



Framing faith: Analysing the influences on Malaysian media coverage of religious conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Due to its deeply held beliefs, cultural relevance and potential for conflict, religion frequently plays a delicate role in a plural country like Malaysia. Differences in religious practices, beliefs, and values can cause conflicts and make it difficult to maintain peace and harmony in a society where many different religions coexist. Using Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model, this study investigated how religious conflicts are covered in Malaysian media. Religious conflicts are frequently and widely covered in Malaysia's diverse society, which is a reflection of the complicated relationship between the impacts of journalistic practices. The model, which comprises of levels: individual, organisational, extra-media, ideological, and societal, offers a comprehensive framework in influencing the contents of news coverage. Using in-depth interviews with 10 journalists and editors from *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star*, this study adopted a qualitative methodology through a thematic analysis from the levels of influences. Findings show that reporting decisions made by journalists are influenced by personal variables, such as their conventions and views. Coverage is also shaped by organisational variables such as editorial guidelines and resource limitations, outside factors, including government regulations and societal expectations which add pressure to the reporting. The way conflicts are portrayed is influenced by political and religious views. The framing is also influenced by societal elements like historical background and popular opinion. By understanding these influences through a thematic analysis, the study hopes to provide insights into media portrayals, ethics, and interreligious interactions in multicultural communities, thereby fostering informed discussions on conflict resolution.

Keywords: *Hierarchy of influences, religious conflicts, Malaysian media, journalistic practices, framing*

INTRODUCTION

Religion, with the nature of different beliefs, cultural significance, and continuous potential for conflict, holds a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of a society, particularly a plural society like Malaysia. Religion is a central facet of the Malaysian identity, influencing not only personal beliefs, but also societal norms and values. Malaysia is home to a multitude of faiths including Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and various indigenous beliefs, which coexist within a complex social structure. This diversity has the potential to stimulate meaningful interfaith discussion and advance respect and understanding (Zainal Adnan & Abdul Rahman, 2023). However, it could also result in miscommunications and conflicts, especially when different views collide. Because there is a greater chance of conflict in a pluralistic society, it is significantly important to carefully navigate these differences. According to Senin et al., (2024), five factors found contributing to religious sensitivity issues include misunderstandings of other religions, social media manipulation, emotional approaches, the attitude of non-Muslims towards Muslims' rights, and a demeaning attitude towards various religions.

In such a diverse society where various religions coexist, disparities in religious beliefs, practices, and values often emerge as a challenge in maintaining its peace and harmony (Ashaari & Khushairi, 2019; Tan, 2012). Although the government has made efforts to promote interfaith harmony through programs and dialogues, yet incidents of religious conflict still surface, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to foster understanding and cooperation among different faith communities (Mazhisham et al., 2019). Given the vital role of religion and culture as an indicator of a united society, it is significant to look at how the Malaysian media, particularly newspapers, report on religious conflicts.

The media, playing an important role in disseminating information and opinion, is considered powerful in shaping public perception and understanding of religious conflicts. Research has shown that media framing can significantly influence audience attitudes toward different religious groups (Entman, 1993). For example, in one Malaysian case where religious sensitivities were emphasised, media portrayals could contribute to even worse implications. For example, sensationalised reporting about religious disputes could intensify polarisation, but fair coverage can encourage communication and peace making (Bennet & Entman, 2001).

However, past research has shown that reliability is now regarded as a competition between the traditional and new media, but the popularity of social media has worsened the situation and thus, need to be controlled to prevent altercations in any plural society (Alivi et al., 2018). A recent report, *Information Ecosystem Assessment Malaysia* (2020) found that 66% of respondents (news actors and Malaysian citizens) cited social media as their primary source when looking for information (Wan Alkamar Shah & Mohamad Rosli, 2020).

