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The aim of the *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research* is to promote and enhance research development and debates in the field of media and communication research. It also serves as a forum for researchers and industry players who use research as the frame for social awareness and change. We welcome any submission of manuscripts throughout the year. Authors are invited to submit scholarly works on communication such as International Relations, Media Management, Film and Media Arts, Digital Education and Communities, Communication and Policies, Globalization and Social Impact, Youth and Media, Audience and Perception Analysis, Democracy and Integration, Media Literacy and Education, Media and Development, Health Communication, Politics, Hegemony and the Media, Gender and Sexuality, Social Media and Subcultures, Popular Culture and Society, Media and Religion, Media and Identity, War/Peace Journalism, Conflict and Crisis Communication, Strategic Communication and Information Management, Digital Media, Advertising and Persuasive Management, Public Relations and Crisis Management, Global Journalism and relevant areas from the standpoint of media and communication research.

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Resisting hegemony: Islam and identity in the *Mentega Terbang* film

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the controversial Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang* constructs alternative representations of Islam and challenges dominant religious discourses within the Malaysian socio-cultural context. In Malaysia, Islam occupies a central position in public life, with state institutions playing an important role in regulating religious interpretation and discourse. Within this environment, *Mentega Terbang* generated significant public debate due to its engagement with sensitive religious themes. While discussions have largely focused on the controversy surrounding the film, limited scholarly attention has been given to how it constructs meaning through its narrative and cinematic strategies. Drawing upon the concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony and media representation, this study employed qualitative narrative analysis to examine the film's storyline, character development, dialogue, symbolism, and visual construction. Through repeated viewings, thematic coding and contextual interpretation, the study analysed how the film negotiates dominant understandings of Islam, identity and religious authority in contemporary Malaysia. The findings suggest that *Mentega Terbang* functions as a counter-hegemonic cinematic text by presenting alternative spiritual perspectives and questioning institutionalised religious norms through narrative construction, symbolism, and emotional framing. Rather than evaluating the theological validity of the beliefs represented, the study focuses on how the film negotiates meanings surrounding religion, identity and authority. At the same time, its controversial reception reflects broader societal sensitivities concerning religion, social harmony and media regulation in Malaysia. This study contributes to the scholarship on media representation, religion and Malaysian cinema by demonstrating how films can function as a site of ideological negotiation where dominant religious narratives are symbolically questioned, reinterpreted, and contested.

Keywords: *Mentega Terbang*, hegemony, status quo, Islamic representation, Malaysian film

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, with the majority of its population consisting of Malay Muslims. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia establishes Islam as the religion of the Federation, although religious freedom is guaranteed under its Article 3. Within this pluralistic framework, Islam is not only a religion but constitutes a core element of the Malay ethnic identity. The definition of ‘Malay’ under Article 160 of the Federal Constitution effectively merges ethnicity and religion, making Islam an integral component of Malay identity. As a result, any deviation from Islam by a Malay individual would not only be regarded as religious apostasy but also a rejection of their ethnic identity, which often brings significant social, legal, and familial repercussions (Ahmad Sabri et al., 2025; Latif, 2024; Saat & Alatas, 2022).

In Malaysia, the Muslims predominantly adhere to the Shafi’i school of Islamic jurisprudence, which was introduced to the Malay Peninsula by Muslim traders and became firmly established by the 15th century (Hassan, 2014). Today, it continues to dictate religious practices and institutional norms, shaping the administration of Islam at both federal and state level. In the Malaysian context, a school of jurisprudence (*mazhab*) is also officially recognized by the government as the authoritative source for determining legal rulings, interpretations, and fatwas. This was affirmed through a resolution passed during the 14th *Muzakarah* (Deliberation) of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI), held in Johor on 22–23 October, 1985, which required all states in Malaysia to issue their fatwas in accordance with the Shafi’i school of thought. Nevertheless, the application of other schools of jurisprudence may still be possible, provided there are valid justifications and endorsement of the Sultan or Ruler of the respective state.

Post-independence, the administration of Islam in Malaysia has been carried out by both federal and state institutions (Latif, 2024). The Federal Constitution stipulates that Islamic affairs fall under the shared jurisdiction of the federal and state governments. At the federal level, the administration of Islamic affairs falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), established in 1997, while Islamic Religious Departments are set up and run by individual states under the authority of the respective state rulers who oversee the administration of Islamic law, education, and mosques. The establishment of the National Council for Islamic Affairs in 1968 and Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM) in 1974 broadened the federal government’s role in promoting and directing national initiatives for Islamic outreach (*dakwah*) and coordinating religious programs. Prior to the formation of YADIM, religious affairs were mostly managed independently by each state. The setting-up of YADIM prompted the federal government to systematically organize, fund, and supervise Islamic initiatives nationwide, enabling a more cohesive national Islamic identity.

In order to gain and maintain support from the Malay Muslim majority, government policies often incorporate elements of Islamisation (Jha, 2009; Walters, 2007). Miller (2004) noted how Islamic symbolism and discourse are deeply ingrained in Malaysian political narratives, influenced by historical, institutional, and structural

forces. In the early 1980s, during the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad, Islamisation became a more prominent feature, with Islamic principles systematically integrated into education, administration, finance and various other sectors (Saat & Alatas, 2022). Subsequently, the premiership of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi applied a more moderate approach through *Islam Hadhari*, which received criticism from more conservative factions. Meanwhile, under the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak, Islamic conservatism became more apparent, particularly following his endorsement of the controversial Bill 355 proposed by the Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, PAS), which sought to expand the punitive powers of Sharia courts.

In the current political landscape, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's *Malaysia Madani* concept embodies a renewed take on Islamisation that seeks to integrate Islamic ethical values with good governance, social equity, and national unity (Musa, 2023). Initially introduced in 1995, *Masyarakat Madani* was later reduced from an alternative socio-economic vision to a general idea of "civil society" after Anwar's political fall in 1998. Upon his return to power in 2022, Anwar revived and renewed the concept, giving special focus to *Maqasid Al-Shariah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law). As a form of post-Islamism concept, Madani seeks to balance Islamic principles with democratic governance and multicultural coexistence.

In practice, however, the implementation of *Malaysia Madani* continues to operate within a politically fragile environment shaped by ethno-religious contestation and ideological pressure from conservative factions. Shi (2025) argues that despite the reformist aspirations associated with the unity government under Anwar Ibrahim, issues related to race, religion, and Malay-Muslim identity continue to function as important political instruments within Malaysia's post-GE15 landscape. The increasing reliance on 3R (race, religion, and royalty) narratives reflects the government's ongoing need to balance progressive ambitions with conservative political realities. In this context, religion continues to operate not merely as a matter of personal belief, but also as a mechanism of political legitimacy, ideological control, and cultural governance.

Within this broader religious and political landscape, the Malaysian film and media industry operates in a regulatory environment shaped heavily by sensitivities surrounding Islam, Malay identity, race, royalty, and national unity (Augustin, 2024; Khoo, 2009; Mohd Sofian et al., 2025; Weintraub, 2011; Zainal, 2019). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and the Film Censorship Board (LPF) closely monitor media content that engages with religious beliefs, interfaith interactions, personal faith struggles, or issues perceived to threaten social harmony. Film censorship occupies a particularly significant position in Malaysia, as cinema remains one of the few artistic mediums subjected to prior censorship before public release (Augustin, 2024). Consequently, filmmakers frequently encounter institutional restrictions and censorship when attempting to address controversial or sensitive themes (Annisa et al., 2025). These limitations do not entirely prevent creative expression in Malaysia; rather, they shape the boundaries of acceptable public discourse by determining which narratives may be publicly circulated and represented on screen.

As Augustin (2024) and Ngo (2025) further observed in relation to the *Mentega Terbang* controversy, contemporary Malaysian media culture remains deeply influenced by broader ideological struggles between conservative orthodoxy, state regulation, and competing interpretations of Islam, particularly within the politically sensitive environment following the 15th General Election (GE15). Although the Anwar-led unity government was initially associated with hopes for greater openness and reform, concerns over conservative backlash and the need to maintain Malay-Muslim political support continue to influence media regulation and censorship practices. In this context, unofficial “red lines” surrounding race, religion, and royalty (3R) continue to shape the boundaries of acceptable cinematic discourse in Malaysia. The banning and public vilification of *Mentega Terbang*, alongside increasing scrutiny towards independent filmmakers, therefore, reflect not only concerns over religious sensitivity, but also wider tensions surrounding ideological authority, political legitimacy, and the regulation of acceptable discourse in contemporary Malaysia. Controversial films may thus function not merely as entertainment products, but also as ideological sites where competing understandings of religion, identity, and national culture are negotiated and contested.

Previous scholarship on Malaysian cinema has examined themes such as censorship, Islamisation, multiculturalism, Malay identity, and religious representation in film. Khoo (2009), Beng (2015) as well as Changsong and Kerry (2022), for instance, explored how Malaysian filmmakers, particularly Yasmin Ahmad, negotiated issues of cosmopolitanism, Malay subjectivity, religion, and identity through alternative cinematic narratives that challenged dominant socio-cultural norms. Similarly, Shi and Baharudin (2015) demonstrated how Yasmin Ahmad’s *Muallaf* constructed alternative interpretations of Islam through narrative and visual strategies that questioned conservative religious understandings while promoting multiculturalism, tolerance, and interreligious engagement. Other studies have focused on censorship practices, digital film activism, and the regulation of controversial content in Malaysian cinema (Ahmad et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2022), while more recent scholarship on *Mentega Terbang* has primarily examined audience reception, multicultural interpretation, and public controversy surrounding the film (Annisa et al., 2025).

While these studies provide important insights into religion, identity, and media regulation in Malaysia, limited attention has been given to how controversial Malaysian films themselves construct counter-hegemonic Islamic discourse through narrative strategies, symbolism, dialogue, and representations of institutional religious authority. Existing studies have largely focused on censorship systems, multicultural negotiation, audience reception or broader issues of religious representation, with comparatively little emphasis on how films function as ideological sites of contestation within the socio-political context of contemporary Malaysia. This study addresses that gap by analysing *Mentega Terbang* through the framework of hegemony and counter-hegemony, focusing specifically on how the film negotiates dominant Islamic narratives, institutional authority, religious identity, and personal autonomy within Malaysia’s evolving Islamisation landscape. In doing so, this article contributes to broader discussions on media representation, ideological resistance, and the role of cinema as a space for negotiating competing understandings of Islam in Muslim-majority societies.

Mentega Terbang

As Islamic governance and identity politics continue to evolve, cultural and creative works that challenge dominant religious narratives would often spark public debate. One example that drew much attention is the controversial indie film, *Mentega Terbang*.

Mentega Terbang, a film directed by Khairi Anwar, Arjun Thanaraju, Vishnu Varman, and Ti Teng Hui, debuted at the Yogyakarta Film Festival in 2021 (“*Mentega Terbang* flies into Jogja-Netpac”, 2021). It caught the attention of the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia when it premiered on the streaming platform Viu in 2023. Interestingly, the initial opponent of the film’s distribution was none other than the scriptwriter of the film, Zabidi Mohamed. He asserted that the film gives rise to serious issues surrounding the Muslim faith (Augustin, 2024).

Mentega Terbang was strongly criticised by Islamic authorities, including the former Mufti of the Federal Territories, Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, for tackling sensitive issues on the Muslim faith in ways deemed inappropriate and provocative (Al-Bakri, 2023). In Malaysia, the majority of Muslims adhere to the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah tradition, which is based on the teachings of the Qur’an, the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, and the theological approaches of the *salaf* and *khalaf*, particularly through the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools of thought (Al-Bakri, 2020). The film drew widespread criticism for presenting ideas seen as incompatible with the fundamental principles of Islamic doctrine, particularly those upheld by the Shafi‘i school of thought (“*Filem Mentega Terbang bertentangan dengan akidah Islam, pihak terlibat akan dipanggil*”, 2023). Consequently, on 21 August, 2023, MOHA exercised its powers under the Film Censorship Act 2002 and officially banned the screening, distribution, and promotion of *Mentega Terbang*. To this effect, the Film Censorship (Prohibition) Order 2023 was issued, endorsed by the Minister of Home Affairs, Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution.

Freedom Film Network (Palatino, 2024), an organization which supports independent filmmaking that raises awareness of social justice and human rights issues, spoke against the government’s move to ban *Mentega Terbang* and to take legal action against its creators, describing it as a regressive measure that suppresses creative freedom. The organization argued that open dialogue, mutual understanding, and safe platforms for sharing diverse viewpoints are needed in order to foster true religious harmony. They argued that the film encouraged interfaith conversations, with many viewers finding that it helped them gain a deeper understanding of other religions and have empathy with the main character’s journey. This constructive feedback has seemingly been overlooked by the authorities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media hegemony and resistance in Malaysian films

Hegemony refers to the way a social group secures leadership in moral, intellectual, and political life not through coercion, but through the voluntary consent of other groups (Althusser, 1995/2014). This is accomplished by mobilizing social institutions

such as education, religion, family, and the mass media to shape culture and ideology. Media hegemony, therefore, describes how dominance over society and social thought is achieved by embedding prevailing cultural principles into everyday life (Durham & Kellner, 2006). It significantly influences societal values, beliefs, and worldviews (Altheide, 1984), assuming that the ruling class's ideas will become the dominant ideology, with mass media serving as a primary vehicle to reproduce and normalize these ideas.

Drawing from Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, this study understands hegemony as the process through which dominant groups secure ideological leadership by normalising particular worldviews and social values as "common sense" within society (Gramsci, 1971). This hegemonic process is particularly significant within the Malaysian media environment, where Islamic discourse has historically been shaped through institutional regulation, political interests, and commercialization. Mohamed and Azzman (2018) argue that the Islamisation of Malaysian media is closely connected to the state's broader project of institutionalising Islam within public life, resulting in media structures that normalize particular representations of Islam and Malay-Muslim identity. In this context, media functions not merely as entertainment, but also as an ideological apparatus that reinforces socially acceptable religious norms and boundaries.

Consequently, films that challenge dominant religious narratives may be perceived as disrupting hegemonic understandings of religion, morality, and national identity within the Malaysian society. Hall (1982) further argues that media representation plays a crucial role in the construction and circulation of ideological meaning, where media texts actively shape social understanding rather than merely reflecting reality. As such, films may function both as a site for reproducing dominant ideological narratives and as a space where alternative meanings and resistant discourses emerge. Within this framework, *Mentega Terbang* is examined as a counter-hegemonic cinematic text that negotiates dominant religious narratives through its representations of spirituality, interreligious inquiry, and Muslim identity.

Films function as a cultural medium where diverse social discourses may be articulated and made available for public engagement. However, in Malaysia, this potential remains largely theoretical. In practice, local filmmaking is heavily constrained by censorship laws, bureaucratic procedures, regulatory requirements, cultural norms, and religious sensitivities (Ahmad et al., 2017; Weintraub, 2011). Such restrictions limit the film industry's capacity for critical reflection and alternative representation. Malaysian film critics further argue that a hegemonic social discourse continues to shape how cultural themes are framed and interpreted, resulting in films produced from narrow racial perspectives that fail to capture the nation's multicultural complexity (Changsong & Kerry, 2022; Weintraub, 2011).

The hegemonic influence of the Malaysian state is most visible in its formalized censorship system (Wood et al., 2022). Film censorship is governed by the Film Censorship Act 2002 and administered by the Board of Censors and the Appeal Committee, both housed under the Ministry of Home Affairs. These bodies are empowered to modify, restrict, reclassify, or ban films entirely. Their decisions rely on the Film Censorship Guidelines 2010, which cover sensitive areas such as religion,

morality, public order, and socio-cultural values. Yet the guidelines are often vague and subjectively interpreted, enabling the state to maintain ideological dominance and suppress narratives that challenge political, religious, or cultural norms.

