT increased from 91.7% in 2020 to 95.5% in 2021 (Birruntha, 2022). Moreover, online news and social media remain the main news sources in Malaysia, while the printing press continues its downward spiral from 45% in 2017 to 17% (Nain, 2022). Nain (2022) also mentioned that formerly proud newspapers, especially the national language and vernacular newspapers in Malaysia, now languish at the bottom in terms of the level of trust given by Malaysians. Malaysiakini is one of the news portals that have remained popular largely due to its balanced yet critical approach to the government.

As discussed in the previous section, the limitations imposed on the traditional Malaysian media paved the way for the Internet to play an alternative, notable role (Radue, 2012). Since the launch of "Vision 2020" which focused on community development, Malaysia has been progressively shifting towards projects that adopt more communication technologies promoted through foreign investments. Tun Mahathir bin Mohamad implemented the "Multimedia Super Corridor" in order to fulfil each vision. In this sense, the Internet has been excluded from government monitoring in order to attract foreign investors and improve the country's economy (Abbot, 2013; Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

The scandalous sacking of the former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1998 almost consolidated the first test of the Malaysian online news portals developed to serve as alternative outlets (Zawiyah et al., 2015; Wok & Mohamed, 2017). More importantly, several websites were involved in adopting a new line of coverage regarding the issue (ibid).

During the 1999 and 2004 elections, Malaysia experienced two electoral processes that were dominated by the influence of information dissemination through the Internet. Nevertheless, the government's hegemony remained because the ruling party continued to receive 2/3 majority votes in Parliament in both elections (Mohd Amirul, 2011). However, the significant contribution of news portals and blogs in exposing the power abuse and corruption occurring within the BN government was deemed as an essential factor that influenced the decision of the voters. As a result, BN failed to keep a two-thirds majority of the parliamentary seats in the 2008 election (Zawiyah et al., 2015). The presence of this new trend within the Malaysian media has severely weakened the control of information by the BN government through their ownership of the mainstream media (Radue, 2012).

In other words, the Malaysian public is now provided with various sources of information which are not restricted to the grip of one-party domination (Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010; Mohd Amirul, 2011; Radue, 2012). On top of that, it is worth mentioning that such a change clearly indicates the rapid growth of digital democracy in Malaysia (Mohd

Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). Abbot (2004, cited in Zawiyah et al., 2015) stated that an audience who desires fair, unbiased, critical, and open-ended news is more likely to read the news from online portals compared to the mainstream media because it is believed that they provide more accurate news to the public.

Malaysiakini is the best example of an alternative Malaysian online news portal, which has managed to gain popularity by playing a "watchdog" role in the government (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2007; Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). In fact, Malaysiakini is considered to be one of the major contributors to BN's failure of securing a 2/3 majority in the 12th and 13th General Elections in 2008 and 2013 respectively (Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010). Malaysiakini started operating online on November 20, 1999, before the 1999 general elections with the purpose of offering an alternative coverage that would strongly compete with the performance of traditional press (Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010).

Malaysiakini's coverage is deemed to be accurate, updated, diverse, and independent (Mohd Nizam et al., 2013). Its 'Letters' section is available and actively inclusive, as it gives the opportunity for any race or group to present various ideological perspectives (ibid). Conspicuously, restricted or 'taboo' topics are raised for debate which include religion, racial quota, migrant workers, and AIDS. Furthermore, it is noted that the editorial board is considerably inclined towards promoting human rights issues, democracy, and freedom of expression (ibid).

Due to the nature of its reporting, some segments of the public, primarily the Malay Muslims, have accused Malaysiakini of being anti-Islamic for promoting liberalism in its coverage of Islamic issues in Malaysia (Guan, 2005). Malaysiakini has also been labelled as an enemy of Islam (Malay Mail, 2016). Furthermore, various claims were made regarding Malaysiakini's manipulation of facts with varying viewpoints against the government, in addition to inciting Islamophobia among the general public (Malaysia Today, 2016).