It is a matter of fact that reporting such conflicts is not an easy process but rather, it is influenced by a number of factors from various levels of a society. Although the media could be the mediator in fostering mutual understanding in the society, the primary barrier to adopting mediation is the involvement of aggravating external forces (Abdul Rahman & Ishak, 2022). The Hierarchy of Influences Model founded by Shoemaker and Reese provides a comprehensive framework in understanding these multilevel

influences, which include individual, organisational, extra-media, ideological, and societal dimensions. According to Reese (2019), the Hierarchy of Influences Model describes the factors affecting media content organised by levels of analysis.

Essentially, there is a need to study how religious conflicts are reported due to the complex interplay between religion, media, and the society in Malaysia. The findings of this study will add to the current debate concerning media ethics and the function of journalism in promoting religious harmony. In this way, people can better appreciate the power of media in shaping societal narratives and, ultimately, in promoting peace and harmony in a diverse society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of religion in the Malaysian society

The social, cultural, and political climate of Malaysia is significantly influenced by religion in a variety of ways. With Islam as the official religion and significant followings of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and indigenous beliefs, Malaysia is a country distinguished by its ethnic and religious variety (Abdul Rahman & Muhamad Shah, 2020). As such, religion has a significant impact on many facets of the Malaysian society. Islam is an integral part of the ethnic identity of the majority Malay people, in addition to being their religion.

Furthermore, religious institutions frequently act as the social services, educational, and support centres of their communities. Senin et al. (2024), through their findings, contended that efforts should be taken to foster ethical interactions in order to enhance mutual understanding and empathy among diverse religious communities. Churches, mosques, and temple serve as venues for community meetings and promote social solidarity among participants. These organisations play a critical role in advancing noble activities that augment the welfare of a society, such as food distribution and medical care (Adji, 2021).

Additionally, religion has a big impact on Malaysian politics. To gain support, political parties frequently ally with religious principles. For example, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) presents itself as a guardian of Islamic principles and pushes for the application of Syariah law (Sabtu et al., 2021). Communities may become more divided as a result of this alignment since religious feelings are regularly brought up in political debate and elections, which influence governance and policy decisions (Lee, 2019). Malaysia's religious diversity offers opportunities for interfaith communication, but it also creates difficulties. Differing religious practices and views can give rise to tensions, especially when it comes to legal rights, public policy, and education (Muthaliff, 2019).

Malaysia has experienced various religious conflicts that show the complications of interfaith relations in a plural society. For example, in the Allah word issue, a Malaysian court's 2009 decision allowing the Catholic Church to allude to God in its publications using the term 'Allah' created a continuous legal controversy (Ahmad Sabri, 2021). Widespread demonstrations against this decision took place, and Muslim organisations retaliated, claiming the phrase was exclusive to only Muslims (Neo, 2014).

In another case, a joint cemetery in Selangor where Muslims and Christians desired to bury their dead, became the source of dispute in 2017. Arguments concerning funeral privileges and cemetery administration brought to light the difficulties of sharing spaces

and the necessity of communication amongst religious groups (Sulaiman & Mohamad Daud, 2014). These cases could have easily been sensationalised by the media for the sake of profit gaining, although for some media organisations, they understand their role perfectly well. For example, Yong and Ahmad Ishak (2010) found that *Sin Chew Daily* reported sympathetically towards Lina Joy in her apostasy case, but at the same time, was critical of the court's decision. Irrespective of being right or wrong, the reporting itself could be construed differently in the eyes of the different religious or ethnic communities of the Malaysian society.

As Islam is the official religion of the Federation of Malaya, *Syariah* law has also become a focal point of contention, reflecting the complexities of balancing Islamic principles with the rights of non-Muslims in the country. Operating under a dual legal system where both civil law and *Syariah* law coexist, this duality however often leads to tensions, especially relating to issues of personal status, morality, and freedom of religion. Debates over the enforcement of Islamic laws, especially on moral issues, have raised questions about religious freedom and minority rights time after time (Shah & Mohd, 2010).