Filmmakers interviewed by Wood et al. (2022) described the censorship process as opaque, inconsistent, and restrictive, often prompting self-censorship even before films are submitted for review. This internalised policing of content illustrates how hegemony operates not only through formal institutional control but also through the normalization of creative boundaries and expectations (Gramsci, 1971). Wood et al. (2022) further demonstrated that censorship reinforces hegemonic control through vague guidelines, inconsistent enforcement, non-transparent appointment processes for censors, limited avenues for judicial review, and ministerial powers to override decisions. Together, these mechanisms contribute to an environment where dominant ideological preferences shape the cultural landscape and restrict film's potential as a platform for social critique and alternative representation.

Within this environment, counter-hegemony—referring to ideas, practices, or movements that question or disrupt dominant ideological narratives (Fiveable, 2024)—becomes especially important. Counter-hegemonic practices promote marginalized viewpoints and create spaces for dissent, often through artistic and media forms such as film. Cinema can amplify the voices of marginalized communities and challenge the status quo by presenting alternative narratives and lived experiences (Fiveable, 2024). Filmmakers may employ strategies such as irony, humour, unconventional storytelling, or symbolic critique to provoke public reflection and debate. These approaches aim not only to critique social structures but also to inspire broader awareness of injustice and complex power relations. Counter-hegemonic films are effective precisely because they spark dialogue and encourage audiences to interrogate dominant ideologies.

When mainstream media is influenced by authoritarian tendencies or restricted political environments, alternative media becomes crucial in providing platforms for opposition groups or critical voices (Mohd Sofian & Qasem, 2020; Mohd Sofian et al., 2023; Mohd Sofian et al., 2025). Alternative media offers relatively autonomous spaces—even within democratic societies—where competing narratives may be articulated (Foster, 2009). By challenging mainstream representations, alternative media contributes to the counter-hegemonic discourse by enabling discussions on sensitive issues, including debates on Islam, that are often absent from mainstream public narratives (Mohd Sofian et al., 2023). Thus, alternative media enables both creators and audiences to participate in critical discussions and resist dominant ideological frameworks.

The expansion of digital technology and online streaming platforms has further complicated the dynamics of media hegemony in Malaysia. Unlike conventional cinema releases that remain subject to strict censorship regulations, streaming platforms provide relatively less regulated spaces for the circulation of alternative narratives and politically sensitive content (Shukri et al., 2024). This shift enables filmmakers to engage audiences more directly and potentially challenge dominant ideological frameworks by presenting perspectives that may otherwise be restricted within mainstream media environments. In this regard, digital platforms may function as important spaces for counter-hegemonic

expression and ideological negotiation in contemporary Malaysian cinema. The circulation of *Mentega Terbang* through online and alternative digital spaces, rather than through mainstream cinematic distribution channels, further illustrates how digital media may facilitate the dissemination of narratives that challenge dominant religious and cultural discourses in Malaysia.

METHODS

This study employed a narrative analysis to examine how *Mentega Terbang* constructs representations of Islam through its storyline, character portrayals, dialogues, and symbolic visual elements. Narrative analysis is widely used in film and media studies to uncover how meaning is produced, negotiated, and communicated through narrative structures (Bal, 2017; Riessman, 2008). This approach enables researchers to investigate not only what is represented in a film, but also how ideological meanings are embedded within plot development, characterization, dialogue, and visual semiotics (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010; Chatman, 1980). The method is particularly suitable for analysing ideological representations in cinema, as films often function as cultural texts that reflect, negotiate, and challenge dominant social values and hegemonic discourses.

The primary unit of analysis in this study was the scene, defined as a continuous sequence of actions occurring within a specific narrative setting or interaction. Secondary units of analysis included character dialogues, visual symbolism, religious references, and interactions involving ideological or theological conflict. The film, with a total runtime of 1 hour and 43 minutes, was viewed repeatedly to ensure analytical rigour and accuracy. Repeated viewings are a standard procedure in qualitative film analysis, allowing researchers to identify subtle narrative patterns, ideological tensions, and symbolic cues that may not have been immediately evident during initial observation (Rose, 2016).

During each viewing session, detailed analytical notes and memos were recorded focusing on several narrative dimensions, including plot progression, character development, dialogue relating to religion and belief systems, symbolic representations associated with Islam and religious identity, and moments of narrative tension that challenged or subverted dominant religious norms within the Malaysian sociocultural context. Although the entire film was examined holistically, analytical emphasis was placed on scenes containing explicit or implicit references to Islamic discourse, apostasy, interfaith interaction, institutional religious authority, and ideological conflict. These scenes were selected purposively due to their relevance to the study's objective of examining how the film constructs alternative discourses surrounding Islam.

Following the viewing phase, the study undertook thematic coding guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for qualitative thematic analysis. The coding process began with open coding, whereby recurring narrative patterns, ideological tensions, symbolic religious elements, and counter-hegemonic representations were identified across the selected scenes. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories through constant comparison, before being refined into final themes. This iterative process enabled themes to emerge inductively from the film text rather than

being imposed a priori. The coding process ultimately generated several major thematic categories, including apostasy and personal autonomy, interfaith parallels, alternative theological perspectives, and critiques of institutional religious authority.

The study also incorporated contextual interpretation, which is essential in cultural and ideological film analysis (Hall, 1997; Kellner, 1995). Interpretation was conducted by relating narrative structures, character portrayals, dialogues, and symbolic imagery to broader sociocultural and political discourses surrounding Islam in Malaysia. Particular attention was given to how the film negotiates hegemonic understandings of Islam, challenges dominant religious narratives, and presents counter-hegemonic perspectives through its narrative construction and cinematic representation. This interpretive approach allows the analysis to move beyond textual description by situating the film within Malaysia's socio-religious landscape, particularly concerning the institutionalisation of Islam, the role of religious authorities, and sensitivities surrounding religious pluralism and religious identity. To enhance methodological rigour and analytical transparency, the researcher maintained continuous engagement with the film through repeated viewing sessions, analytical memo writing, and systematic comparison between emerging themes and existing scholarship on religion, ideology, and Malaysian cinema. By combining narrative analysis, thematic coding, and contextual interpretation, this study provides a comprehensive qualitative framework for understanding how *Mentega Terbang* constructs and negotiates alternative representations of Islam within contemporary Malaysian cinema.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section critically examines how *Mentega Terbang* challenges religious hegemony and dominant norms within the Malay Muslim society. Through its narrative, the film engages with sensitive issues such as apostasy, reincarnation, and interfaith relations, while also questioning religious authority and societal expectations surrounding faith and identity.

Apostasy and the crisis of faith

The issue of apostasy is sensitively but provocatively handled in several key scenes. A significant moment takes place at 1:17:39, when Aisyah, in a dream sequence, tries to convince her dying mother to convert to Hinduism. She feels that through reincarnation, they could remain together even after death:

Aisyah: “*Why do you have to go, mama? ... Did you think about changing your religion? To be reincarnated... you can still be here with me, mama.*”

Before her mother could respond, Aisyah interrupts by challenging her mother's faith:

Aisyah: “*Mama, how do you know that Islam is right?*”

This depicts Aisyah's internal struggle and her growing doubts about her faith, particularly concerning the afterlife. Following her mother's death, another crucial conversation takes place between Aisyah and her father (1:35:06), where he openly expresses his support for her to explore other religions if she feels compelled to do so:

Father: *"If there is any other faith that speaks to you... go ahead, dear. I trust you."*

This dialogue presents faith as an individual spiritual journey rather than a rigid inherited identity, reflecting a liberal and existential understanding of religion. The scene challenges hegemonic constructions of the Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia, where Islam is institutionally tied to ethnicity and citizenship. Hall (1997) argues that representation is closely linked to power because it shapes which identities become normalized or marginalized. The father's calm tone and emotional openness further disrupt dominant patriarchal and religious expectations commonly associated with Muslim family structures in Malaysian media. Cinematically, the use of medium shots creates emotional intimacy and equality between the characters, reinforcing mutual trust rather than hierarchical authority (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). The film therefore frames religious exploration as a personal and reflective process rather than a moral transgression.

Islam and Christianity: Portraying parallels and complexities

Mentega Terbang repeatedly constructs Islam and Christianity as interconnected rather than oppositional belief systems. At 03:28, Aisyah discusses a Bible verse with her parents, and her father acknowledges that both Christianity and Islam contain diverse schools of thought. This dialogue challenges exclusivist understandings of religious truth by presenting religious identity as fluid and interpretive, rather than fixed. Through Hall's representation theory, the scene destabilizes binary constructions between "self" and "other," where Islam is often positioned as singularly true while other religions are viewed as fundamentally different (Hall, 1997). The domestic setting, warm lighting, and medium close-up framing further normalize interfaith discussion within the Muslim household, presenting theological plurality as ordinary rather than threatening.

Similarly, at 16:10, Aisyah's father draws parallels between Islam and Christianity by suggesting that both religions promote moral goodness and promise rewards in the afterlife. This comparative framing reflects a universalistic spiritual discourse that prioritizes ethical values over doctrinal exclusivity. Barthes (1977) argues that cultural texts construct myths that normalize particular worldviews; here, the film promotes a myth of interfaith moral commonality that contrasts with dominant exclusivist narratives. The scene's calm pacing and balanced dialogue structure avoid privileging either religion, further reinforcing the film's emphasis on theological openness and religious coexistence. A dialogue at 59:00 between Aisyah and her Christian neighbor, Esther, further reinforces this interfaith perspective:

Esther: *"Islam and Christianity are like siblings—lots of similarities but always quarrelling."*
(laughing)

Although presented humorously, the dialogue carries significant ideological implications by framing religious conflict not as absolute opposition, but as tension within shared origins and similarities. Through casual conversation and humour, the film makes interfaith comparison more emotionally accessible to audiences. Fiske (1987) argues that media texts often encode ideological meanings through ordinary interactions, allowing complex ideas to appear natural and relatable. The use of eye-level shots, relaxed body language, and laughter further creates equality and empathy between the characters, avoiding hierarchical authority. The scene therefore functions as a counter-hegemonic representation that challenges exclusivist religious narratives and promotes a more pluralistic understanding of faith relations in Malaysia.

Reincarnation: An alternative to the Islamic afterlife

Reincarnation, presented as an alternative spiritual framework that contrasts with dominant Islamic understandings of the afterlife, is a recurring theme throughout the film. Introduced to the concept by her Hindu classmate, Suresh, Aisyah becomes increasingly fascinated by the possibility of life beyond conventional Islamic teachings. At 44:45, she asks her mother:

Aisyah: *“Have you ever thought, what if there’s something else besides heaven?”*

This question reflects not merely curiosity, but also emotional uncertainty and a search for spiritual continuity. Hall (1997) argues that meaning is constructed through discourse and cultural negotiation rather than fixed truth. By presenting reincarnation sympathetically through Aisyah’s grief, the film frames non-Islamic beliefs as emotionally meaningful rather than inherently deviant or threatening. The use of soft lighting, contemplative pacing, and close-up shots further emphasizes Aisyah’s emotional vulnerability, encouraging audiences to engage with the scene affectively rather than doctrinally.

This theme culminates again at 1:41:47, when Aisyah and her father visit her mother’s grave and a butterfly lands on the tombstone. Smiling, Aisyah believes the butterfly may represent her mother’s reincarnation. The butterfly functions as a recurring visual metaphor for spiritual continuity beyond dominant Islamic conceptions of the afterlife. Rather than explicitly endorsing reincarnation, the film constructs emotional ambiguity through symbolic imagery and quiet pacing, shifting attention from doctrinal certainty toward the emotional and existential dimensions of religious experience. Through this symbolism, the film subtly legitimizes alternative spiritual imagination within the Malaysian Muslim context.

Questioning the authority of JAKIM

At 1:00:20, a conversation between Aisyah and Esther directly criticizes institutional religious authority. Discussing religious conversion, Esther highlights the difficulties that Aisyah would face, citing the restrictions imposed by JAKIM. Aisyah expresses

frustration at being trapped in a religion she was born into, suggesting that such regulations are put in place not so much to protect faith but mainly to impose social control:

Aisyah: “*Maybe it’s just to make people’s lives harder.*”

This scene portrays both JAKIM and, by implication, Islam itself, as limiting personal freedom. The film constructs institutional religious authority through dialogue marked by frustration, hesitation, and emotional tension. Rather than presenting JAKIM through direct visual confrontation, the narrative relies on interpersonal conversation and subjective emotional experience to represent institutional control as something embedded within everyday life. This indirect narrative strategy allows the film to critique religious bureaucracy not through overt political opposition, but through the personal anxieties and emotional constraints experienced by the protagonist. Such characterization positions institutional authority as a pervasive ideological structure shaping individual identity and religious autonomy.

Depiction of practices prohibited in Islam

At 12:42, Aisyah fondly pets her neighbour’s dog, despite casual contact with dogs generally being discouraged within Shafi’i jurisprudence unless justified by necessity. Later, at 56:07, she eats a pork bun, openly violating Islamic dietary laws, while comparing her action to her Hindu friend Suresh consuming beef. Through these acts, Aisyah symbolically challenges religious prohibitions that she perceives as arbitrary or restrictive. Rather than framing these moments as outright rebellion, the film presents them as acts of personal and ideological negotiation. The scene’s restrained pacing, reflective facial expressions, and conversational tone encourage audiences to reflect on how religious boundaries are socially internalized and personally negotiated within everyday life.

The film further frames institutional religion not merely as spiritual guidance, but also as a mechanism of social regulation and control. Through Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, institutions maintain dominance by normalizing ideological values within everyday life (Gramsci, 1971). *Mentega Terbang* represents religious authority as part of a broader hegemonic structure that regulates identity, belief, and personal autonomy. Rather than depicting direct political resistance, the narrative emphasizes emotional frustration and psychological tension, illustrating how institutional authority operates affectively and socially. The use of conversational intimacy and medium close-up shots visually communicates the emotional burden of religious regulation.

Hall (1997) argues that representation shapes how power is socially understood and experienced; here, institutional authority is portrayed as pervasive, emotionally restrictive, and embedded within ordinary life. Through this subtle yet resonant critique, the film positions religious bureaucracy as a hegemonic force shaping both public behavior and personal spiritual freedom. The film’s representation of institutional religious authority also reflects broader structures of media and religious regulation within Malaysia. Mohamed and Azzman (2018) argue that the Islamisation of Malaysian media has

been closely tied to institutional control and the normalization of dominant Islamic values within public discourse. In this context, *Mentega Terbang*'s alternative representations of spirituality and religious questioning may be understood as counter-hegemonic disruptions to established religious narratives within the mainstream Malaysian media culture.

Within this analytical framework, it is important to emphasize that the study does not seek to evaluate the theological correctness of the beliefs, practices, or interpretations represented in *Mentega Terbang*. Rather, the analysis focuses on how the film constructs and negotiates meanings surrounding religion, identity, and authority within a particular socio-cultural context. Islam is therefore approached primarily as a representational and discursive framework within the filmic text rather than as an object of doctrinal assessment. The emphasis lies on examining how cinematic narrative, symbolism, characterization, and emotional framing articulate tensions between dominant religious discourse and alternative forms of spiritual subjectivity within contemporary Malaysian society.

