

# The Impact of Popular Culture on Socio-Cultural Identities of Malaysians: A Qualitative Analysis

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*Abstract:* - This study of the impact of popular culture allows a closer look at how it builds the construction of socio-cultural identities. Taking a qualitative analysis perspective, this article analyzes textual data from a case study involving Malays residing in north of Malaysia. The participants are accustomed to, cultured, and identified as frequent-goers of Malay dramas. The research reveals contesting ideologies on Islam, family traditions, and clothes. These are factored in by suspenseful storyline, themes of struggles, hardships, and relationships, and the popularity of actors/actresses. The outcomes of the research involve suggestions on an exhaustive research examining unconscious characterization and emotional elements of popular culture on the construction of socio-cultural identities among Malaysians, and how these may have pedagogical implications in the teaching of literature in Malaysia.

*Key-Words:* - Fiction, popular culture, socio-cultural identity

## 1 Introduction

Exhibit A: A common portrait of family in Malaysia, showing the intimacy among family members. Exhibit B: a long-running Malaysian broadcast of drama in which a man, who, advocating many of the family beliefs and customs typical of those who resist monogamy or women's voice, loses his family, his wife to a wish for a brighter future and eventually dies of an accident. Which of these can we anticipate a greater impact and what are the possible explanations? They are, to a large extent, profound messages to the construction of identity. The first approach is directly persuasive in nature. Whereas the second involves a dramatic story from which many socio-cultural lessons may be consciously drawn upon and learned.

This paper explores the impact of Exhibit B (Malay dramas) on socio-cultural identities in a conscious manner that influences attitude and behaviors of Malays. This issue is important from theoretical as well as from the perspective of practice. In Malaysia, popular culture emphasizes the ordinary and deconstructs meaning of culture itself, calling for a study on conscious and unconscious characterization on identities [1]. This process can also be seen easily from the development of narrative techniques well-sought

after in the field of social development in order to shape attitude and behaviors. By using these techniques, the effects have bridged the popular culture to the construction identities of the "fans."

Besides uncovering the impact of Malay dramas on the construction of socio-cultural identities among Malaysians, the findings of this analysis will also provide learning evidence of the mechanisms underlying possible incidental reception of Malay dramas. The paper begins by giving an overview of current pop culture, at the time when Malaysia is fascinated by the realms of dramas, before moving on to the methodology and analysis sections. Outcomes of the study and suggestions will also be discussed.

## 2 Popular Culture in Malaysia- A General Ideological Picture

The images of popular culture, where local artists and industries are directly involved are not met with fewer reservations. The industries of novel and books, for example, have led to the distinction between high culture and the culture of the elites from the culture of the commoners. Usually, high culture is characteristic of exquisite taste of art, sophisticated language, dance, and music. But popular culture in Malaysia does not incline towards

anything fancy or sophisticated. This is probably because more popular culture sheds light on the overt impact that can be seen in everything that they do. This phenomenon has given rise to solid foundation of identity construction from which no society is immune [1-3].

Malay dramas grace the Malaysian society that encompasses largely of Malay viewers. "Cerekarama" which is native to Malays has emerged as the top-ranked drama slot with more than 1.95 viewers, accumulating 35.3% share of viewership across Media Prima Flagship, indicating a wide reception of dramas [4]. These dramas equate to soap operas which are highly received in the United States. Despite the popular reception of dramas in Malaysia, research on the impact and underlying mechanisms of how these are well-received remains relatively scarce.

Therefore, this paper taps onto this gap by conducting a case study involving a focus group. The following sections attempt to highlight the research methodology involved, followed by analysis of the findings of a case study involving one of the focus groups. Finally, considerations on valuable questions and future work will be presented.

### 3 Research Methods

The case study involves the following research questions: (1) What is the frequency of viewers watching Malay dramas? (2) What are the impacts of Malay dramas on their socio-cultural identities? (3) What are the guiding factors involved in loyal viewership?

Four people, whose age ranged from 18 to 35, were interviewed. While we assume that certain demographic characteristics such as socio-economic backgrounds are central determinants of socio-cultural identities, sample limitations in the present study did not allow examinations of such correlations. Four of the respondents are students studying at a local community college, two of which are married. Two of these are studying in order to complete their first professional certifications, while the remaining two-married students are studying as part of the pension requirement of the military forces. It is important to include a broad spectrum of background among Malay viewers for this analysis because it provides platform for experiences to be shared and opinions to be expressed. In reporting this section, names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Relatively broad questions were designed to identify initial focus of participants on impact of

Malay dramas to explore issues central to the construction of socio-cultural identity and how these dramas keep their viewers loyal. A total of seven questions had been developed and peer-checked into three sections- (1) frequencies of Malay drama viewers, (2) impact of Malay dramas on the construction of their identities, (3) the nature of persuasive dramas to keep their viewers loyal.