In short, religion plays a significant role in shaping Malaysian politics, judicial systems, communal life, and cultural identity. The intricacies of managing a pluralistic society demand constant communication and understanding, even as it has the ability to promote social cohesion and mutual respect. As Malaysia develops further, a significant role in determining its destiny, calls for a well-rounded strategy that upholds the rights and religious convictions of all segments of the population.

Impact of media representations

Particularly in a multicultural and pluralistic nation like Malaysia, the media is extremely influential in determining how the general public views religious matters. The way that religious conflicts are portrayed in the media has the potential to either increase tensions or promote mutual understanding across various faiths. In other words, the way these topics are presented has a huge impact on how viewers feel about different religious communities, which makes media coverage an effective weapon in forming societal narratives (Govindaraju & Muniandy, 2023).

Previous studies have shown that media framing is capable of influencing audience perception and response to religious issues. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient, thereby influencing public perception and reaction. The stakes of media representation are particularly high in Malaysia, a country with unusually high religious sensitivity. The use of sensationalised language and selective narrative in the reporting of religious conflicts can exacerbate polarisation within and between religious communities. According to Zainal Adnan and Abdul Rahman (2023), this type of coverage frequently amplifies pre-existing anxieties and misunderstandings, fostering an atmosphere that encourages mistrust and hostility. In fact, another study found that media representations also contribute to mental health stigma (Chen, 2021), underscoring media's power in influencing people's perception and response.

According to Chang and Kho (2017), media coverage too can play a pivotal role in promoting dialogue and reconciliation. They stated that after the May 13, 1969 bloody riot, media has become one of the machineries used as a tool in nation building and

integration of the society. Media sources can help in bridging gaps and promoting mutual understanding when they handle religious disagreements sensitively, with an emphasis on common values. By offering background information, emphasising points of agreement, and presenting positive interfaith projects, responsible media coverage could help in the resolution of conflicts (Bennet & Entman, 2001). With the potentiality of religious strife in Malaysia, it is critical that the media is responsible in reporting with integrity and accurately.

In summary, the media's portrayal of religious issues has a significant influence in Malaysia. The way religious or racial disagreements are reported has the power to either widen societal gaps or foster mutual understanding and cooperation (Elsheikh et al., 2024). Although the media landscape continues to change, especially with the emergence of digital platforms, it is still essential for media organisations and the practitioners to report honestly and sensitively in order to maintain peace and harmony in the country.

Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model

In a diversified country like Malaysia, it is crucial to comprehend the nuances of media coverage, especially when it comes to delicate subjects like religious disputes. The Hierarchy of Influences Model by Reese and Shoemaker (2016) is one theoretical framework that provided a thorough lens for this study. According to this concept, news content is influenced by a wide range of factors that function at different levels and can be divided into five different but related layers: societal, extra-media, organisational, ideological, and individual (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Similar to a study by Elsheikh et al. (2024) that focused only on the social system level, this study aims to understand how societal pressures, organisational regulations, and individual attitudes interact to shape reporting practices through in-depth interviews with editors and journalists from two of Malaysia's leading newspapers, *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia*.

Individuals, who represent journalists' and editors' own opinions, experiences, and prejudices, have a big influence on their individual reporting choices. Individual viewpoints can influence how religious conflicts are framed in complex ways in a pluralistic society where religious practices and beliefs differ greatly. Thus, analysing coverage that could either increase tensions or foster understanding amongst varied populations requires an understanding of how these individual elements affect journalistic practices.

The institutional policies and practices of media organisations are the main focus at the organisational level. The selection and presentation of stories are significantly influenced by business culture, resource availability, and editorial rules (Elsheikh et al., 2024). For example, a more liberal newspaper like *The Star* may view religious disputes differently from a newspaper like *Utusan Malaysia*, which is strongly connected with Malay and Islamic perspectives. Understanding this organisational background is crucial to comprehending the editing decisions that affect how religious problems are portrayed.