At the same time, these findings should be understood within the scope and limitations of textual film analysis. The interpretations presented are derived from the narrative and cinematic construction of a single film and therefore do not aim to make definitive claims regarding the Malaysian society, public opinion, or broader transformations in religious discourse. Instead, the study focuses on how such tensions and alternative representations are articulated within the filmic text itself. Broader conclusions concerning audience interpretation, social impact, or changes in religious attitudes would require additional empirical approaches such as audience reception studies, interviews, ethnographic research, or comparative analysis involving multiple media texts. Nevertheless, the study highlights how contemporary Malaysian cinema may function as a site of ideological negotiation where dominant religious narratives are symbolically questioned, reinterpreted, or contested through cinematic representation.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the film *Mentega Terbang* represents an act of resistance against dominant religious and socio-political discourses which prevail in Malaysia by dealing with sensitive themes such as apostasy and reincarnation, and by portraying the rigidity of institutionalized religion, the film challenges the idea that there is only one correct interpretation of Islam, namely the state-enforced interpretation. Through the main character's personal journey of questioning and negotiating faith, the film places emphasis on individual autonomy and spiritual exploration over adherence to deeply rooted institutional norms.

At the same time, the controversy surrounding *Mentega Terbang* also reflects the broader sensitivities associated with religion, identity, and social harmony within Malaysia's multicultural and multi-religious society. Given the politically and socially sensitive nature of religious discourse in Malaysia, concerns regarding the film's

potential impact on public understanding of Islam and interreligious relations may also help explain the rationale behind institutional responses such as censorship and banning. In this regard, Beng (2015) argues that Malaysian films engaging openly with sensitive issues involving religion, ethnicity, and morality frequently generate public and institutional tensions because such representations challenge established cultural expectations and dominant constructions of Malay-Muslim identity. The controversy surrounding *Mentega Terbang* therefore reflects not only ideological resistance and counter-hegemonic representation, but also broader anxieties concerning the negotiation of religion, identity, and acceptable public discourse within Malaysian media culture.

Rather than evaluating the theological validity of the film's representations, this study has examined how *Mentega Terbang* functions as a cinematic site of ideological negotiation where dominant religious narratives are symbolically questioned, reinterpreted, and contested through narrative construction, symbolism, and emotional framing. The study therefore highlights the role of contemporary Malaysian cinema as a space where issues surrounding religion, authority, identity, and personal belief may be represented and negotiated, even within highly regulated cultural environments.

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Constructing institutional visibility through university website communication: Evidence from Malaysian research universities

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ABSTRACT

University websites operate as strategic communication infrastructures through which higher education institutions construct institutional visibility, communicate identity, and sustain relationships with diverse stakeholders. While prior scholarship has examined webometric indicators, usability performance, accessibility, and online ranking visibility, less attention has been given to how institutional visibility is communicatively produced through the interface architecture of university websites. This study examines the official websites of three Malaysian research universities, namely Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) using qualitative thematic content analysis supported by visual interface evidence. Drawing on the dialogic communication theory, web visibility scholarship, and contemporary research on higher education digital communication, the study identifies three mutually reinforcing visibility-building mechanisms, specifically content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. Our findings reveal that these mechanisms generate informational visibility by organising institutional information for stakeholder access, access visibility by reducing navigation complexity, and relational visibility by linking users to enquiry channels and social media spaces. The discussion argues that institutional visibility should not be operationalised only as an external ranking or hyperlink outcome, but also as an interface-level communication outcome embedded in website design, content hierarchy, and stakeholder-oriented interaction affordances. The article contributes to strategic communication and higher education studies by proposing an interface-level model of institutional visibility and by demonstrating how university websites function as communicative infrastructures in competitive digital higher education environments. It further highlights the need for universities to design website interfaces that are clear, accessible, user-oriented, and responsive to changing contemporary stakeholder communication expectations.

Keywords: ***Institutional visibility, university website, digital communication, dialogic communication, web visibility, higher education***

INTRODUCTION

University websites have become central strategic communication infrastructures for higher education institutions (Kang & Norton, 2006; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). They are no longer merely administrative information repositories, rather, they function as digital gateways through which universities communicate institutional identity, academic reputation, international orientation, research capacity, student experience, and stakeholder accountability. In an increasingly competitive higher education environment, the official website often becomes the first institutional contact point for prospective students, parents, alumni, industry partners, funders, policy actors, researchers, and international publics (Gordon & Berhow, 2009). As universities compete for visibility within global ranking systems, international student markets, and digital reputational economies, the website becomes an important site where institutional presence is made visible and meaningful.

Existing studies on university web visibility have primarily approached visibility through webometric indicators, hyperlink structures, ranking performance, usability features, accessibility, and search engine optimisation (Aguillo et al., 2008; Thelwall, 2002a). These studies are important because they show that online presence affects how universities are discovered, evaluated, and compared. Webometrics rankings, for example, link online visibility to impact, openness, and research excellence, while global university rankings such as QS World University Rankings continue to shape institutional reputation in international higher education markets (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025; Webometrics, 2026). However, a purely metric-based approach does not fully explain how visibility is communicatively constructed within the website interface itself.

This article argues that institutional visibility is not just an external measurement of web impact, ranking position, or hyperlink presence. It is also an interface-level communication outcome produced by the way universities organise information, design stakeholder access pathways, present institutional identity, and create opportunities for interaction. This framing is consistent with recent higher education communication research, which shows that universities increasingly use digital channels to promote brand identity, differentiate themselves, and build relationships with stakeholders (Capriotti et al., 2023; Capriotti, Carretón et al., 2024). The website therefore requires analysis, not only as a technological platform, but also as a strategic communication environment.

The Malaysian higher education context provides a useful empirical setting for this study. Malaysian research universities are actively positioned within regional and global higher education systems. Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) are consistently visible in national, regional, and international ranking systems (Lee, 2014; Mok, 2015). In this environment, university websites perform a crucial communication function by presenting institutional achievements, academic programmes, research strengths, international collaborations, public engagement, and stakeholder services.

The current research examines the official websites of three Malaysian research universities: UM, UPM, and UKM. The article explores how their online presence constructs institutional visibility through three dimensions of website communication: content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. The study is guided by the following research questions: How do selected Malaysian research universities construct institutional visibility through website communication architecture? What interface-level communication mechanisms are used to support stakeholder access, information discoverability, and interaction? How do content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement contribute to informational, access, and relational visibility?

This article initially outlines the empirical patterns identified across the selected websites before interpreting these patterns in relation to the dialogic communication theory, institutional visibility, and current higher education digital communication literature. The article contributes to strategic communication scholarship by operationalising institutional visibility as a communicative outcome produced through website interface design, rather than treating it solely as a ranking or webometric indicator.

Institutional website visibility and interface-level communication

Institutional web visibility has often been studied through webometric indicators, link analysis, and university rankings (Aguillo et al., 2008; Lee & Park, 2012; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025; Thelwall, 2002b; Webometrics, 2026). These studies are useful because they show how visible a university is online. However, they do not fully explain how visibility is created through the university website itself. University websites are not only online brochures. They are strategic communication platforms that present institutional identity, provide information, and support relationships with different stakeholders, including students, staff, alumni, parents, industry partners, and international audiences (Capriotti, Carretón et al., 2024; Capriotti et al., 2023; Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Kang & Norton, 2006; McMillan, 2000a; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014; Sharp, 2001; Zainal Abidin et al., 2020).

This perspective is related to the dialogic communication theory, which argues that websites should support two-way communication, rather than only one-way information sharing (Kent & Taylor, 1998). However, contact forms, feedback links, and social media icons do not automatically create meaningful interaction (Kent, 2021; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). For interaction to happen, users must first be able to understand the content, access the website, and navigate it easily (Caglar & Mentis, 2012; Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005). Accessibility is also important because university websites should be usable for different groups of users (Campoverde-Molina et al., 2021; World Wide Web Consortium, 2024; Yussubaliyeva et al., 2025). Therefore, website usability is an important part of institutional visibility.

Recent studies in media and communication also show that websites and digital platforms are important communication spaces. Kriyantono et al. (2023) explained that institutional websites can be assessed through usability, information quality, and service interaction quality. Deepak et al. (2020) showed that digital platforms use interactivity, multimedia, immediacy, and personalisation to improve audience engagement. Esa et al.

(2024) also argued that clear content quality is important because audiences now access information across many online platforms. These studies support this article's focus on university websites as communication platforms that shape visibility, accessibility, and stakeholder engagement.

Although previous studies have examined web rankings, usability, accessibility, and online interaction, less attention has been given to how university websites create institutional visibility through their interface. This study addresses this gap by focusing on three mechanisms: content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. Content clarity helps users understand university information. Navigational usability helps users find information easily. Dialogic engagement provides contact and interaction channels. Together, these mechanisms show that institutional visibility is shaped not only by rankings or web metrics, but also by how a university website communicates with its users.

A dialogic framework for institutional web visibility

This study is guided by the dialogic communication theory, which explains how organisations use communication platforms to build relationships and interact with their publics. Kent and Taylor (1998) argue that websites should not only provide information but should also create opportunities for meaningful interaction between organisations and stakeholders. This theory is suitable for studying university websites because universities communicate with many different publics, including prospective students, current students, staff, alumni, parents, industry partners, government agencies, and international audiences. These groups visit university websites for different purposes, such as finding academic programmes, research information, admission details, student services, institutional achievements, or contact channels. Therefore, a university website should support clear information, easy navigation, and visible interaction opportunities (Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

Kent and Taylor (1998) identified several principles of dialogic communication, including the usefulness of information, ease of interface, dialogic loop, generation of return visits, and conservation of visitors. In this study, these principles were applied to examine how university websites make institutional information visible and accessible. For example, useful information can be seen through clear programme details, research information, news, and student services. Ease of interface is demonstrated by menus, search functions, language options, and stakeholder-based links. The dialogic loop is supported by enquiry forms, contact details, feedback channels, and social media links.

This study extends the dialogic communication theory by linking website communication features to institutional visibility. Previous studies often examined whether websites have interactive features, but less attention was given to how these features help make an institution more visible, accessible, and connected to stakeholders (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). Recent studies also show that universities use digital platforms for branding, stakeholder engagement, and relationship-building, although many universities still focus more on information delivery than actual interaction (Capriotti et al., 2023; Capriotti, Zeler et al., 2024).

Based on this theoretical position, this study understands institutional website visibility as an outcome produced through three communication mechanisms: content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. Content clarity describes how clearly institutional information is organised, labelled, and presented for users. It contributes to informational visibility because stakeholders can easily understand the university's programmes, identity, services, research strengths, and achievements (Kang & Norton, 2006; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014).

Navigational usability refers to how easily users can move through the website and find the information they need. It contributes to access visibility because institutional information becomes more visible when users can reach it through simple and logical pathways (Caglar & Menten, 2012; Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005). Dialogic engagement indicates how clearly the website provides opportunities for users to contact, follow, ask questions, or interact with the university. It contributes to relational visibility because the university becomes visible not only as an information provider, but also as an institution that can be contacted and engaged (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

Therefore, this study proposes that institutional website visibility is not only produced through rankings, hyperlinks, or webometric indicators. It is also produced through website interface design. When university websites provide clear content, easy navigation, and visible interaction channels, they strengthen institutional visibility among stakeholders.

METHODS

Research design

This study employed qualitative thematic content analysis to examine how university websites construct institutional visibility. This method enables the systematic interpretation of digital texts, visual interface elements, navigation structures, and communication affordances (Herring, 2010; McMillan, 2000b; Schreier, 2012). A directed thematic approach was utilised, with initial coding categories derived from the conceptual framework (content clarity, navigational usability, dialogic engagement) and subsequently refined through repeated interface observations (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Screenshots were collected not as decorative material, but as empirical visual evidence of interface architecture.

Case selection and research context

The study selected three Malaysian research universities: UM, UKM, and UPM. These institutions were selected because they are among Malaysia's leading research universities and because their official websites function as important public-facing communication platforms for national and international audiences. Their selection allows the study to examine institutional visibility within a competitive higher education context where university reputation, web presence, operationalisation, and stakeholder engagement are strategically important.

The ranking information in Table 1 is used only as contextual evidence of institutional prominence. It is not used as a dependent variable and does not determine the findings. Instead, rankings are used to justify why these universities represent analytically relevant cases for examining how institutional visibility is communicated through official websites. The emphasis of the study remains on website communication architecture rather than ranking performance alone.

Table 1. Contextual profile of selected Malaysian research universities

University	Malaysia Rank	QS World University Rankings 2026	Webometrics 2026 Context
UM	1	58	High web visibility among Malaysian research universities
UKM	2	126	Strong research university web presence
UPM	4	134	Strong research university web presence

Data corpus and unit of analysis

The data corpus consisted of publicly accessible official website materials from UM, UPM, and UKM. Website observation was conducted over a one-month period from April 1, 2026 to April 30, 2026. The observation focused on homepage structures, top-level menu categories, stakeholder segmentation, quick links, admissions and academic programme pages, research and institutional profile sections, language or self-selection features, contact pages, FAQ sections, office directories, enquiry links, and social media integration. These elements were selected because they represent the main interface structures through which users encounter institutional information and interaction pathways (Herring, 2010; McMillan, 2000b; Schreier, 2012).

The unit of analysis was the website's interface element. An interface element refers to any visible component that performs a communicative function, such as a menu label, navigation pathway, homepage banner, stakeholder tab, visual content block, language selector, contact button, social media icon, or search facility. This unit of analysis allowed the study to examine how small design and content features combine to produce broader institutional visibility outcomes (Herring, 2010; McMillan, 2000b; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014).

Coding procedure and trustworthiness

The coding process involved four sequential stages. Initially, the researchers conducted operationalisation by repeatedly viewing the selected websites and recording visible communication features. Subsequently, interface elements were mapped according to stakeholder access pathways, including prospective students, current students, staff, alumni, researchers, industry partners, and public audiences. Following this, the elements were coded into the three main categories of content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). Finally, a cross-case synthesis was conducted to identify similarities, differences, and recurring institutional visibility mechanisms across UM, UPM, and UKM (Yin, 2018).

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used an audit trail of observed features, screenshot documentation, repeated comparison across cases, and theoretical triangulation with dialogic communication, web usability, and institutional visibility literature (Nowell et al., 2017). The coding process ensured operational transparency by linking each theme to observable interface features. The study does not claim to measure user satisfaction or actual website traffic. Instead, it provides a qualitative interpretation of how website architecture communicates institutional visibility.

Table 2. Coding framework for analysing institutional website visibility

Analytical Dimension	Operational Definition	Indicators Observed	Visibility Outcome
Content clarity	Organisation and presentation of institutional information for stakeholder understanding	Homepage content hierarchy; stakeholder categories; academic programme information; research information; institutional identity messages; bilingual or self-selection features	Informational visibility
Navigational usability	Ease with which users can locate information and move through the website	Menu structure; drop-down navigation; quick links; search facility; homepage layout; logical grouping of information	Access visibility
Dialogic engagement	Availability and visibility of interaction pathways between the university and stakeholders	Contact details; enquiry forms; FAQ; office directory; feedback links; social media icons; embedded communication channels	Relational visibility

FINDINGS

The findings identify four interrelated patterns across the three selected university websites. Initial observations concern content clarity and the production of informational visibility. Another significant pattern involves self-selection and multilingual or stakeholder-based access. Furthermore, navigation plays a key role concerning usability and the production of access visibility. Finally, relational visibility is produced through active dialogic engagement. Each finding is presented with a suggested location for website screenshots. The screenshots should be inserted as visual evidence, with date of capture and source indicated below each figure.