The study employs semi-structured interviews, as it is important to ensure sensitivity to the language of the participants and how they adjust to the topic of the research [5]. By employing purposive sampling, the research could identify appropriate participants and maximize the representation of a range of perspectives because not all Malaysians watch dramas and similarly, not all Malays watch Malay dramas themselves. The focus groups interview lasted over twenty minutes, by going through the list of questions in a flexible fashion. The flexibility takes control of the uniqueness of the specific case and the emergence of new theory [6]. Phenomenological analytic techniques were used to explore the impact of Malay dramas on participants' socio-cultural identities. These meaning-focused analytic techniques allow for the understanding on the subjective meaning and situations of the participants [5].

### 4 Frequency of Malay Drama Viewership

Table 1 shows the summary of interviewee's drama viewership. Participants consisted of two females and males. They have experiences of watching Malay dramas on a regular basis. Most respondents would watch two to three dramas per week, while some were loyal by watching two to three dramas per day. A majority of the interviewees would take a minimum of thirty minutes to watch a Malay drama, while the rest invested one and two hours for a specific Malay drama.

Table 1 Frequency of Malay drama viewership

Interviewee	Age	Quantities of Malay dramas watched	Frequencies of Malay dramas watched	Time spent for each drama
Farah	20	2 to 3	per day	sixty minutes
Zaki	32	2 to 3	per week	thirty minutes one
Fauziah	19	2 to 3	per day	hundred twenty minutes
Roslan	35	2 to 3	per week	thirty minutes

## 5 Impact of Malay Dramas on Socio-Cultural Identities

### 5.1 Competing ideologies on Islam

One of the central impacts of Malay dramas is narrated from the viewpoint of ideologies on religion. Every religion indicates overt statements on how religion is closely associated in defining oneself. In Malaysia, religions can be indicated by how individuals represent themselves, either physically or through their principles. According to Roslan, Muslims who usually wear “kopiah” or widely known as Moroccan fez are mostly recognized as innocent and un sinful individuals. However, this ideology is misleading in typical Malay dramas where they are represented as individuals who dismiss their families in order to gain submissions from God. Previously, in one of the scenes in “Adam & Hawa,” “Am,” the family character with a “kopiah” was blamed for leaving behind his wife, “Ain” for mass pilgrimage (the Hajj). Roslan’s responses to the scene could be found below:

*Hurm, if a (pak aji) religious man that we are talking to is usually the innocent one; some dramas show that he is sinful and not kind. On the other hand, those who do not put on “kopiah” are un sinful; better than the religious man. Therefore, in the plot, they drop the man and advocate that the religious man is guilty, promoting that non-kopiah worn individuals are kind. So, they tend to show the opposite of what we understand on religion.*

Roslan’s awareness of putting on “kopiah” and the associations the people make of these religious

men becomes one of the guiding factors in the formation of his socio-cultural identity. However, this understanding is contrasted to the meanings and beliefs portrayed across popular dramas as the interpretation is misleading. This dilemma on conception of Islam in Malay dramas is difficult due to “...conformity to a political party, agenda and the official range of expressions of Malayness” [7]. By watching Malay dramas, one could be aware of the contested ideas of religion because what is traditionally accepted as background knowledge is not always demonstrated in the popular mainstream.

### 5.2 Family traditions

Families would be the first entity to which most Malays learn their roles. Apart from the fact that the interviewees understood that families consisted of parents, they also learned that roles are constructed differently today than they were in the past. In the olden days, women tended to stay home, submissively receiving instructions from men who were frequently known to the society as the breadwinner. In response to a Malay drama, “Julia,” Fauziah’s comments below illustrate an example:

*Most women used to stay at home; now that time has changed, they work, as seen on TV. Most unfortunately, dramas show freedom among teens in that they can go out anytime and build casual relationships with whoever they meet. Viewers tend to follow this act and think that this act of women is acceptable in Malay culture. It is as if Malay dramas allow women to do whatever they want.*

Fauziah was aware of the pre-established ideology that dictates women’s behavior, but according to her understanding, women are bound by expected behavior in that there are limitations to going out and forming relationships. This is probably because “They (women) did not express any desire to challenge male authority...” [8]. Next, Fauziah further argues that narratives in Malay dramas are in opposition to what she believes in, stating that there are boundaries to freedom and family ties. It, thus, can be assumed that there are expectations that need to be met by women and Malay dramas have brought a new horizon in the interviewees’ background knowledge.