Additionally, external pressures from government regulations, societal norms, and the political environment are examples of extra-media influences. In Malaysia, the government's position on religious matters can have a big impact on media coverage, and journalists frequently work in a setting where adherence to the law and social norms is crucial to avoid detrimental repercussions. This degree of influence can result in self-censorship, where journalists choose not to report on certain aspects of religious conflicts, in order to comply with government expectations or to preserve social harmony.

At the ideological level, media narratives are shaped by the larger cultural and religious ideals that pervade society. These ideologies have the power to shape how the public views and frames disputes (Elsheikh et al., 2024). For instance, how religious minorities are portrayed in the media may be a reflection of the attitudes that are prevalent in society, which may have an affect on public discourse and interreligious interactions.

Last but not least, the societal level takes into account the cultural and historical background of the media. Malaysia's media environment is influenced by its multicultural composition, colonial heritage, and current sociopolitical dynamics. Researchers can learn more about how media coverage is influenced by societal tensions and historical grievances by placing religious conflicts within this larger framework.

This study attempts to clarify the intricate interactions between variables that influence how religious conflicts are covered in Malaysian media by utilising Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model. In short, this method offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending how religious disputes are portrayed in the media, which helps to guide conversations about ethics, interreligious relations, and how to resolve problems in multicultural societies.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative methodology centred on in-depth interviews with 10 media practitioners including journalists and editors from two prominent newspapers: *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star*. The opinions and interests of the Malay Muslim community are normally reflected in *Utusan Malaysia*, which is renowned for its close adherence to Malay and Islamic viewpoints (Mohd Sofian, 2014). This makes it an important resource for learning how this group frames religious concerns. On the other hand, *The Star* is seen as a more liberal news source that seeks to serve a wider range of readers, including those from different racial and religious backgrounds (Mohd Sofian, 2014; Yang & Leong, 2016).

Because of this diversity, it is possible to compare the ways in which various editorial philosophies and target audiences affect how religious conflicts are covered. The coverage in both newspapers influences public opinion and discourse around religious issues. By studying their reporting, the research aims to uncover how media portrayals can either bridge gaps or widen divisions between different communities, thus fostering informed discussions on conflict resolution. Using Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model as the theoretical framework, this approach seeks to reveal complex dynamics of media portrayal in the context of religious conflicts.

To gain a deeper understanding of these dynamics, qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews with journalists, could provide valuable insights. More complex elements that influence media coverage of religious conflicts could be ascertained by looking at the viewpoints of individuals who work directly in the field of journalism. This method not only deepens the understanding of media practices, but also brings to light, the moral dilemma that journalists encounter while covering sensitive issues in a multicultural society (Deuze, 2005).

The respondents for this study were selected based on their professional experience and involvement in reporting on religious issues. A purposive sampling technique was

used, encompassing not only journalists who cover religious issues directly, but also editors who formulate the editorial decisions. Interviews were conducted between March and April 2024, with five respondents from *Utusan Malaysia*, which is renowned for portraying Malay and Islamic perspectives, and another five from *The Star*, which is acknowledged for taking a more inclusive, multicultural approach. According to Van Dijk (2015), a smaller sample size, such as 10 respondents, is often sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, where no new themes emerge from additional interviews.

To gain comprehensive insights into the experiences, perspectives, and behaviours of the respondents when reporting about religious conflicts, in-depth interviews were carried out (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The interviews were semi-structured, using both guided questions and open-ended discussions and each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes on average. Respondents were able to openly express their opinions as their identity were made anonymous while ensuring that key themes related to media representation and religious issues were addressed.