Content clarity constructs informational visibility

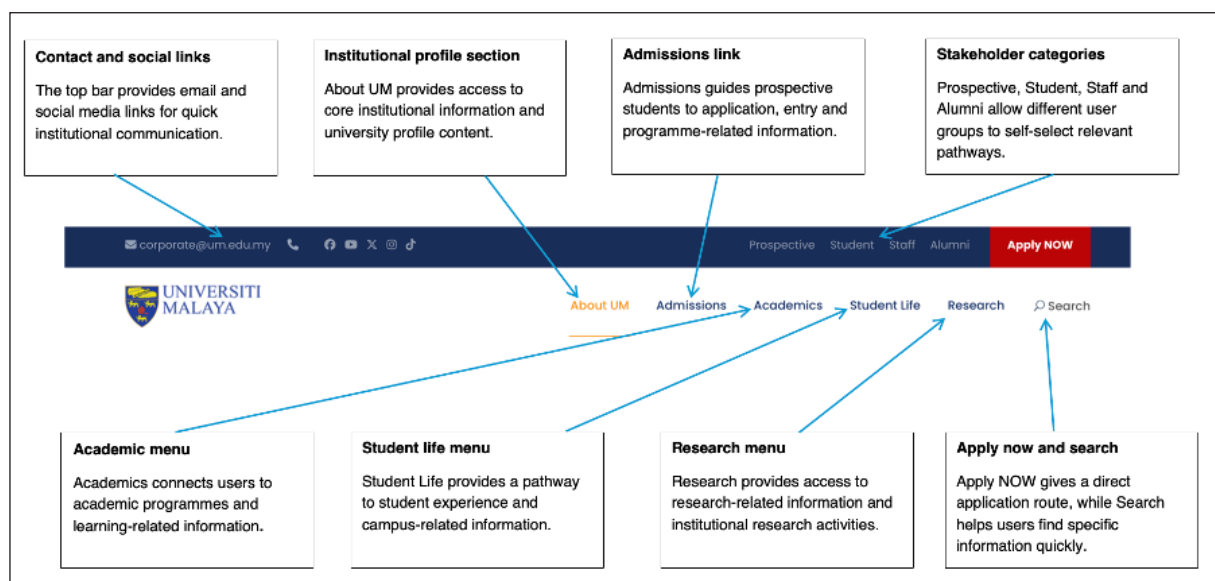
The first finding reveals that institutional visibility is constructed through the clear organisation and presentation of website content. Across UM, UPM, and UKM, the homepage functions as a primary visibility gateway. It introduces the institution to users by highlighting institutional identity, academic information, admissions, research,

campus life, services, and stakeholder categories. This content architecture transforms the homepage into a structured communication space where users can quickly understand what the university represents and where relevant information can be located.

Content clarity is particularly visible through the segmentation of information according to stakeholder needs. Instead of presenting all information as a single undifferentiated body of content, the websites organise information into categories such as admissions, academics, research, students, alumni, international affairs, campus life, services, and contact information. This segmentation supports informational visibility because it allows different publics to identify the parts of the institution that are relevant to them. For prospective students, admissions and programme information become visible. For researchers, research centres, expertise, and publications become visible. For public stakeholders, institutional achievements and official announcements become visible.

The websites also use visual hierarchy to signal institutional priorities. Homepage banners, institutional logos, ranking announcements, news sections, and featured achievements operate as visual cues that guide users toward key messages. This is important because institutional visibility is not only produced by the presence of information, but also by the prominence, arrangement, and interpretability of information. When university achievements, academic programmes, and research identity are placed visibly on the homepage, the website performs a reputational communication function.

The analysis indicates that content clarity contributes to informational visibility in multiple ways. Primarily, it reduces ambiguity by presenting institutional information through organised categories. Additionally, it lowers cognitive effort by allowing users to identify relevant information without excessive searching. Moreover, it enhances institutional representation by making selected aspects of the university more prominent to external publics. These patterns suggest that content clarity is not simply a design preference, but a strategic communication mechanism.



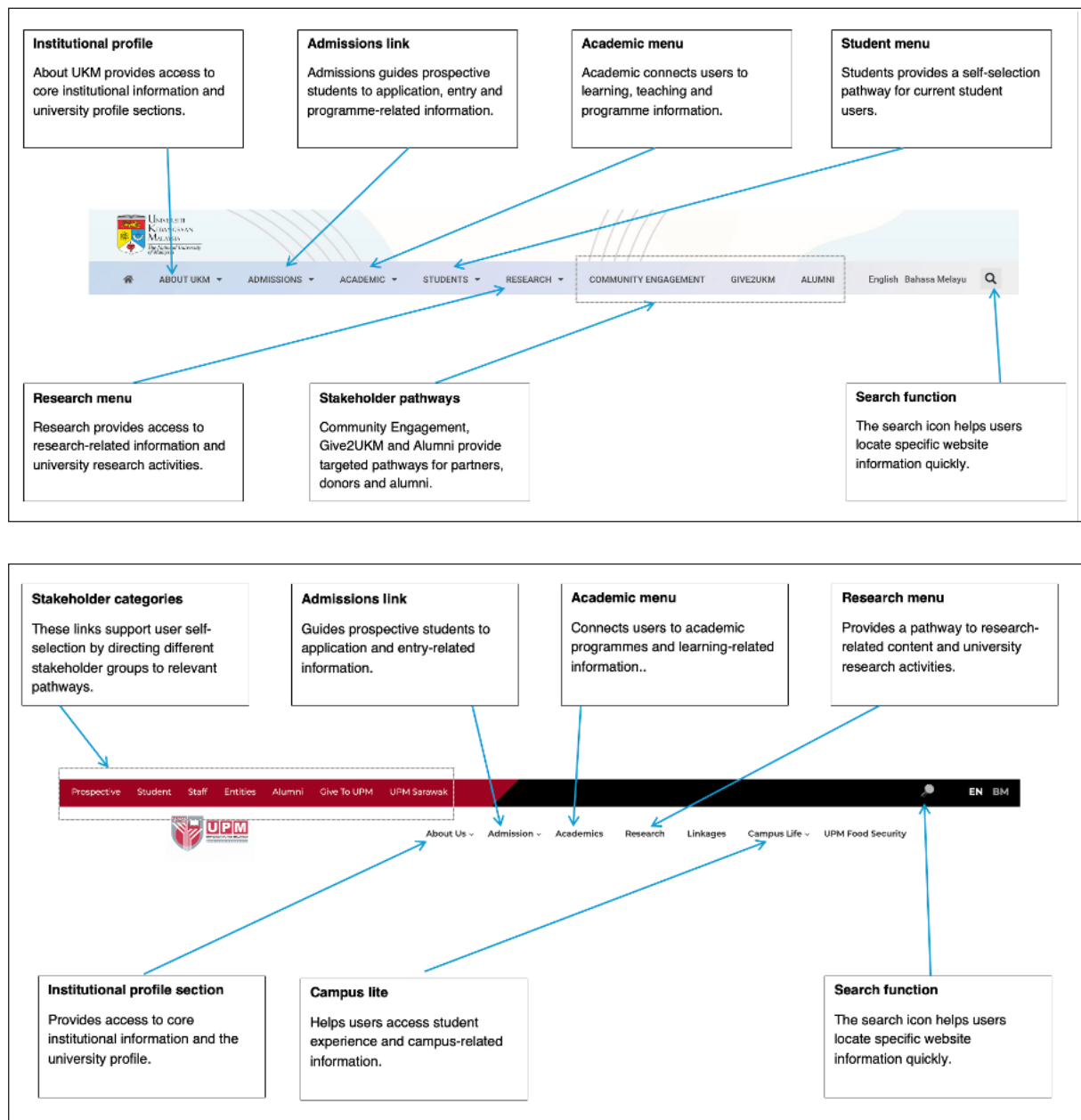


Figure 1. Website screenshots showing homepage or main menu structures of UM, UKM and UPM: Stakeholder categories, admissions links, academic menu, research menu, campus life or institutional profile sections.

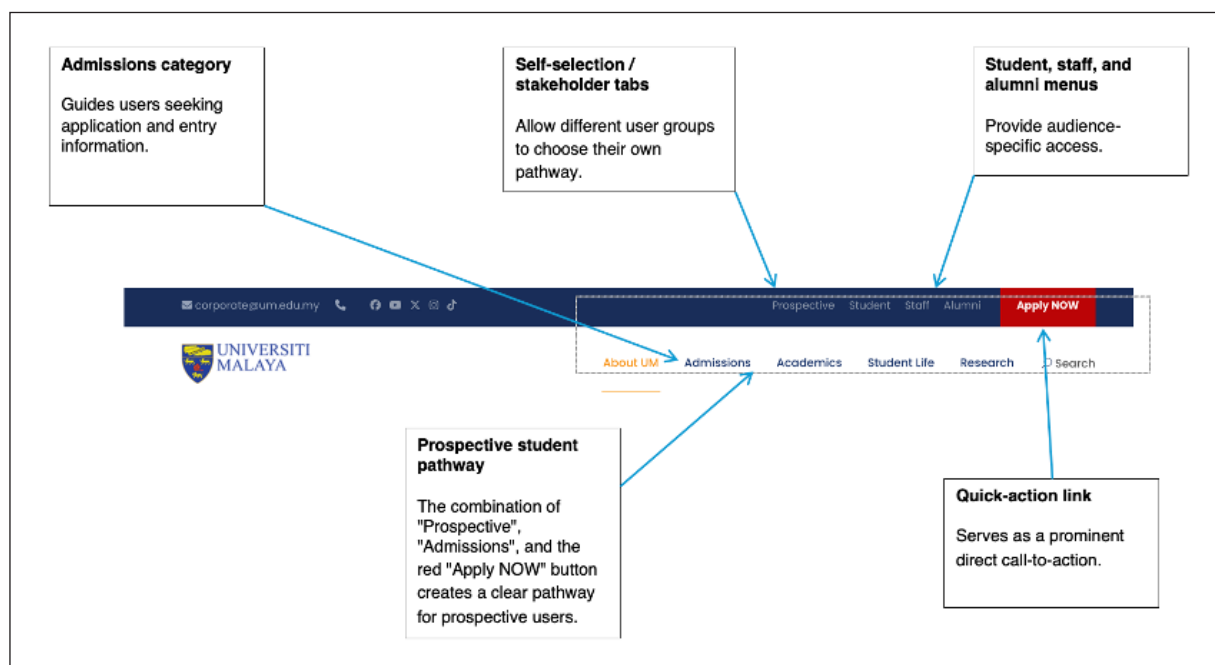
Self-selection features strengthen stakeholder-specific visibility

The second finding concerns the role of self-selection features in strengthening stakeholder-specific visibility. Self-selection refers to website features that allow users to choose information according to their needs, identity, language, or purpose of visit. These features are important because university websites serve multiple publics with different expectations. For instance, a prospective undergraduate student, an international postgraduate applicant, an academic collaborator, an alumnus, and a member of the public do not approach the website with the same information needs.

Across the selected websites, self-selection is visible in stakeholder-based menus, quick links, academic programme categories, language options, and dedicated sections for particular publics. These features enable users to enter the institutional information environment through a pathway that matches their information-seeking purpose. This contributes to visibility because it prevents important information from being hidden within a broad institutional architecture. When users are given visible pathways to choose their own information route, the website increases the chance that institutional content will be discovered and used.

Self-selection also has a language and accessibility dimension. Where language options or bilingual content are available, the website becomes more accessible to both local and international publics. In Malaysia, the strategic use of Bahasa Malaysia and English can support both national identity and global engagement. This is especially relevant for research universities that communicate with domestic students, international applicants, global academic partners, and government or industry stakeholders. Language accessibility therefore contributes to institutional visibility by broadening the interpretive reach of the website.

The analysis suggests that self-selection features create stakeholder-specific visibility. Instead of assuming a single general public, the websites recognise that visibility must be produced differently for different user groups. This finding is important because institutional visibility is not uniform. A university becomes visible to stakeholders when the website makes the relevant part of the institution visible to each stakeholder group.



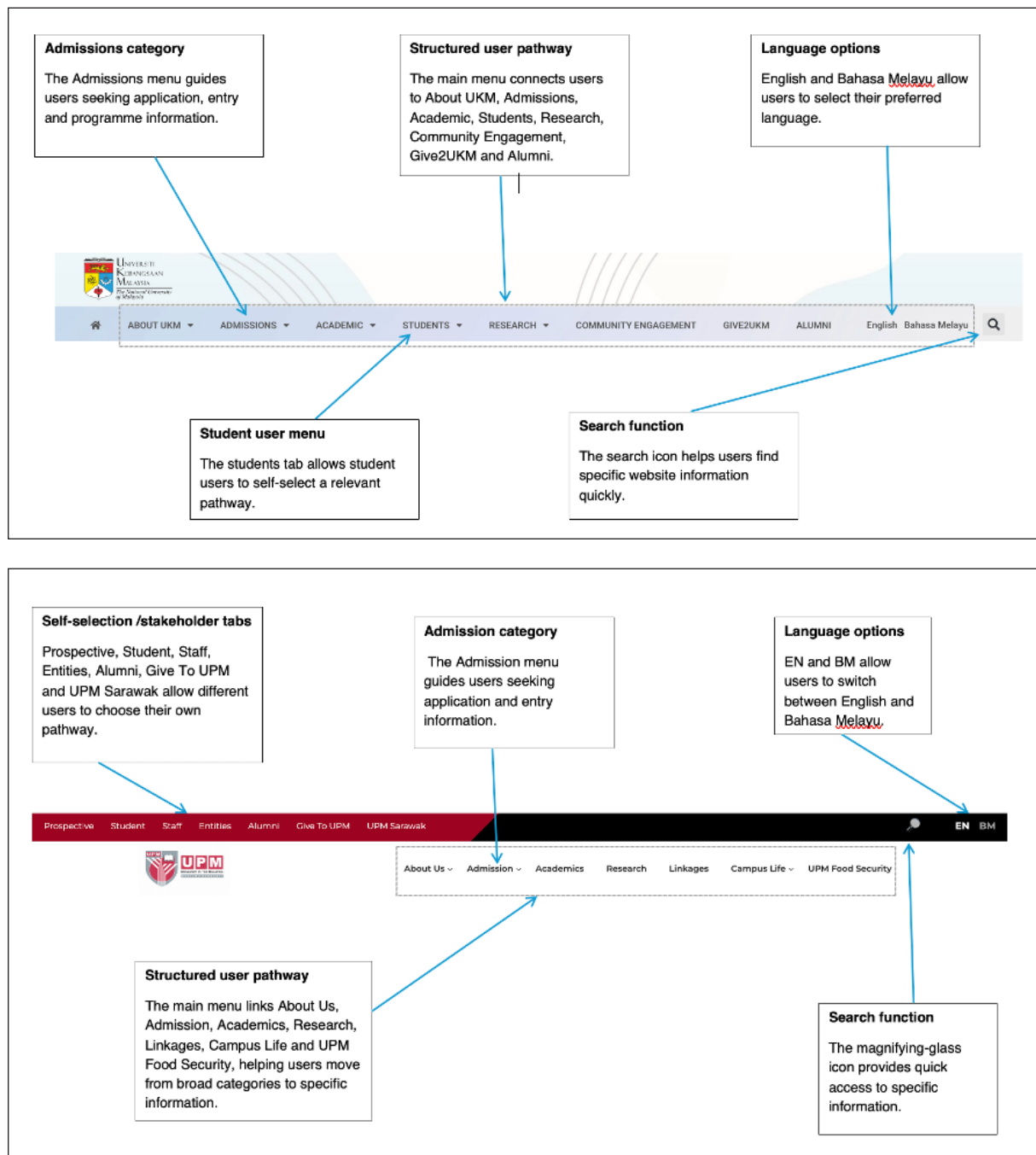


Figure 2. Website screenshots showing self-selection features, language options, stakeholder tabs, quick links, admissions categories, student/staff/alumni menus, or international user pathways for UM, UKM and UPM