Media Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony
Media hegemony is the perception of a process in which particular values and ways of thinking propagated by the mass media become prevalent in society (Gramsci, 1971). It is considered a tool to be used for strengthening the capitalist system in particular. Media hegemony has been seen to affect how reporters in the media, who are themselves subject to existing values and norms, choose and deliver news stories.

The notion of hegemony refers to a social group's moral, intellectual, and political leadership that is attained not using force but through the active permission of other social groups obtained via control of culture and ideology. Throughout this process, the dominant social group exerts influence and acquires legitimacy primarily through social mechanisms such as education, religion, family, and mass media. Based on the definition of hegemony, media hegemony is the dominance of particular areas of life and thought through the infiltration of a dominating culture and its ideals into social life. In other words, media hegemony influences the culture, values, and ideology of a society (Altheide, 1984).

The dominant ideology will have a significant impact on reporter socialisation, including guidance, job norms, and orientation. Journalists are socialised into professional and organisational conventions, and some of the underlying values and norms they share are influenced by ideology, as it is difficult to be independent of the culture produced by the dominant class (Gans, 1979). Although journalists claim to be independent of the state and

marketing forces, and that they are always on the side of the public as a social instrument, it is undeniable that economic ideology and control do pervade the assumptions, orientations, and procedures of reporters who directly produce news stories. Journalists' use of cultural categories and symbols can unwittingly assist ideological hegemony (ibid). Furthermore, reporters are more likely to select and report on issues that support the dominant ideology and the status quo. To a considerable measure, public opinion is formed based on information disseminated by status quo-oriented news media.

In the context of this study, it is possible to assert that the government has exploited the media and issues related to Islam to enhance its power and maintain the status quo, given that a majority of Malaysians are Malay Muslims. Their ownership and control of the mainstream media make it very difficult to locate alternative news. The reporting of issues concerning Islam in the mainstream media, particularly the Malay-language media, would frequently side with the government/Malay Muslims and neglect to represent the views of non-Muslims and minorities (Muhammad Raqib & Qasem, 2020).

This scenario results in counter-hegemony through the means of the Internet. News portals provide a broad platform for minorities, particularly non-Muslims, to express their opposition towards the government and also towards imbalanced policies that favour Islam and Muslims (Muhammad Raqib, 2021). Counter-hegemony is an attempt to challenge or undermine hegemonic power (Drezner, 2019). In other words, it is a conflict or a challenge to the present status quo and its legitimacy in politics, but it may also be seen in history, media, music, and other areas of life. According to Pratt (2004), counter-hegemony is the building of an alternative hegemony on the terrain of civil society in preparation for political transformation.

Alternative media has long been viewed as a platform for marginalised communities to be heard outside of mainstream media. When an authoritarian political regime controls the mainstream media, alternative media becomes a tool for opposition parties to communicate with the audience (Yoedtadi & Pribadi, 2020). Similarly, when the democratic political system allows media conglomerates to control the mainstream media, alternative media remains a medium free of hegemonic capital power (ibid). Counter-hegemony is exercised by alternative media against mainstream media by presenting a contrasting perspective from the dominating sphere of information. As a result, readers and authors of alternative media such as Malaysiakini are frequently able to discuss Islam in a critical manner.

METHODOLOGY

This study used quantitative and qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the representation of Islam in both samples from the selected case studies. The procedure entailed reading the news articles published in newspapers to acquire a better grasp of how the contentious issue was covered. Aside from that, the study included an investigation of news narratives to analyse how the selected case is built and depicted by both news portals.

For the quantitive content analysis, the units of analysis included regular news, editorials, columns, public opinion, and reader letters. For this quantitative study, among the categories studied are news sources and the reporting slant of the articles. Meanwhile, for qualitative content analysis, the researcher only reviewed opinion articles published by both newspapers. These articles are usually written by editors, readers, and columnists. These articles were chosen because the tendency, bias, and subjective way in which they have

presented their views can be seen more clearly (Muhammad Raqib, 2021). Most of the time, opinion pieces that match the beliefs of an organisation will be chosen for publication. The themes and words employed by the writer in expressing their opinions are also explored.