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis. In order to find reoccurring themes and patterns regarding how religious conflicts are portrayed in the media, this approach involves transcribing the interviews and coding the transcripts. The aim of the analysis was to obtain insights into how editors and journalists view their duties in covering delicate religious subjects and the moral dilemmas they face on the job. This is intended to enhance the conversation about media ethics while also promoting a more nuanced discussion about interfaith relations in a multicultural setting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Individuals (Journalists)

The first layer (smallest circle) of Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model focuses on individuals, or in this case, the journalists and media practitioners, illustrating how personal experience and characteristics shape editorial decisions in the context of reporting on sensitive religious issues. This layer comprises several key themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with the journalists and editors from *Utusan Malaysia* (UM) and *The Star* (TS): (1) editor's decision, (2) sense of belonging, (3) characteristics (personal and professional), (4) sensitive issues, and (5) gatekeeper.

Firstly, the impact of editorial decision on how religious conflicts are framed was one of the most important findings. According to respondents UM1, UM2, TS1, TS2 and TS3, "*as gatekeepers, editors are essential in selecting which stories are published and how they are presented*". They emphasised that editorial rules frequently mirror the goals and values of the organisation as a whole, affecting the choice of subjects and the style of reporting. As the society relies heavily on contents produced by the credible media (Jalli, 2020), the gatekeeping role emphasises the collaborative nature of news production by having the ability to either magnify or lessen biases inherent in the viewpoint of the individual journalist.

Secondly, the interviews revealed that a sense of belonging among journalists significantly impacts their reporting practices. The majority of respondents conveyed a strong sense of identification with their individual media organisations, which influences how they shape their approach to sensitive topics. According to UM3 and TS2:

We journalists will match our reporting with the organisation's principles as a result of this sense of belonging, which could strengthen our commitment to those beliefs.

For example, the editors of *Utusan Malaysia* framed religious problems and made editorial decisions based on their sense of duty to reflect Malay and Islamic perspectives.

Thirdly, the findings show that a journalist's personal and professional traits significantly influence the way they report. The respondents shared how their experiences in the workplace, ethnic identities, and religious affiliations influence the way they perceive religious disputes. UM3, UM5, and TS5 stated that reporters who strongly connected with a specific religion or group also tend to be more aware of the consequences of their work when doing their reporting. On the other hand, a few individuals mentioned that their training as professionals pushed them to take a more objective position, going against their personal convictions for the sake of fair reporting.

The next theme is sensitive issues. The respondents recognised the difficulties in covering religious issues and emphasised the importance of caution and sensitivity. For example, UM1, UM5, TS2, TS4, and TS5 expressed their concerns about the possible consequences of their reporting, such as criticism from the public and accusations of bias. TS5 stated, "*This understanding frequently resulted in us, journalists, to practice self-censoring, either by avoiding some topics or framing them in a way that minimises controversy*". A recurrent theme in the interviews was the conflict between the need to inform the public and the need to avoid escalating tensions.

Finally, the role of journalists as gatekeepers was emphasised throughout the interviews. The ethical obligations that come with this position were discussed by the respondents, especially when it came to reporting on stories that can cause social tensions. For example, UM2 and T34 realised that the way they framed stories, chose their sources, and presented facts could have a huge impact on how the public perceived different religious groups. Many were motivated to work towards more inclusive and fair reporting because they recognised their gatekeeping function, even though the demands of their different editing settings occasionally made this difficult.

Organisational

In exploring the second layer of Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model, which focuses on media routines, several critical findings emerged that illustrate how organisational practices and routines shape the reporting of religious conflicts in Malaysia. Journalists' reporting techniques are greatly influenced by their day-to-day practical routines. These procedures control how journalists manage deadlines, prioritise stories, and spend their time, which ultimately affects the breadth and calibre of coverage. The respondents observed that the demands of the daily news cycles frequently result in a dependence on well-known sources and storylines. UM1 and TS2 contended that these demands might impede the investigation of more complex viewpoints on delicate religious matters and reinforce pre-existing biases.