Navigational usability produces access visibility

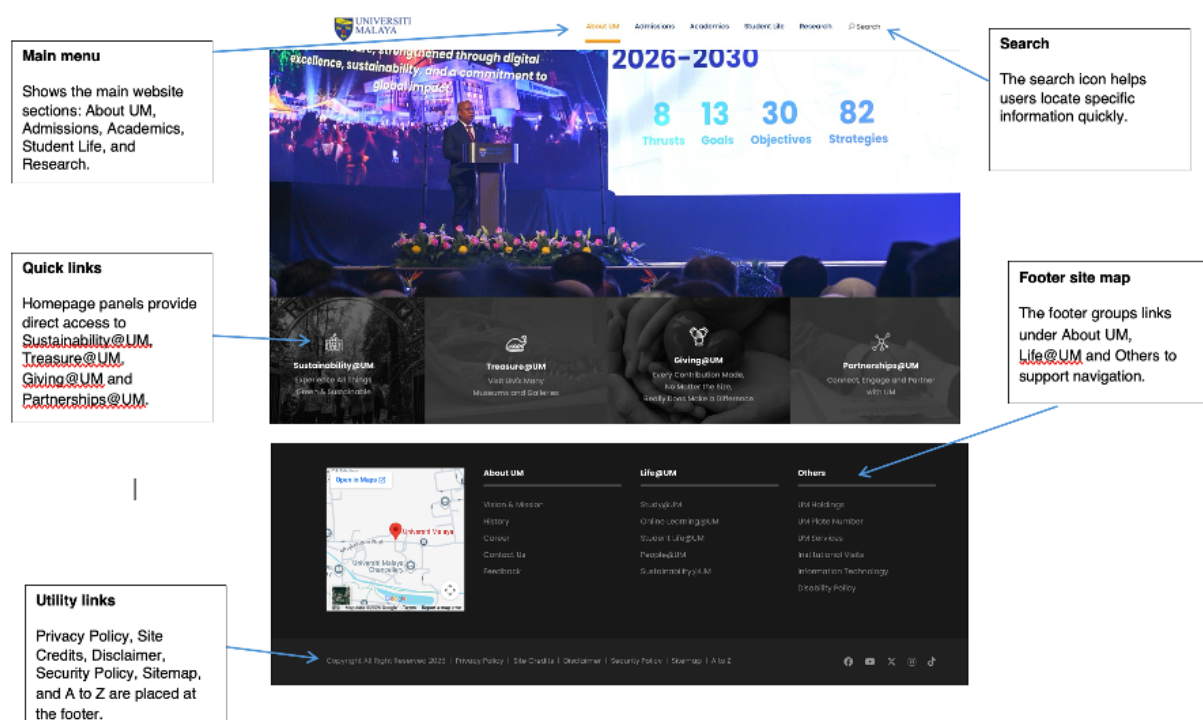
The third finding shows that navigational usability is a key mechanism through which universities produce access visibility. Access visibility refers to the extent to which institutional information can be easily located through the website's interface structure. Across the selected websites, access visibility is shaped by top-level menu design, drop-

down menus, quick links, search functions, homepage organisation, and the systematic grouping of information.

A visible institutional message is only useful when users can reach it efficiently. The analysis indicates that navigation structures serve as pathways that connect stakeholders to institutional information. Clear menu labels help users understand the structure of the website. Quick links reduce the number of steps required to reach frequently used information. Search functions provide an alternative route for users who do not follow the menu hierarchy. These navigational elements are therefore not merely technical features but communication devices that affect how institutional information is accessed and interpreted.

The selected websites demonstrate varying degrees of navigational organisation, but all three show an attempt to structure information through organised categories. The presence of admissions, academics, research, services, campus life, directory, and contact categories reflects an effort to anticipate user needs and reduce search complexity. Systematic layout also helps users evaluate the institution more quickly because important information is placed within predictable locations. For example, admissions information placed prominently on the homepage signals that prospective students are a major public. Research information placed visibly signals the institution's research identity. Contact and directory links signal openness to communication.

The analysis further shows that navigational usability contributes to perceived institutional professionalism. A website with clear pathways, consistent menus, readable labels, and organised layouts communicates competence and reliability. Conversely, weak navigation can reduce trust, make information appear fragmented, and weaken the user's perception of institutional credibility. This supports the argument that access visibility is not neutral; it affects how the institution is experienced by users.



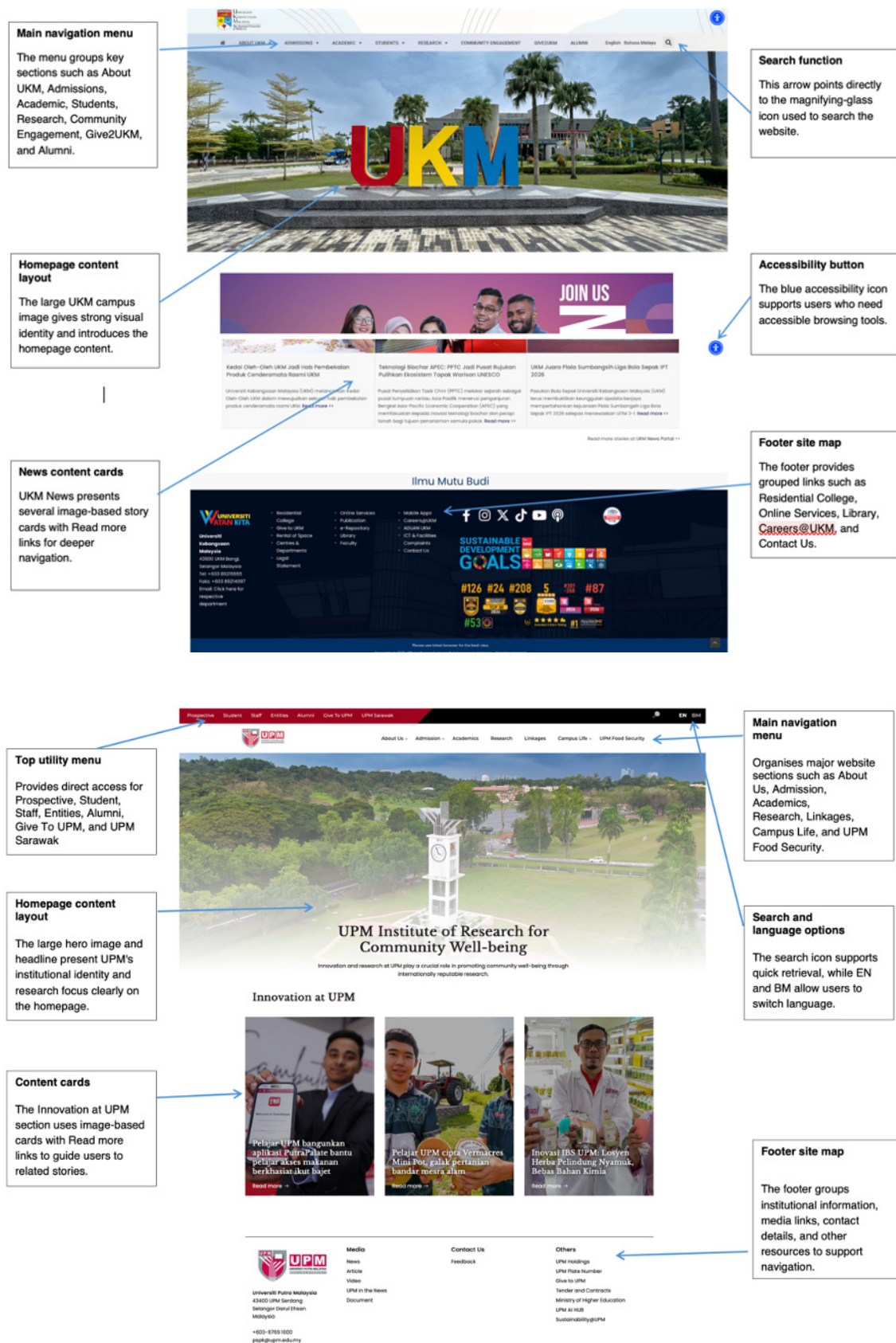


Figure 3. Website screenshots showing navigational features such as drop-down menus, search bars, quick links, homepage content layout, site map, or structured menu hierarchy for UM, UKM and UPM

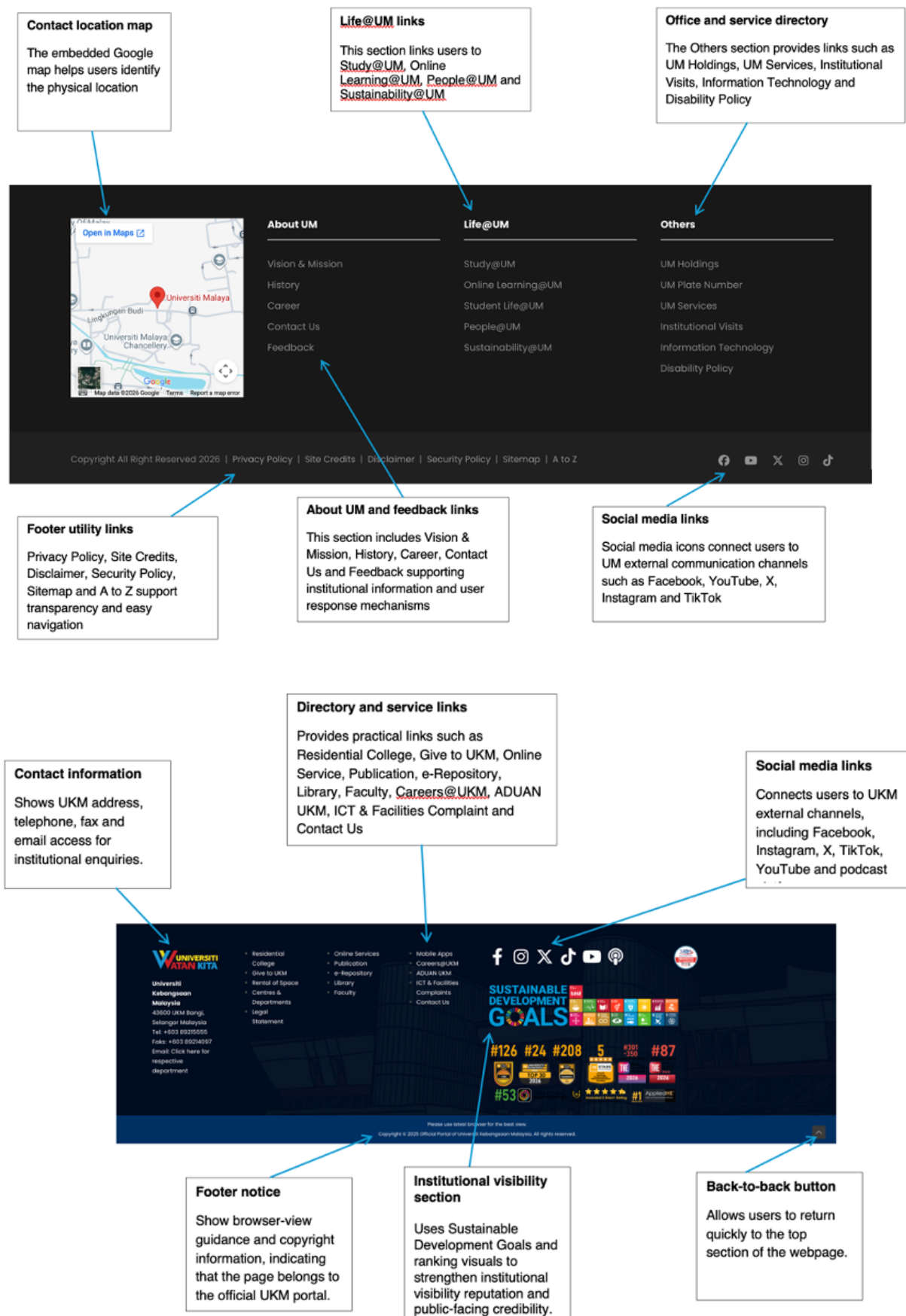
Dialogic engagement creates relational visibility

The final finding demonstrates that dialogic engagement contributes to relational visibility. Relational visibility refers to the extent to which the website makes the university available for contact, enquiry, feedback, and ongoing interaction. Across the selected websites, dialogic engagement is visible through contact details, office directories, enquiry channels, FAQ sections, social media links, and institutional communication pages.

The presence of contact information and enquiry channels is important because it transforms the website from a static information repository into a relational communication environment. Users are not only given information about the university; they are also shown how to communicate with the institution. This is particularly important in higher education because stakeholders often require direct contact for admissions, programme clarification, research collaboration, media enquiries, alumni relations, and student services.

Social media links further extend relational visibility by connecting the official website to broader digital communication ecosystems. When Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, X, or other social platforms are integrated into the website, the institution signals that communication continues beyond the official webpage. These links can support ongoing engagement, real-time updates, institutional storytelling, and networked visibility. However, the finding also suggests that the mere presence of social media icons does not guarantee dialogic communication. The icons must be visible, functional, and integrated into a meaningful stakeholder journey.

Dialogic engagement is therefore better understood as a continuum. At the basic level, the university provides contact details and social media links. At a stronger level, the website offers clear enquiry forms, responsive FAQ systems, segmented contact channels, and feedback mechanisms. At the highest level, the website actively supports reciprocal engagement by making interaction easy, visible, and relevant. The analysed websites demonstrate important dialogic affordances, but the evidence also suggests that dialogic potential could be strengthened through more interactive and stakeholder-specific communication mechanisms



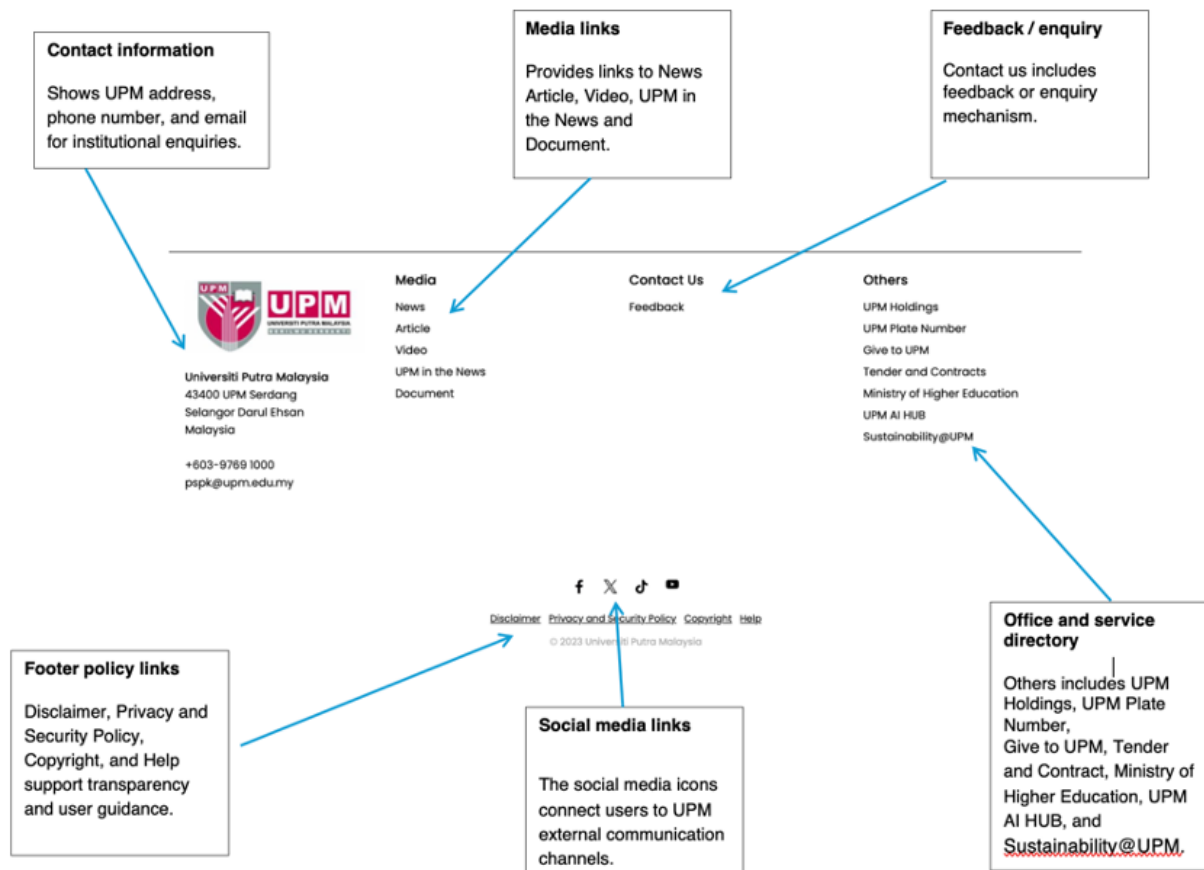


Figure 4. Website screenshots showing contact pages, enquiry forms, FAQ sections, office directory links, feedback mechanisms, or social media links for UM, UKM and UPM

Cross-case synthesis of findings

The cross-case synthesis shows that UM, UKM, and UPM share a common reliance on content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement as visibility-building mechanisms. However, the visibility outcomes are not identical. Differences are likely to emerge in the prominence of stakeholder categories, the clarity of menu architecture, the visibility of contact pathways, and the integration of social media into the website interface. Table 3 summarises the analytical synthesis.