Samples were chosen from articles published in The Star Online and Malaysiakini since they have the widest readership in Malaysia. According to Google Analytics, the total foreign audience for the news portal reached 2.27 million in March 2019 but this number jumped to 9.65 million in March 2020 (Star Media Group, 2020). The news portal also had a total of 20,589,643 unique visitors from various nations, an increase from 8,415,868 visitors in the previous year.

According to the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report (Malaysiakini, 2018), Malaysiakini was the most popular media portal in Malaysia. Malaysiakini was ranked first in Malaysia in the yearly survey of news consumption in various markets in 2018, with 44 per cent of weekly usage by local users. The Star Online and Berita Harian Online ranked second and third respectively.

FINDINGS

Sources of News

The most often cited sources for The Star were Barisan Nasional politicians. Statements by Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai, the minister who was also MCA President at the time, were frequently cited to justify why the event was cancelled. Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai also published various statements in which he stated that he only supported the cancellation due to security reasons, and not due to politics or pressure from specific groups. The Star also referred to MCA members who disagreed with the cancellation of the festival for political reasons.

The public was also frequently cited as a source of news by The Star. Civil society was given the opportunity to express their opinions; some supported the cancellation, while others complained that the government did not give due consideration to their limited rights. In addition, The Star also published the views of its editors and columnists on the subject. The majority of the columnists appeared to be opposed to the cancellation of the festival.

In its reports, The Star regularly referred to authorities such as the police and DBKL in providing reasons for the cancellation of the festival. Tan Sri Fuzi Harun, the then-Chief of Police, was frequently cited, as it was alleged that he had received terrorist threats that harm would occur if the festival was to go on. The Star was also seen offering the alcohol festival organisers opportunities to explain the nature of the festival and why it must be allowed to be held. Furthermore, The Star highlighted the views of moderate Islamic NGOs such as Sisters in Islam, which outlook is more moderate than PAS. Sisters in Islam supported and defended the alcohol festival, which was believed to represent the right of non-Muslim Malaysians to congregate and consume alcohol.

On the other hand, Malaysiakini made the most use of the resources from Pakatan Rakyat's leadership. Datuk Seri Azmin Ali, the then-Menteri Besar of Selangor, was frequently praised for approving the alcohol festival in Selangor despite concerns expressed by PAS. Some DAP (Democratic Action Party) and PAN (Parti Amanah Negara) leaders were also cited as sources, and it is clear that they had opposing views on the festival. The cancellation of the festival was vigorously opposed by DAP leaders and DAP leaders such as Lim Kit Siang were

mentioned in several articles when he criticised MCA for failing to fight for the Chinese community's freedom to meet and enjoy alcohol during the festival.

Furthermore, Malaysiakini gave its editors and columnists the most opportunities to speak on this subject. The majority of columnists criticised the government's decision to cancel the festival and questioned the actions of the police, who were accused of conspiring with the ruling regime.

Malaysiakini also highlighted the stance of the Barisan Nasional leadership. Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi, the Deputy Prime Minister who was also the Minister of Home Affairs at the time, was frequently cited as he was the one who gave instructions to cancel the alcohol festival as a preventative step against terrorist attacks. Some UMNO members, including Tan Sri Annuar Musa, voiced their opposition to the alcohol festival's organisation. The MCA leadership was also cited as a news source when they responded to criticisms from Lim Kit Siang and clarified their viewpoint on this issue.

The study's findings also showed that Malaysiakini also reported the views of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) extensively. Perak Liberation Organization (PLO), Engage, Center for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET), Bebas, and Movement for Change, Sarawak were among the NGOs mentioned in Malaysiakini's articles. All of these NGOs opposed the festival's cancellation on the grounds that the rights of non-Muslim Malaysians had been violated by the authorities.