Journalists usually work within their networks of colleagues and sources, which may impact the story angles and support dominant narratives. Because of the interdependence among them, some points of view could have predominated while others are stereotyped. The social dynamics in newsrooms may also sometimes have a huge

influence on who is heard and how stories are presented, as Shoemaker and Reese (1996) pointed out especially when it comes to sensitive religious topics.

Ownership interests further complicate the landscape of media routines. The editorial policies and content selection processes of media organisations can be influenced by their political and economic affiliations. UM3, UM4, TS1, and TS4 agreed that, particularly when it comes to religious issues, their respective ownership structures frequently determine the narrative course of their reporting. TS4 stated:

And because media organizations may feel under pressure to match their reporting with the interests of their owners or political sponsors, this influence may result in the prioritisation of some viewpoints over others.

Within these routines, sensitive issues pertaining to religious conflicts present unique challenges. Concerns about the consequences of their reporting were also voiced by respondents, where tensions are prone to rise, especially in a multicultural society like Malaysia. This apprehension often results in self-censorship as a careful approach to story selection and narrative framing. Many respondents stated that oftentimes, they had to balance the public's right to know against the possible consequences of their reporting, which sometimes makes them reluctant to report on controversial subjects directly.

Furthermore, a crucial component of journalistic practices is the requirement for reliable sources. The significance of depending on reputable and well-established sources to give credibility to their reporting was underscored by the respondents. This dependence may unintentionally support prevailing narratives and prevent the inclusion of other points of view. Despite their best efforts to deliver a balanced story, respondents have found that their search for reliable sources frequently returns them to well-known individuals, who may not always represent the diversity of opinions within religious communities.

Extra-media factors

The impact of societal institutions and extra-media forces on media representations is examined in the Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model's fourth layer, with a focus on Malaysian religious tensions. This layer draws attention to a number of important conclusions about how outside influences affect media narratives and journalistic procedures.

It is clear that reporting on religious problems is heavily influenced by the greater trans-organisational media field at the level of social institutions. UM2, UM4, and TS5 pointed out that editorial choices and the way religious conflicts are framed can be influenced by the dynamics within this larger field, which include competition among media outlets, fluctuations in audience preferences, and changes in the regulatory environment. UM4 explained:

Because media organisations are interconnected, habits and trends in one outlet could swiftly spread throughout the industry, resulting in standardised narratives or the reinforcement of particular prejudices across platforms.

Factors originating from outside of the media institutions itself are also included in this category. Public opinion, cultural standards, and political environments are some

examples of outside influences that can put pressure on media companies to follow certain narratives or steer clear of controversial issues entirely. The respondents emphasised that they frequently feel out public sentiment when it comes to delicate religious matters, which could cause them to self-censor or report cautiously. TS3 and UM1 continued that they may be reluctant to fully engage with contentious subjects out of fear of community backlash or government sanctions, which may limit the extent of coverage and perpetuate pre-existing preconceptions.

Additionally, special interest groups also play an important role in shaping media narratives. Respondents disclosed that a range of advocacy organisations and religious groups actively work to influence media coverage of religious conflicts. UM2 and TS2 stated that these groups frequently advocate for favourable depictions of their communities while opposing unfavourable ones. These groups could mobilise public opinion and harness social media to magnify their ideas, creating further pressure on journalists to align their reporting with prevalent narratives. As a result, the impact of these special interest organisations may provide a distorted portrayal of religious matters, giving preference to some viewpoints over others.

Another noteworthy extra-media influence is revenue sources. The editorial independence and story pursuit strategies of media organisations could be influenced by the economic climate in which they function. The reliance on advertising revenue from particular sectors or interest groups, according to the respondents, might lead to conflicts of interest that affect their reporting. For instance, TS4 clarified:

Media outlets may avoid critical coverage of sponsors or stakeholders who play a vital role in their financial stability, thereby limiting full reporting on religious issues that could alienate these funding sources.