Table 3. Cross-case synthesis of institutional website visibility mechanisms

Visibility mechanism	UM	UKM	UPM	Interpretive significance
Content clarity	Strong institutional identity and prominent academic/research information	Clear institutional identity supported by academic and stakeholder information	Stakeholder-oriented content categories and institutional service information	All three websites produce informational visibility by organizing institutional information into organized categories.

Table 3. (con't)

Visibility mechanism	UM	UKM	UPM	Interpretive significance
Self-selection	Visible pathways for prospective students, students, staff and institutional publics	Stakeholder access supported by institutional identity and user categories	Stakeholder links and service-oriented information pathways	Self-selection strengthens stakeholder-specific visibility by allowing users to locate relevant information based on purpose.
Navigational usability	Menu hierarchy, search and direct links support information discovery	Navigation supports access to academic and institutional information	Structured navigation and homepage layout support access to institutional services	Navigation produces access visibility by reducing information-search complexity.
Dialogic engagement	Contact information, directory and social links create interaction pathways	Contact and social media links extend institutional communication beyond the website	Contact channels and social media links support basic dialogic affordance	Dialogic features create relational visibility, but more interactive feedback mechanisms could strengthen two-way communication.

DISCUSSION

Reconceptualising institutional visibility as interface-level communication

The findings demonstrate that institutional visibility should not be understood only as a ranking position, webometric score, hyperlink pattern, or search engine outcome (Aguillo et al., 2008; Thelwall, 2002b). While these external indicators remain important, they do not explain the communication processes through which users encounter and interpret the institution. This study shows that visibility is also produced within the website interface through content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. These elements operate together to make institutional identity, information, services, and relationships visible to stakeholders.

This argument contributes to web visibility scholarship by shifting the focus from measurement to meaning. Webometric indicators can show the degree to which a university is visible across the web, but they cannot fully explain whether users can understand the university's institutional profile, find relevant stakeholder information, or engage with the institution through accessible contact pathways. The findings therefore support a communication-centred understanding of visibility. Institutional visibility is not merely about being found online; it is about being meaningfully represented, navigable, and reachable once users arrive at the website.

The findings also extend the dialogic communication theory. Kent and Taylor (1998) emphasized the capacity of websites to build relationships between organisations and publics. This study suggests that dialogic potential is shaped not only by interactive features, but also by the broader communication architecture of the website. Users must first understand the content and navigate the website before they can engage dialogically.

Thus, content clarity and navigational usability are preconditions for dialogic engagement. In this sense, dialogic communication should be analysed as part of an integrated interface system rather than as a separate feature (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

Content clarity as reputational framing

The first major implication of the findings is that content clarity functions as reputational framing. Universities selectively foreground information that communicates their institutional identity, such as rankings, academic programmes, research achievements, international collaborations, campus life, and public engagement. These choices are not neutral. They frame how stakeholders perceive the university and determine which aspects of the institution become salient (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014).

This finding aligns with recent research showing that universities use digital platforms to promote and differentiate institutional brand identity (Capriotti, Carretón et al., 2024). However, the present study shows that this branding work occurs not only on social media but also through website interface architecture. Homepage banners, menu labels, stakeholder categories, and content blocks operate as strategic framing devices. They communicate what the university considers important and how it wants to be perceived.

In the Malaysian research university context, content clarity is especially important because universities must communicate simultaneously to domestic and international audiences. They must present national relevance while also signalling global competitiveness. This dual communication task is visible in the way websites combine local identity, bilingual access, international ranking information, research excellence, and stakeholder service information. Content clarity therefore becomes a mechanism for balancing national embeddedness and global visibility.

Navigational usability as access equity and communication efficiency

The second implication concerns navigational usability. The findings show that navigation is not merely a technical usability concern; it is a communication issue linked to access equity and institutional transparency. When a university provides clear menus, quick links, search functions, and systematic layouts, it reduces barriers between stakeholders and institutional information (Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005). This is especially important for prospective students, international applicants, parents, and members of the public who may not understand the internal administrative structure of the university.

Recent accessibility research reinforces this point. WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) 2.2 emphasizes that web content should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (World Wide Web Consortium, 2024). Although this study did not conduct a technical accessibility audit, the findings indicate that user-oriented navigation and content organisation are communication conditions for inclusive visibility. A website that is difficult to navigate may technically contain information but still fail to make that information visible to users.

Navigational usability also supports communication efficiency. In a competitive higher education environment, users may compare multiple universities quickly.

If institutional information is difficult to locate, users may leave the site or form negative impressions of the institution. Conversely, clear navigation communicates professionalism, responsiveness, and user orientation. This supports the argument that usability contributes to reputational communication, not merely functional convenience.

Dialogic engagement and the limits of symbolic interactivity

The third implication concerns dialogic engagement. The findings show that all three websites contain features that support relational visibility, such as contact information, enquiry channels, directories, FAQ sections, and social media links. These features are important because they signal that the institution is available for communication. However, the findings also suggest that dialogic engagement often remains at the level of access provision rather than a fully developed two-way interaction.

This distinction is important. Symbolic interactivity occurs when a website displays interactive icons or contact links but does not necessarily facilitate sustained dialogue. Functional dialogic engagement occurs when the website provides clear, segmented, responsive, and meaningful pathways for communication. For example, a generic contact email provides a basic dialogic affordance, but a structured enquiry form with stakeholder categories and clear response expectations provides a stronger dialogic mechanism. Similarly, social media icons may extend visibility, but their dialogic value depends on whether the linked platforms support active interaction (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

This finding is consistent with recent studies suggesting that universities often use digital platforms primarily for information dissemination, even when interactive tools are available (Capriotti et al., 2023; Capriotti et al., 2024). The present study extends this observation to institutional websites by showing that dialogic potential is embedded in interface design. A website may be visible and informative but still only partially dialogic if interaction pathways are not sufficiently prominent, targeted, or responsive.

Toward an interface-level model of institutional visibility

Based on the findings, this article proposes an interface-level model of institutional visibility. The model consists of three mechanisms and three outcomes. Content clarity produces informational visibility. Navigational usability produces access visibility. Dialogic engagement produces relational visibility. These outcomes are interconnected. Informational visibility is weakened if navigation is poor. Access visibility is incomplete if the information lacks clarity. Relational visibility is limited if users cannot easily find interaction pathways.

The model suggests that universities should evaluate their websites not only through external metrics but also through the communicative quality of the interface. A high-ranking university website may still have weak institutional visibility if users cannot interpret its content, find stakeholder information, or contact the institution easily. Conversely, improvements in content organisation, navigation, and dialogic pathways can strengthen institutional visibility even before changes are reflected in ranking indicators.

This model also has methodological implications. Future studies can operationalise the three mechanisms through mixed methods, combining qualitative interface analysis, accessibility audits, user testing, web analytics, and stakeholder interviews. Such approaches would allow researchers to examine not only what website features are present but also how users experience and interpret them.

CONCLUSION

This article explains institutional visibility as something created through the university website interface. University websites are not only digital brochures, but also strategic communication platforms (Kang & Norton, 2006; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). The findings show that visibility is shaped by three main elements: clear content, easy navigation, and dialogic engagement (Thelwall, 2002b; Aguillo et al., 2008). These elements create informational visibility, access visibility, and relational visibility. This study also adds to the dialogic communication theory by showing that users must first understand and find information before meaningful interaction can happen (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

The findings suggest that universities should evaluate their websites based on how well they communicate with users. To improve visibility, communication teams should regularly review website content and design homepages based on user needs, not only internal university structures. Web administrators should improve search functions, mobile navigation, and accessibility by following WCAG 2.2 standards (Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005; World Wide Web Consortium, 2024). Dialogic features should also be improved through enquiry forms, stakeholder-based FAQs, and social media links that support meaningful engagement (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

This study is limited because it only analyses the visible website features of three Malaysian research universities during a specific period. It does not measure user experience, website traffic, or stakeholder perceptions. Future studies should include more types of universities, such as private, regional, and international institutions. They should also use mixed methods, including interface analysis, usability testing, accessibility audits, interviews, and web analytics. Overall, universities should not only focus on being online, but also design websites that clearly present their identity, make information easy to access, and support real communication with users.

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Flipping the script: Code-switching as a digital advertising tool in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the communicative functions of code-switching in Malaysian digital advertisements. Ten narrative-type code-switched commercials were selected based on: i) Malaysian product or service, ii) accessible on YouTube platform, and iii) 3-minute duration. Using Malik's (1994) Ten Communicative Functions of Code-Switching as the framework, textual and discourse analysis were conducted to identify how code-switching fulfils persuasive and communicative purposes in digital marketing. The findings reveal that the most frequent function was to amplify and emphasise a point, followed by lack of facility, habitual expression, lack of registrational competence, mood of speaker, to attract attention, pragmatic reasons, and to conform to group identity. Code-switching was strategically used to enhance clarity, prevent misunderstanding, and create emphasis, particularly when Malay equivalents were unavailable, overly formal, or less effective in conveying meaning. Common English expressions were preferred for their brevity and conversational ease. Beyond linguistic necessity, code-switching reflected emotional states, captured audience attention, adapted to varying contexts, and signalled group identity. Interestingly, older speakers were observed adopting youth slang, gaming jargon, and social media terms to bridge generational gaps and foster camaraderie. The study concludes that code-switching in Malaysian digital advertising is a versatile tool serving linguistic, social, and persuasive functions.

Keywords: **Code-switching, digital marketing, digital advertisements**

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multicultural country consisting of a mix of ethnicities, that is, Malay, Chinese, Indian and others. Each ethnic group has its own language, culture and practices that differentiate it from other ethnic communities. In addition, apart from the different ethnic languages, each state also has its own dialect which distinguishes people from each state. However, regardless of their differences in languages or dialects, Malaysians still have one common entity that binds them together, which is the national language. The Malay language is the national language of the country as prescribed by the Malaysian constitution. Hence, it has become the main medium of communication which is widely spoken and used by the majority of Malaysians.

Other than the Malay language, another language that is equally well-utilised by Malaysians is the English language, which is formally regarded as a second language in Malaysia. It has also become a compulsory subject in the education curriculum or syllabus along with the Malay language, and is primarily used in most economic sectors in the country. Malaysians are required to learn both languages since young. According to the national language policy, it is mandatory for all students to learn Malay and English from the primary level (Muthusamy, 2010). Hence, it is common knowledge that the majority of Malaysians are bilinguals whereby they are accustomed to and fluent in both languages.

Code-switching is frequently used in bilingual communities including Malaysians. It is a natural phenomenon of communication among Malaysians to switch from Malay to English and vice versa. Bishop (2007) pointed out that in multicultural countries, conversing via two or more languages alternately in a sentence is considered accurate communication. Such communication in this type of society is common because most of them are bilinguals. Code-switching happens extensively among the speakers, either consciously or unconsciously during formal or informal settings. In short, code-switching occurs in accordance to the context or situations in which both languages are utilised for specific communicative purposes (Saputra, 2018).

The use of code-switching has transcended beyond personal and social spheres to include the business sector. Currently, it has become an important marketing approach adopted by Malaysian brands in advertising their products digitally. On this note, Sulaiman et al. (2013) highlighted that code-switching or using more than one language alternately in advertisements can attract prospective customers effectively compared to the use of a single language because it effectively delivers messages to bilingual communities. Moreover, Astani et al. (2020) highlighted that code-switching can take place both in direct and indirect communication, which is crucial in the marketing of products or services.

The emergence of the internet has changed the commercial landscape all over the world. Businesses are moving away from traditional platforms such as television, radio and newspapers to advertise and market their products. In turn, the majority of them are spending millions yearly to utilise new digital media platforms for a wider reach of audiences and prospective buyers (Agil et al., 2022).

Besides that, changes in the social paradigm, particularly in relation to media usage among Malaysian consumers, is another catalyst which motivates Malaysian businesses to

adapt their marketing strategy to keep up with this trend. In this digital era, both the new and older generations are spending more time on social media. According to Wan Mohd Ghazali et al. (2024), advancements in technology have shifted TV viewing habits, with audiences increasingly moving away from free-to-air (FTA) channels. As a result, most businesses have migrated to digital media as a means to publicise and create awareness of their brands (Rowley, 2001). Undoubtedly, the transition from traditional media to digital media allows businesses to reach audiences at a larger scale and faster rate.

Research objectives

Due to the development and changes in marketing strategies, the present study intends to investigate the functions of code-switching in the digital advertisements of Malaysian products. It aims to enrich the existing literature on digital marketing, particularly advertisements in social media such as YouTube. This is most apposite since social media has become a must-have platform for most businesses wherein most of them have their own social media account (Ohajionu & Mathews, 2015). Specifically, the main purpose of the present study is to:

- i. Identify and analyse the functions of code-switching in the digital advertisements of Malaysian products, and
- ii. Unearth how code-switching fulfills the communicative purposes of digital advertisements.

Research questions

In fulfilling the purpose of the study, the research was guided by the following questions:

- i. What are the functions of code-switching in digital advertisements of Malaysian products?
- ii. How does code-switching fulfill the communicative purposes of digital advertisements for each function?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital media

The internet has brought about tremendous changes to various aspects of our lives including new practices in consumerism and marketing strategies. With the rise of digital media usage amongst consumers, many companies have shifted their marketing approaches to include digital marketing to reach their targeted markets. In the new digital era, most people choose to go online instead of traditional media because it is easier and faster to access information (Odun & Utulu, 2016). In the past, advertisers used traditional media such as printed media, billboards, television, radio, etc. as platforms for advertisements (Odun & Utulu, 2016). However, following current development, many now choose to go online for socialising, branding and marketing purposes because online platforms provide more effective means of communication and social evolution.

Online advertising has become increasingly prevalent due to the wide range of digital platforms available for companies to promote and market their brands. In their

study, Durmaz and Efendioglu (2016) highlighted the transition of traditional marketing to digital marketing and how companies took measures and initiatives to embrace the changes. They also contended that online platforms allow companies to communicate with consumers regarding their products and services. The advantages of digital media were also highlighted, including enabling businesses to reach target consumers more effectively. As the means of communication evolved, the field of marketing also changed, whereby businesses communicate with consumers through the use of digital media. The study also emphasised that traditional media remains a means of changing the perception of consumers towards products while digital media is a platform to speed up the purchasing process. The paper also listed out the applications of digital media including social media, search engines and viral marketing.