### 5.3 Clothes

The image of Malays is profoundly entrenched in the notions of clothes. In fact, most Asian cultures highly value the importance of clothes as they are instrumental in accentuating one’s socio-cultural

identity. In this focus group interview, a majority of them expressed concerns over the changes of what they know and what they see on Malay dramas. Farra has this to say on what she observed among modern women in “Julia:”

*Their culture in dramas is different because their clothes are revealing. Therefore, this is not good for our culture to imitate. There are some we cannot follow, so we must have some rational bases in thinking about our ways of clothing.*

This comparative observation and understanding on the values placed on clothes have formed part of their socio-cultural interaction with the world. They use clothes that are pleasing to their eyes to project themselves, the ways in which they want to present to the community, and the kinds of culture they like to be identified with. This transactional relationship they have with the world represents the territory they have drawn and emblazoned. In turn, clothes are part of the construction of their socio-cultural identity.

## 6 Guiding Factors in Loyal Viewership

### 6.1 Suspenseful storyline

Asked for their thoughts on what guided them to indulge in Malay dramas, the interviewees were generally concerned. Three factors surfaced. The most frequent and repeated argument was that because of the storyline of the Malay dramas, they were free to stay as long as they wish. According to Roslan, Fara, and Zaki on the general comments on “Adam & Hawa,” if the storyline did not portray gripping, heart wrenching, and suspenseful plot, they were less likely to watch them. On this note also, they recognized the differences between the popularity of Malay dramas from the majority of English ones. By watching these dramas through their dramatic storyline, Malay dramas are grappled with concerns over their ritual daily lives that includes hardships, struggles, and relationships.

### 6.2 Themes of struggles, hardship, and relationship

A second common explanation for the wide reception of Malay dramas had to do with the themes of dramas- hardship, struggles, and relationship. Fauziah, for instance, could watch two to three hours if she watched teary-eyed kind of dramas. Fauziah said, “If Malay dramas involve

struggles, romance and family, I would watch them.” Indeed, these dramas add variety to their day-to-day living, reflecting upon their self as Malay because these dramas employ themes surrounding what they know, understand, and apply in their belief systems. This is in support to what Roslan had to say on the general guidelines his acquaintance used in order to write Malay drama scripts, “The guideline for the screening of the Malay dramas to be on TV should not go beyond the image of the extremes, for instance, portrayal of not too big of a house and not too poor of a needy can be exposed. Unfortunately, this is in contrast to what the varieties of lifestyle found in Malaysia.” Thus, it can be deduced that the comparative landscape of Malay-ness is contrasted to what is shown in popular Malay dramas, introducing new flavors in the socio-cultural environment.

### 6.3 Actors and actresses

The third guiding factor involves the presence of actors and actresses. For Zaki and Roslan, famous actors and actresses in Malaysia- Fasha Sandha, Ikram Dinzly, and Aaron Aziz were some of the cast he frequented and looked for; in the case of their absences, they would not invest their time watching them. This is important on the premise that they know who can and cannot perform their roles effectively. This is not surprising because most of the premise revolve around the notion of day-to-day transactions and require excellent delivery of roles. Who better perform these other than the popular actors and actresses? These roles of the actor/actresses depict, reflect, and project their images in handling issues in their daily lives and to this extent, have shaped who they are living in a Malay community in Malaysia.

## 7 Conclusions

Relating to the questions posed at the beginning of the study, exhibit B reveals the complexities behind the construction of socio-cultural identity in popular culture in Malaysia. Although these complexities have strongly been introduced in our society, our understanding of it is not as profound nor as deep as it should be. So far, this study has shown that Malay dramas’ reception has informed contesting ideologies on Islam, family traditions, and clothes. To account for these impacts, the popularity of these dramas can be discussed in terms of suspenseful storyline, themes of struggles, hardships, and relationships, and the popularity of actors/ actresses.

The findings makes evident that popular culture has played an important factor in shaping people's attitudes, behaviors, and interpretations [9].

The present study was designed to understand the impact of Malay dramas and the guiding factors surrounding their wide reception through a case study. Thus, this research could help build a theory as case study research can be considered as one of the possible approaches in the initial stages of research [6]. In particular, because this focus group interview deals with Malays in the north of Malaysia, it indicates that the generalization of findings should only be limited to this group of Malays. Therefore, extensive research should also be conducted in other regions across the country to understand the wave of Malay dramas thoroughly.

At present, we are, in our view, confronted with two important tasks; the first is to build a theory on the unconscious formation of socio-cultural identity through Malay dramas and the second is to develop a parallel understanding on whether storyline, themes of hardships, struggles, and relationships and presence of actors or actresses influence this impact. Both lines of understandings are integral, not just to describing this popular culture phenomenon but more importantly, to establishing a concrete basis for the study of the relationship between socio-cultural identity and popular culture in postcolonial societies.

What are the pedagogical implications of this research into audience response? By integrating this methodology into the teaching of literature that involves pop culture and audience reaction, students are exposed to different ways in which people respond to texts, and what their responses reveal of their world views. This method of deriving certain conclusions about norms and beliefs will facilitate in enhancing students skills in making critical analysis of texts.

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