Furthermore, the media landscape has changed drastically due to technology breakthroughs, which have an impact on how religious topics are covered and understood. The advent of digital platforms and social media has led to an exponential demand for instant coverage and faster information transmission and has also changed audience interaction. Respondents noted that sensationalism frequently takes precedence over depth in online journalism due to its fast-paced nature, which could lower the standard of reporting on intricate religious matters. The change in technology also makes it more difficult to verify information since false information could travel quickly and inflame sentiments around religious conflicts (Yeoh, 2019).

Ideological

The fourth layer examines the sociocultural and ideological factors that influence media portrayal, especially when it comes to covering religious issues in Malaysia. This layer shows how journalism practices and narratives are shaped by the interaction of societal culture, identity, as well as larger political and economic systems.

One important finding is that media representations of religious issues are heavily influenced by the ideology ingrained in the Malaysian society. The way that people, organisations, and institutions interact produces a collective identity that shapes the way that religious conflicts are presented. UM1, UM2, TS1, TS3, and TS4 observed that journalists frequently work in a cultural context where acceptable narratives are

determined by societal norms and beliefs. Certain viewpoints, especially those that support the views of the majority group, may be given priority as a result of this prevailing ideology, marginalising minority voices and strengthening pre-existing prejudices (Bakali, 2019). For example, while the way religious disagreements are framed may indicate a preference for harmony and togetherness, this may obscure underlying conflicts or grievances amongst various religious communities.

Moreover, the political and economic systems that influence cultural dynamics are also included in the sociocultural context. Respondents emphasised that the way religious conflicts are portrayed in the media is greatly influenced by Malaysia's political environment. According to Ismail (2019), there appears to be a growing trend in the Malaysian society for provocative and rhetorical statements associated with radical religions. Religion-related laws and regulations frequently foster a cautious environment for journalists, who may worry about the consequences of covering sensitive subjects. TS5 shared:

Journalists may self-censor as a result of this pressure, avoiding topics that could spark political controversy or contradict popular belief systems.

Because of this, political environments have the power to severely limit journalistic independence and control the stories that are reported in the media.

An additional factor contributing to these ideological impacts is the economic frameworks in which media organisations function. UM5, TS3 and TS4 conveyed that editorial priorities can be influenced by financial dependencies, specifically those pertaining to government assistance and advertising revenue. Religious topics may be portrayed unfairly by media outlets as a result of their pressure to match their reporting with the interests of their stakeholders. This relationship underscores how ideological frameworks and economic factors interact and shape the way religious conflicts are portrayed and the range of perspectives that are communicated.

Furthermore, the media's ability to address religious issues is complicated by the multicultural society of Malaysia and its ideological foundations. The difficulty of striking a balance between the depiction of various points of view and the realities of societal differences was underlined by the respondents. Because religious and ethnic identities are often entwined, it can be challenging for journalists to report on conflicts without escalating the already tense situations. This intricacy underscores the importance of placing media reporting in a larger sociocultural framework since it has a direct impact on the framing of stories and the elevation of particular voices.

Societal-level

Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influence Model's fifth or last layer, which focuses on societal-level effects, emphasises how important larger social structures and cultural beliefs are in shaping the portrayal of religious conflicts in Malaysian media. This layer shows how journalistic practices and media narratives are shaped by the interaction of political frameworks, economical systems, and society norms.

One important conclusion that emerged was the way religious conflicts are presented in media coverage in Malaysia is significantly influenced by societal ideology. Respondents believed that a collective identity that shapes societal interactions is influenced

by the complex ties among individuals, organisations, and institutions. UM1, UM3, TS1, and TS4 emphasised that this collective identity, which reflects Malaysia's multicultural setting, frequently places an emphasis on harmony and coexistence. However, narratives that value unity above conflict, may lead to the underreporting of conflicts or grievances within various religious communities. According to UM1:

We are frequently influenced by these social norms, which might make them reluctant to confront controversial subjects head-on and reinforce pre-existing biases and stereotypes.