The utilization of social media is intended to increase the exposure of brands. This study is consistent with a later study conducted by Lakshmanan and Basariya (2017) where they mentioned that the digital platform is an ideal avenue for consumers to recognize and engage with brands more effectively compared to the usual banners and pop-up advertisements. It is worth noting that Malaysian brands too have been utilizing these platforms to maximize their efforts to reach out to consumers.

One of the most used platforms for marketing is YouTube. Some brands spend part of their revenue on online advertising such as paid advertisements on digital platforms like YouTube. Dehghani et al. (2016), in their study, found that YouTube advertising did affect recognition towards brands and customers' purchase intention. However, the right content and message is vital for digital advertising to be a success. The rates of advertisement on YouTube differ in accordance with the types of advertisements such as in-stream video advertising and in-video advertising. YouTube advertising is paid advertisement; therefore, companies need to allocate a specific portion of their budget for such purposes. Further, higher rates are applied depending on the demand for the product or service being advertised.

However, there are also advertisements which are created and uploaded on YouTube for free by various companies. Within the Malaysian context, these advertisements are normally produced in conjunction with certain celebrations or campaigns. For example, some of the most famous advertisements have been done by Petronas, Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB), and Telekom Malaysia (TM) for the major celebrations of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. It is also noted that the type of genre for most of these advertisements is unique, in that they are produced in a narrative or story-like manner embedded with strong social or moral messages. Moreover, most often these advertisements contain appealing and meaningful storylines that leave such a deep impression on Malaysians regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Due to this unique characteristic, these narrative-type YouTube advertisements were chosen as the focus of the present study.

In addition to focusing on free-narrative YouTube advertisements, this study distinguishes itself from previous research by adopting a different analytical lens. While past studies have primarily emphasized the types and effectiveness of digital marketing strategies (Barari et.al, 2026; Dolbec & Smith, 2025; Yeo et al., 2025; Zamri et al.,

2024), the current study highlights the emotional appeal embedded in storytelling-based advertisements, emphasizing the narrative-driven approach used to engage audiences. Furthermore, in Malaysia, most of the established brands or companies tend to use emotions and storytelling in advertisements to give value instead of the hard-selling type of advertisements that emphasize on brand awareness and how the brands are closely related to consumers.

Code-switching in advertisements

Advertising is a means to inform, expose and attract audiences and potential buyers. Advertisers may use different tools and techniques to make the advertisements a success. Some may use one language, while others may utilize code-switching in their advertisements depending on their focus and context. Code-switching is used in many advertisements, especially in a multicultural society where the community speaks more than one language. Cowley (2016) mentioned that in the past, code-switching was considered a language flaw and speakers who incorporated words from another language in their communication were perceived as incompetent. However, the views on code-switching slowly changed when many researchers started to delve deeper into its intricacies in terms of its features and consequences.

Several studies have been conducted focusing on code-switching in advertisements. Among the earliest studies were by Luna and Peracchio (2005a), who investigated the persuasiveness of code-switched advertisement, aiming to identify how code-switched advertisements affect the perception of code-switching among bilingual speakers. The framework used to assist their study was the Markedness Model by Myers-Scotton (1993). Two studies were discussed comprehensively in their article. In the first study, the participants involved were 105 fluent Spanish-English bilinguals whereby they were given eight slogans that consisted of a code-switched word. Two languages became the focus, English as the majority language and Spanish as the minority language.

The first study aimed to see the effects of code-switched components in terms of perception and attitude towards code-switched advertisements. The results of this study showed that code-switched slogans from minority to the majority language were more persuasive compared to slogans from the majority to the minority language. The second study involved 56 fluent Spanish-English bilinguals and the focused text was the cover of a magazine consisting of code-switched excerpts of these two languages, either English to Spanish or vice versa. Similar to the first study, the findings from the second study also indicate that the shift from the minority to majority language was much more favourable as compared to advertisements which code-switched from the majority to the minority language.

Building on the work of Luna and Peracchio (2005b) which examined code-switched advertisements in isolation, Bishop and Peterson (2010) explored how the surrounding medium influences bilingual consumers' responses to Spanish-English code-switching. Drawing on neuroscience and sociolinguistic theories, the study developed a model tested on 122 bilingual Mexican Americans. Results showed that when the primary language of a code-switched advertisements matched the language of the medium

(for example, Spanish advertisements in a Spanish medium), it led to a better recall of the advertisements and heightened perceptions of the advertiser's cultural sensitivity. This, in turn, enhanced cognitive engagement and persuasion. Thus, the findings suggest that aligning the advertisement's language with the medium can improve advertising effectiveness.

Since then, research on code-switching and advertisements has continued to gain momentum with different scholars contributing to the existing literature with a new scope of interest and different community background. For instance, Ahn et al. (2016) investigated code-switching and its influence on advertising attitude and product evaluations through the lens of the Markedness Model within the context of the Korean society. Their study involved 130 Korean tertiary education students, fluent in Korean and English, examining printed advertisements as a stimulus and answering related questions. Findings from this study showed that both Korean–English and transliterated Korean–English code-switching led to a more positive attitude towards the slogan and better product evaluations compared to English–Korean switching.

Investigations on code-switching and advertisements have gained similar appeal and interest among Malaysian researchers. Moreover, code-switched advertisements are a common feature in the multiracial commercial landscape of the country. A study by Sulaiman et al. (2013) investigated the attitude, reasons of perception and impact of code-switched advertisements on the persuasion level of consumers. Their study focused on Malay-English code-switching in advertisements, addressing a gap in research on audience attitudes and perceptions within the Malaysian marketing context. Using a survey of 30 respondents, data were collected through a Likert-scale and open-ended questionnaires. The findings revealed generally positive perceptions of code-switched advertisements. However, some respondents expressed concerns, suggesting that such advertisements might lack professionalism and could be ineffective in persuasion. Despite these mixed views, the study concluded that code-switching holds potential as a persuasive marketing strategy for advertisers in Malaysia.

Besides that, Hadei et al. (2016) conducted a study which utilised data from YouTube. This study focused on identifying the social factors that motivate code-switching in Malay-English bilingual speech. Data were collected by transcribing short video clips of bilingual conversations and then analysed using Malik's (1994) framework to explore the social functions and dimensions of the language switches. The analysis revealed that the most common motivation for code-switching was to express one's sense of identity with a particular group. These findings offer valuable insights into the reasons Malaysian bilinguals switch languages in everyday communication.

A recent study by Ramba and Abu Bakar (2024) examined code-switching among Malaysian bilingual radio announcers on radio stations, Hitz FM and Mix FM. Using Poplack's (1980) typology and Gumperz's (1977) functions, findings revealed tag switching as the most common, mainly for interjections, qualification, reiteration, and quotation, underscoring its role as a key strategy for engaging diverse audiences. An equally recent study that focused on social media was conducted by Adnan and Nik Mat (2024) who examined code-mixing by Malaysian Instagram influencers in product endorsements,

focusing on types and motivations. Using a qualitative design, data collected from five influencers across niches were analysed. Guided by Muysken's (2000) framework, insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalisation emerged as key categories. Their findings showed that influencers strategically employ code-mixing to engage with multicultural audiences, build personal connections, and boost endorsement impact, underscoring its effectiveness as a linguistic strategy in social media marketing.

From the literature above, it is noted that despite the fact that code-switching has become a common feature in the Malaysian digital advertising industry, very few studies have been conducted to investigate the different functions of this feature, especially in digital marketing. The current study aims to add to the intellectual discussion on this aspect.

METHODOLOGY

In achieving the purposes of the study, identifying suitable narrative-type digital advertisements on the YouTube channel became the first main task. The sampling of videos was done based on the criteria shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria for selection of video advertisements

Criteria	
1	Malaysian product/service advertisements
2	Published and accessible on YouTube
3	The minimum duration of the advertisement videos is 3 minutes
4	Contains code-switch elements of Malay and English

Eventually, a total of 10 video advertisements were identified and were immediately coded. Contextual information of these advertisements and their codes are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Contextual information and coding system of selected video advertisements

Code	Title and Contextual Information
A01	TM's 2018 Raya ad — #MakLongBawang This Raya ad tells the story of Mak Long, a nosy aunt who asks uncomfortable personal questions during Raya and upsets Kamal and Maryam, her younger relatives. Initially, they are annoyed with Mak Long but over time, they realise that she doesn't mean harm, although her comments seem intrusive, her intention comes from honest care. The storyline emphasizes empathy in maintaining family harmony during the festive season.
A02	Watsons' Raya ad — #MisiIkhlasAidilfitri This advertisement tells the story of a well-known TV host known as Munira who appears glamorous and confident but in reality, self-absorbed and dismissive. Everything changes, when she sees herself through "truth glasses" which reveal how others truly see her. Being confronted with her own unkind behaviour, leads to a transformation where she starts reflecting and finds the true meaning of Aidilfitri, that celebrates other aspects such as sincerity and meaningful relationships.

Table 2. (con't)

Code	Title and Contextual Information
A03	TM's 2019 Raya ad — Atuk Gamer #LebihUntukMu <i>Atuk Gamer</i> is a heart-warming story of a grandfather who learns gaming to connect with his grandson. His efforts in stepping out of his comfort zone and mastering new tech trends portrays how connectivity can bridge generational gaps. This ad shows how technology can bring different generations closer to each other, especially during festive seasons like Raya.
A04	Masta Chef <i>Masta Chef</i> by Mat Luthfi, in collaboration with DahMakan, uses humour and parody to celebrate the Malaysian food culture. By blending parody and styling it like a competitive cooking show, the ad highlights and promotes local food appreciation.
A05	PETRONAS' 2019 National & Malaysia Day ad — UNI This advertisement reflects Malaysia's multicultural story, following Roger from Sabah and Rizwan from Kedah. Due to cultural differences, they did not get along at first, but when they are forced to work together during their university's semester break, a friendship slowly develops.
A06	PETRONAS' 2017 National & Malaysia Day ad — Piala Taman Thomas The short film shows a group of boys challenging badminton legends Rashid Sidek and Foo Kok Keong for a spot to play on the court. What begins as rivalry becomes a lesson in teamwork and determination. It captures teamwork, unity and friendship in a light-hearted way.
A07	PETRONAS' 2017 Deepavali ad — Arathi's First Love <i>Arathi's First Love</i> is a heartwarming Deepavali story centred around a schoolgirl named Arathi who develops a crush on her new classmate, Ivan. Her friends tease her about it, making her feel embarrassed, which indirectly puts their friendship to the test. The story beautifully captures the spirit of friendship and forgiveness during Deepavali.
A08	TNB's 2019 Raya ad — Konvoi Epik Fantastik <i>Konvoi Epik Fantastik</i> tells the story of a family's chaotic road trip back to their hometown for Hari Raya, where they face hiccups along the way. This ad highlights the importance of togetherness and the true meaning of Raya.
A09	Filem Pendek Hari Raya — Mana Tok Ucu? <i>Mana Tok Ucu?</i> is a Raya short film about a group of grandchildren who try to locate their missing grandmother during the lockdown. The story highlights family bonding as they use video calls and the internet to work together to find Tok Ucu.
A10	#BakalMertuakuGengster This advertisement, in collaboration with Touch 'n Go, tells the story of a man trying to build a good relationship with his father-in-law, who happens to be a gangster. It promotes the use of the Touch 'n Go eWallet in a humorous and entertaining way.

In order to identify the functions of code-switching in Malaysian brands' advertisements, the collected videos were transcribed and analysed qualitatively using Malik's (1994) Ten Communicative Functions of Code-Switching (refer to Table 3). During the analysis, each video transcription was carefully and meticulously perused to match the utterances to the different functions in the framework. Inter-rater reliability was applied at this stage to avoid misclassification of codes and classification for the function of code switching.

Table 3. Malik's (1994) ten communicative functions of code-switching

Social Factors of Code-Switching	Definitions
To identify with a group	Code-switching happens when bilingual speakers want to conform with the identity of a specific group
To address different audiences	Code-switching is used to convey messages to people from different languages.
Lack of facility	Bilingual speakers use code-switching to explain concepts in order to avoid misunderstanding
Pragmatic reasons	Code-switching occurs depending on the context, for example, formality, participants, and location in which a conversation is taking place
Lack of registrational competence	Bilingual speakers code-switch when they have difficulties in expressing a certain word in the targeted language
Semantic significance	Conveys a vital linguistic and social information
To attract attention	Media uses this type of code-switch to grab the attention of the audience by using two or more languages.
Habitual expressions	Code-switching happens in a fixed phrase, for example, greetings, commands, requests, apologies, and discourse markers
To amplify and emphasize a point	Code-switching to highlight a specific argument or point
Mood of speaker	Code-switching happens depending on a certain mood (angry, anxious, or nervous)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The validated number of occurrences of code-switched elements in the 10 videos which complemented Malik's (1994) communicative functions are as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Occurrences of code-switching

Social Factors	Frequency
To amplify and emphasize a point	29
Lack of facility	25
Habitual expression	19
Lack of registrational competence	19
Mood of speaker	17
To attract attention	15
Pragmatic reasons	13
To identify with a group	11
Semantic significance	3
To address different audiences	0
Total	151

A total of 151 occurrences of code-switched words were identified across the 10 advertisements uploaded on YouTube. It was found that the most used function was to amplify and emphasize a point which scored the highest number of occurrences (29) compared to other functions. This is followed by lack of facility (25), habitual expression

(19), lack of registral competence (19), mood of speaker (17), to attract attention (15), pragmatic reasons (13) and to identify with a group (11). The least used communicative function of code-switching was semantic significance with 3 occurrences. Meanwhile, it was noted that none of the advertisements utilised code-switching to address different audiences. This result contrasts with that of Hadei et al. (2016) whose study revealed that the social function of identifying with a group was the most common motivation for code-switching. Further exploration of each function was carried out via the discourse analysis approach. The results are provided next. All occurrences in the Malay language have been translated.

To amplify and emphasise a point

Code-switching occurs when a speaker wants to highlight a specific argument or point. A few examples are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. To amplify and emphasise a point

Line	Occurrences	Code
1	Ini Munira, pengacara <i>popular</i> . (This is Munira, the famous host).	A02
2	Aku yang <i>famous</i> , kau yang panas. (I am famous, you are angry).	A02
3	Harini I nak share some <i>wonderful products from Watson</i> . (Today I want to share some wonderful products from Watson).	A02
4	Ha! You. Boleh you ambikkan <i>contact lens solution</i> tu tak? (Ha! You. Can you take that contact lens solution?).	A02

In Line 1: “Ini Munira, pengacara *popular*” and in Line 2: “Aku yang *famous*, kau yang panas”, it could be seen that the speaker used code-switched words such as *popular* and *famous*. Both words have the same meaning, and they were used consecutively. It could be deduced that in this instance, the speaker code-switched from Malay to English because she wanted to highlight that she is a well-known person. In addition, in Line 3, “Har ini I nak *share some wonderful products from Watson*”, the phrase *share some wonderful products from Watson* indicates that she wanted people to concentrate on her message, that is, Watson sells many wonderful products. This is followed by Line 4 where she used the phrase *contact lens solution*, highlighting that this is one of the products that could be found in Watson. Furthermore, the phrase *contact lens solution* is a common term used by Malaysians. These examples from the advertisement clearly indicate that in order for the speakers to emphasise or stress their points effectively, they would code-switch by using lexical items which people are more familiar with.