It can be concluded that both news portals primarily referred to sources that opposed the festival's cancellation. Both news sites appear to make fewer references to Islamic philosophers and thinkers. Only The Star is seen as attempting to give space to moderate Islamic NGOs such as Sisters in Islam to express their opposition to the festival's cancellation. This proves that both newspapers attempted to demonstrate a moderate stance. but it must be noted that when Islamic thinkers and scholars are not given the opportunity to express their views on this issue, the audience is likely to have a narrow view of Islam. Both news portals were more focused on the political side of this issue, providing more opportunities for political leaders to express their opinions and earn political points.

Slants of Reporting

It can be said that Malaysiakini and The Star have published mostly neutral reporting on this issue. Apart from neutral news, both publications have published more stories in favour of the alcohol festival. To provide a clearer explanation, consider the following example of news items that demonstrate a positive news tendency.

> To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia, and the gains in terms of tourist arrivals and hotel bookings (at least 6,000 people were expected to attend) **would have been enormous**. Malaysia's competitive tourism ranking **would definitely improve in terms of tourism service** and international openness" (Baljit, 2017).

Here is an example of neutral news reporting about the festival:

> The Inspector-General of Police said the decision to cancel rested with the local council, not the police. However, he stressed that there was intelligence indicating a militant threat if the event was carried out (Kumar, 2017).

Both news sites have been seen producing more articles in support of the alcohol festival. This comes as no surprise given that their target audience is non-Malay, middle-class citizens. The majority of Malay Muslims read Malay vernacular newspapers and news websites in Malay. When the reporting is slanted towards protesting against the festival's cancellation, unconsciously this leads to some publications being perceived as criticising Islam or parties/groups associated with Islam.

Themes and Words Choice
Among the themes adopted by The Star were as follows:
   a. Criticizing the authorities' actions in cancelling the alcohol festival's organisation.
The actions of the authorities, including Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) and the police, were given various labels by the writers. For example, among the words and statements used were "major disappointment," "sad," "giving credence to terrorist groups and religious fundamentalists," "worrying," "painful," "disturbed by the cancellation of the festival," "acts that are not considerate," "oppression" and "encouraging religious groups to be more brazen in their demands."

Writers also used words like "religious fundamentalists," "extremists," "religious fanatics," "like to be the moral police," "religious ideologues who force conservative values," and "those who are easily offended" to describe those who sought for the festival to be cancelled.

   b. Criticizing Malaysia's socio-political situation
The writers criticised Malaysia's socio-political situation at the time, particularly the interaction between the different races and the denial of non-Malay Muslims' freedom to consume alcoholic beverages in large numbers.

Thanabalasingam (2017), for example, criticised the relationship between communities in Malaysia, which is becoming increasingly strained as a result of various events that occurred at the time, one of which was the cancellation of the alcohol festival. Thanabalasingam described his feelings about this situation as "disappointed and anxious".

   c. Criticising the actions of the PAS party in demanding the cancellation of the festival.
There were several articles that criticised PAS for protesting against the alcohol festival. Wao (2017) and Azmi (2017) said that PAS is made up of "natural terrorists, extremists, racists, right-wingers, and politicians who are seen as religious". They also said that PAS "likes to call people who don't agree with them infidels" and "likes to push their conservative agenda into public life".

On the other hand, the following are among the themes discussed by Malaysiakini:
   a. Criticising the cancellation of the alcohol festival and tying it to the oppression of non-Malay Muslims and Islamization in Malaysia.
Among the words and statements used by the writers to display their criticisms on the cancellation of the festival were "an action that robs the people of their choice", "a stupid and unfair decision", "doing a dirty invasion", "an action that goes beyond the mandate given to them", "an ambiguous action", "an invasion into the private lives of the people", "further divides between different communities", "increasing the perception that the values of one

community are higher than those of other communities", "erosion of the rights of minorities", and "unfair actions". Among the words and statements used by the writers to describe PAS are "Islamist party", "hypocrites", "narrow thinking", "ignorance", "lack of tolerance", "cannot be trusted to be fair and respectful", "an Islamist party dedicated to turning Malaysia into an extremist country" and "a party that pretends to respect the rights of non-Muslims". Also, the religious authorities, UMNO, and Islamic NGOs are called "religious police," "robbing non-Muslims of their choice," "Islamists," "practising Arab culture, its ideology, and factionalism," "practising a narrow view of Islam," "jihadis," "religious extremists," and "conservative groups".