The political atmosphere is another aspect of the sociocultural milieu that has a big impact on how religious conflicts are portrayed. Respondents emphasised how laws and rules pertaining to religious expression create a cautious environment for journalists. Self-censorship may result from the pressure many feel to fit in with official narratives. Because of this political influence, the media frequently avoids questioning the status quo, which reflects larger cultural norms that value stability above critical discussion. As TS2 said, "*Because of this, reporters might be reluctant to delve into the intricacies of religious conflicts, which would limit the breadth and authenticity of their reporting.*"

The economic frameworks in which media organisations function are also very important in determining the influences on society. According to the respondents, editorial decisions might be influenced by financial reliance on government and advertising money, which can result in skewed portrayals of religious topics. The representation of religious conflicts may become even more complex if media outlets are reluctant to broadcast news that might offend important stakeholders or sponsors. The public's impression of religious communities can be shaped by this economic pressure, which has the power to marginalise alternative viewpoints and support prevailing narratives.

Furthermore, social perceptions of religious disputes are greatly influenced by the historical background of Malaysia's interreligious relations. The legacy of colonisation and the policies that followed, which have shaped modern society dynamics, were discussed by the respondents. UM3 and TS5 explained:

The narratives that surface in media coverage are influenced by the historical context, which shapes how various religious groups view and relate to one another.

In order to avoid escalating already-existing divisions, journalists frequently navigate delicate subjects with an understanding of historical tensions.

In summary, the societal-level findings show how complex historical settings, political pressures, economic systems, and collective ideologies interact to shape media portrayals of religious disputes in Malaysia. Journalists work in a complicated societal structure that values peace and stability over critical discussion of divisive topics. Fostering responsible journalism that faithfully captures the variety of stories found in Malaysian society and adds to well-informed conversations about interreligious relations and conflict resolution which requires an awareness of these cultural influences.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate the intricate interaction of factors that determine how religious conflicts are portrayed in the Malaysian media, as expressed by Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model. The relationships between individual journalists, their work routines, the organisations that house them, and the larger social systems in which they function are all deftly separated by this mode. Every layer of influence, from extra-media forces and ideological frameworks to individual prejudices and organisational procedures, adds to the total story that is presented in the media. However, Pang et al. (2014) found that the internal influences have more control on the contents compared to the external influences.

At the individual level, journalists' personal experiences and qualities profoundly affect their reporting, particularly with sensitive religious issues. The way stories are chosen and presented in media organisations is determined by social and practical norms, which frequently serve to reinforce pre-existing biases. Editorial priorities can also be shaped by additional influences brought about by the ownership arrangements of media institutions, especially when it comes to issues of ethnicity and religion. The study also demonstrated that the journalist mindset was the most pervasive factor that actually influenced the relationships among media (Pang et al., 2014).

The environment of media reporting is further complicated by extra-media factors such as economic considerations, special interest groups, and societal considerations. These factors may cause journalists to self-censor and report cautiously as they manage the possible consequences of their coverage in a politically charged environment (Abdul Latif & Oh, 2020).

The macro backdrop that eventually affects media narratives is shaped by the ideological and sociocultural elements present in the Malaysian society. This is the most significant factor. Social norms, political systems, and economic structures are intertwined, resulting in a situation where some voices are intensified, while others are sidelined. This complexity highlights the fact that, despite the interconnectedness of all influences, the media's portrayal of religious conflicts is significantly shaped by the broader societal structures.

In conclusion, the study highlights that comprehending these complex variables is essential for producing an accurate media portrayal of religious disputes in Malaysia. Stakeholders can cooperate to encourage responsible journalism that appropriately reflects the different narratives within Malaysian society by appreciating the complex relationships among individual journalists, their routines, organisational practices, and larger sociocultural contexts. The media's role in addressing religious debate is ultimately shaped by societal influences, underscoring the necessity of continual discussion and reflection within the journalistic community.

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