In addition, Nadeswaran (2017) implicitly tried to associate Muslims in Malaysia with incestuous crimes. Nadeswaran stated that PAS members who protested against the alcohol festival should give more focus to the problem of incestuous crimes that were happening in their own community instead while providing relevant statistics for the period between 2014-2016. Nadeswaran was believed to be linking incestuous crimes with the Malay Muslim community when he stated that PAS politicians who protested against the alcohol festival "should be looking at the pious types who don't drink beer, who say their daily prayers, and prey on their daughters". The phrases used by Nadeswaran clearly indicate that he was addressing this comment to Malay Muslims, who are known not to consume alcohol and who worship on a daily basis by having to pray five times a day. Nadeswaran also used the pronoun "we" to refer to the non-Muslims and "them" to refer to the Muslim Malays who committed the incestuous crimes when he cynically stated, "They, not us, have a '*pesta maksiat*' over months, sometimes years. The court records attest to this".

b. Criticising the BN government, especially the role of MCA and UMNO in the cancellation of the alcohol festival.

Malaysiakini also harshly condemned BN, particularly UMNO, for their role in the cancellation of the alcohol festival. UMNO was lambasted for allegedly supporting extreme actions by PAS and Islamic NGOs that were strongly opposed to the alcohol festival, leading to its cancellation. Meanwhile, MCA was accused of failing to fight for the rights and freedom of non-Muslims in Malaysia, particularly the Chinese community. BN was labelled as "doing nothing and refusing to stand up to the bullying of the non-Muslim community", "treating the people like children or fools", "using a divide and conquer strategy against Malaysians", "providing legitimacy to acts of terrorism", "making irregular and shameful decisions" and "submitting to the threat of Islamic violence against non-Muslims in Malaysia".

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In the context of this study, The Star can be considered as being "careful" in reporting on this issue and it avoided criticising the authorities. Everyone knows that The Star is owned by MCA, which is one of BN's coalition parties, therefore it is safe to assume that they do not want to overly criticise UMNO in the context of this study. The Star was perceived as attempting to maintain good relations among coalition parties, despite the fact that its opinions did appear, in certain pieces, to be tacitly criticising the government's actions (Mustafa, 2003). Although The Star attempted to deliver critical reporting for its readers in some circumstances, it was nonetheless done in an appropriate manner to demonstrate that the government did allow the practice of democracy in this country (Hilley, 2008). The findings of this study also support what academics in the field of political economics (Golding & Murdock, 2000) have stated,

that the power dynamics involved in creating and disseminating media content will influence how it is discussed and presented in the media. On the other hand, Malaysiakini presented a different style of reporting when it dared to challenge the authorities' decisions and criticise the Islamization that was taking place as well as the version of Islam that was being practised in Malaysia. Malaysiakini can be considered as providing "controversial" news that questions the dominance of the elites and the government as part of its efforts to promote good democracy among the people. Furthermore, by offering a platform for widespread public debate, Malaysiakini has become a site that can serve as an outlet for people who feel repressed. As a result, Malaysiakini writers frequently adopt the theme of "we vs them." Unfortunately, this has caused the numerous phrases used against Malay Muslims to appear pejorative, painting an unfavourable picture of Islam within the non-Muslim community. Such reporting is also one of the reasons Malaysiakini is now frequently accused of being anti-Islamic and anti-Malay in its reporting (Muhammad Raqib & Qasem, 2020).

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