Lack of facility

Bilingual speakers use code-switching to explain concepts to avoid misunderstanding. More importantly, they switch to English when they are unable to find the equivalent words or phrases in Malay. Lack of facility prompted them to code-switch as the translated version of the words may not carry the intended precise meaning. Hence,

instead of using Malay words throughout their utterances, they would resort to using English words for the messages to be well conveyed. Lack of facility is illustrated in the following examples in Table 6.

Table 6. Lack of facility

Line	Occurrences	Code
5	Kami tengah sibuk duk terawih, baca doa, dia boleh duk <i>selfie</i> ? (<i>We are occupied with 'terawih prayer', making supplications, but he is busy with selfie?</i>).	A10
6	Ini bahagian Mak Cik, Mak Cik punya ada <i>cashback</i> ! (<i>This is your portion, yours has a cashback</i>).	A10
7	Manalah aku tahu, dia pergi Genting Highlands ke, tempat yang <i>chill</i> , sejuk, yang ada <i>roller coaster</i> tu. (<i>He went to Genting Highlands, a cold and chilly place with roller coasters</i>).	A09
8	Bukan rumah Tok Ucu ada <i>CCTV</i> ke? (<i>Doesn't your house have a CCTV, Tok Ucu?</i>)	A09
9	Eh drone delivery? Eh <i>innovative</i> juga. (<i>Eh, delivery via drone? That's innovative</i>).	A09
10	Eh Hakim, kau cuba tengok dua <i>hashtag</i> ni. (<i>Eh Hakim, please take a look at these two hashtags</i>).	A09
11	Okay, kita pergi <i>search</i> dekat area kampung Tok Ucu tu sesiapa yang ada <i>drone</i> . Mesti ada <i>footage</i> . (<i>Ok, let's find someone who has a drone in Tok Ucu's village. Surely there are footages</i>).	A09

From the examples in Table 6, it could be deduced that words such as *selfie*, *cashback*, *CCTV*, *drone delivery*, *hashtag* and *footage* were better conveyed in English to ensure clarity in the meaning of the utterances. In general, Malaysians are more familiar with the English version of these terms due to the frequent exposure they receive from their surroundings. Moreover, replacing the word *selfie* with its Malay equivalent, which is *swafoto*, may not convey the message with the same impact that it should because the term is uncommonly used among Malaysians. This finding reverberates with that of previous studies such as Bishop and Peterson (2010) as well as Ahn et al. (2016) that reflected a positive attitude in the use of code-switched words in English to encourage advertising effectiveness and product evaluation.

Habitual expression

Next, code-switching is also employed for habitual expressions such as greetings, commands, requests, apologies, and discourse markers. A few examples of this social function are illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7. Habitual expressions

Line	Occurrences	Code
12	<i>Sorry</i> tak dapat balik raya tahun ni! Selamat Hari Raya! (<i>Sorry, can't go back for Raya this year! Selamat Hari Raya!</i>)	A01
13	<i>Sorry</i> Cik. Siapa cepat, dia dapatlah. (<i>Sorry Miss. First come, first serve</i>).	A02

Table 7. (con't)

Line	Occurrences	Code
14	<i>Excuse me?</i> Eh, kau kenal tak aku ni siapa? Munira. M-U-N-I-R-A. Satu Malaysia kenal aku kut. (<i>Excuse me? Do you know who I am? I am MUNIRA. The whole Malaysia knows me</i>).	A02
15	Haa. ni nak dekat raya, bawak kereta tu baik baik ye. <i>Drive carefully</i> . (<i>Haa....Raya is approaching. Drive carefully</i>).	A01
16	<i>Bye...</i>	A01

In Lines 12, 13 and 14, the phrases *sorry* and *excuse me* are common habitual expressions used by bilingual speakers in Malaysia. Words like *Sorry* and *Excuse me* are translated as *Maaf* (*sorry*) or *Maafkan saya* (*Excuse me*) in the Malay language. It is rare for Malaysians to use Malay words as they might sound too formal to be used in a conversation. Thus, code-switched words have become the habitual expressions used by Malaysians, be it in formal or informal settings. In Line 15, the phrase *drive carefully* was a reminder to drive safely. It is an expression used to remind someone to stay safe while driving. It would undeniably sound “awkward” should the speaker use the Malay language equivalent, which is *Selamat memandu*.

In Line 16, *Bye* is another common word to be used for parting or ending a conversation. Malaysians commonly use *Bye* instead of *Selamat Tinggal* (Malay) because *Bye* is much shorter and easier to utter. Besides, the Malay term *Selamat Tinggal* is normally used in the formal context and in written form, rather than oral.

Lack of registrational competence

Bilingual speakers code-switch when they have difficulties in choosing certain words in the targeted language. In addition, code-switching happens due to certain phrases sounding much better in the second language (L2) than the first language (L1). Table 8 presents some examples of occurrences for this social function.

Table 8. Lack of registrational competence

Line	Occurrences	Code
17	Pak Cik, yang paling penting dalam <i>relationship</i> bukanlah budak kampung dan pernah bertumbuk. (<i>For me (Pak cik), the most important thing in a relationship is that he is not a village kid and has not been involved in violence</i>).	A10
18	Pak Cik, zaman sekarang kita dah ada <i>smartphones</i> . (Pak Cik, we have smartphones now).	A10
19	Dia pergi <i>holiday</i> kut. (<i>Maybe he went for a holiday</i>).	A09
20	Jap aku <i>search</i> . (<i>Wait, let me search</i>).	A09
21	Tok Ucu tu sebenarnya nenek saya, Kitaorang risau pasal dia, <i>call-call</i> tak dapat. (<i>Tok Ucu is my grandmother. We are worried about her, our calls were not answered</i>).	A09
22	Ha, You. Boleh you ambikkan <i>contact lens solution</i> tu tak? (<i>Ha! You. Can you take that contact lens solution?</i>).	A02

The examples in Table 8 show the speakers' preference in using words in L2, although there are equivalent words in L1. For instance, the term *smartphones* in Line 18 has its equivalent in the Malay language, which is *telefon pintar*. However, using *telefon pintar* in the utterance may create an odd feeling of being too formal. Other than that, as seen in Line 22, the phrase *contact lens solution* was used to indicate that among the things sold in Watson are contact lens solutions. In this instance, the use of English was deemed more effective in conveying the message since majority of Malaysians are more familiar with such a phrase than the Malay equivalent, which is *solusi untuk kanta sentuh*.

Mood of speaker

Code-switching also happens depending on the mood of the speaker such as angry, anxious, or nervous. Several scenarios are presented in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Mood of speaker

Line	Occurrences	Code
24	Mimie, <i>not now</i> . Latte I mana? (annoyed) (<i>Mimie not now. Where is my latte?</i>)	A02
25	Cuba jangan <i>spoil</i> kan drama ni. (annoyed) (<i>Please do not spoil this drama</i>).	A02
26	<i>My stomach doesn't deserve this</i> . Hanya layak untuk orang yang takde <i>taste</i> ! (sarcastic). (<i>My stomach doesn't deserve this. This is only for those without taste</i>).	A04

In Line 24, the speaker gives a stern warning that she is in a lousy mood via the phrase *not now* which clearly reflects her state of mind at that time. Meanwhile, Line 25 shows that the speaker resorted to code switch in the middle of the sentence by using the term *spoil* to emphasise her annoyance to the development of the drama that she was watching. Another example is shown in Line 26 whereby the speaker highlighted her annoyance through her sarcastic remark by the code-switched phrase, *My stomach doesn't deserve this*. From these examples, it could be deduced that code-switching is used as a means by speakers to accentuate their mood or state of mind and emotions during a conversation. Using L1 in these instances may fall short of achieving its intended effect.

To attract attention

Code-switching is also used to attract the attention of the listeners or audience. This scenario mostly occurs at the beginning of the sentences or at the start of a conversation. A few examples are shown in Table 10.

Table 10. To attract attention

Line	Occurrences	Code
27	Eh <i>freshie</i> , selamat datang. Siapa nama awak? (<i>Eh freshie, welcome. What is your name?</i>)	A05
28	<i>Roger, make some friends</i> . Okay?	A05
29	Eh <i>Apek</i> . <i>ready or not?</i>	A06

In Line 27, the speaker used the term *freshie* to attract the listeners' attention and to indicate that they are being specifically addressed in the conversation. The speaker then code-switched again to L1 for the remaining of the conversation, once the listeners have started to listen and given their attention to the speaker. Line 28 shows that the speaker used L2 to attract the attention of the listener, *Roger*, and to point out the need for him to make friends. However, Line 29 shows a slightly different pattern in that the code-switch phrase is found at the end of the sentence, yet the purpose remains the same, which is to attract the attention of the listener(s). Here, the listener, *Apek*, was being asked on his state of readiness.

Pragmatic reasons

Code-switching also occurs depending on the context such as the formality of the occasion, participants, and location in which the conversation takes place. The examples are illustrated in Table 11.

Table 11. Pragmatic reasons

Line	Occurrences	Code
30	<i>And cut!</i>	A02
31	Eh <i>freshie</i> , selamat datang. (<i>Eh freshie, welcome</i>).	A05
32	<i>Announcing the arrival of, You must be Mr Roger Buang</i>	A05
33	Belum <i>Chef</i> . (<i>Not yet Chef</i>).	A04
34	<i>Uncle</i> , lama sudah kami tunggu ni. (<i>Uncle, we have been waiting here for so long</i>).	A06

The examples in Table 11 demonstrate that code-switching took place based on the conversational context. For instance, *And cut* (Line 30), *Eh freshie, selamat datang* (Line 31) and *Announcing the arrival of, You must be Mr. Roger Buang* (Line 32) are examples of how code-switched phrases were used in sentences to indicate the location that the conversation took place. In Line 30, it could be deduced that the situation took place in a set and the one who uttered this phrase was the director. In addition, in Line 31, the term *freshie* is the colloquial term for university freshman. Moreover, the following phrase *Selamat datang* or *Welcome* further denotes that the context could refer to the beginning of an academic programme.

As for the formality context, certain forms of honorifics were used including *Chef* and *Uncle*. *Chef* in Line 33 was used in the context of a cooking show. Meanwhile, *Uncle* in Line 34 is a colloquial term of respect used by the young in Malaysia to address older people and it was used by the children in the video advertisement.

To identify with a group

Code-switching happens when bilingual speakers want to conform with the identity of a specific group (Malik, 1994). The sentences in Table 12 are examples of code-switching used by the speakers to identify with a particular group.

Table 12. To identify with a group

Line	Occurrences	Code
35	Apa yang <i>back up</i> nya? (<i>What is the back up?</i>)	A01
36	Kamu <i>flanning</i> ye, Yam? (<i>Are you planning Yam? (Take your time to conceive)</i>)	A01
37	Ate, kome semua kalau udah tengok <i>share</i> ler, <i>like</i> video tu haa (<i>Since you have watched the video, please share...like</i>)	A01

The examples in Table 12 show that oftentimes, the speakers resorted to code-switch during certain parts of the conversation to conjure up the idea that they belong to the same group or to create the effect of camaraderie between both speakers and listeners. It was noted that a few speakers went to the extent of employing code-switching for this social function by uttering incorrect features. For instance, the word *back up* in Line 35 should have been *break up*. Meanwhile, the term *flanning* in Line 36 should have been *planning* since the context of the conversation was about planning which refers to planning for pregnancy or taking time to conceive. The elderly speaker intended to use the word *planning* as it is a common word used by married couples at the early stage of their marriage indicating that they are taking time to conceive or planning for pregnancy. It was noted that elderly people such as the speaker in the video were exposed to the words and used them in the conversation regardless of the mispronunciation of the words. They were not reluctant to use the words in order to conform to the speech repertoire of the younger generation in the conversation.

In Line 37, the speaker used terms commonly utilized by younger generations at the end of the video. For example, “Ate, kome semua kalau udah tengok *share* ler, *like* video tu haa”. The speaker used terms like *share* and *like* to address all types of viewers who may come from different age groups. The speaker code-switched from Malay to English as she wanted to identify with the online users who watch the video. These terms are commonly used by people who are active on social media such as YouTube. YouTubers commonly use these phrases in their videos as they want the viewers to share and like their videos so that they will have a higher engagement. It could also be assumed that the speaker code-switched in order to affirm that she is keeping up with the latest trend. Other than that, she wanted to emphasize that she could fit in with the younger generations. Other examples of code-switching to identify with a group are portrayed in Table 13.

Table 13. To identify with a group

Line	Occurrences	Code
38	Asyik dengan <i>handphone</i> awak ni lah, tak habis-habis dengan internet tu. <i>So engross with your handphone, you are using the internet non-stop.</i>	A03
39	LOL...? “TOLOL” kot! <i>LOL...? Stupid</i>	A03
40	IMHO... <i>in my honest opinion</i> . Banyak la pulak nak kena ingat ni <i>IMHO..... in my honest opinion. I need to remember so many terms.</i>	A03

Table 13. (con't)

Line	Occurrences	Code
41	Tengah <i>farming</i> ni. <i>I am farming.</i>	A03
42	Pergilah depan, atuk <i>cover</i> . <i>Go to the front, atuk will cover you.</i>	A03

The data revealed that code-switched slang words were used several times in the video advertisements, especially by the older generation to create a sense of connection with the younger generation. This could be seen in Line 39, *LOL*... and Line 40, *IMHO*. In reference to the context of the video, the story highlighted a grandfather who learnt to play mobile games for the sake of his grandson. He learnt all the slang words in order to show that he belongs to the same group as the younger generation. Code-switching has been used alternately, including certain words that might not be used in their normal conversation at their age (older generation) such as *LOL* and *IMHO*. However, due to the age gap, these words have been used to facilitate the conversation between two different generations.

Another example is the use of the word *farming* in Line 41. The literal meaning of *farming* is the diverse processes involved in the agricultural industry. However, in the context of gaming, *farming* relates to a gaming tactic used in virtual games. Hence, in this advertisement, the grandfather deliberately used the word *farming* to indicate a sense of togetherness with the grandchildren and that he was able to relate to them.

These examples clearly accentuate the idea that code-switching occurs when the speakers want to show that they belong to the same identity group. Besides that, the examples also illustrate how the older generation utilize terms like slang words that are uncommon in their generation in an effort to relate to the younger generation. Moreover, their utilization of gaming jargons with their younger audience clearly shows how they attempt to create shared values and experience and ultimately, express unity with different generations.

Semantic significance

Semantic significance is a social function that is used to convey vital linguistic and social information. Examples are presented in Table 14.

Table 14. Semantic significance

Line	Occurrences	Code
43	Kejap nak <i>record Chef</i> , kejap nak <i>record</i> peserta. <i>Wait Chef, I need to record, wait I need to record the participants.</i>	A04
44	<i>Soundman</i> pulak <i>sound</i> aku. <i>The soundman reprimanded me.</i>	A10

In Line 34, the word *record* was repeated to highlight the additional work that needed to be done by the videographer. In the first half of the sentence, the videographer was asking the Chef to be patient, while in the second half, he was emphasizing to the

Chef that he needed to record the participants during the show. In Line 44, the repetition of the word *sound* creates a nice rhythm to accentuate the differences in their meanings. The first which is *soundman* refers to a profession while the second, *sound*, refers to a Malaysian slang which denotes reprimand or scolding. These examples clearly illustrate how words are code-switched to enhance the delivery of important linguistic and social information to the listeners or audience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the functions of code-switching in 10 narrative-type Malaysian digital advertisements on YouTube, applying Malik's (1994) Ten Communicative Functions of Code-Switching as the analytical framework. The analysis revealed that the most frequently used function was to amplify and emphasise a point (29 occurrences), followed by lack of facility (25), habitual expression (19), lack of registrational competence (19), mood of speaker (17), to attract attention (15), pragmatic reasons (13), and to identify with a group (11). The least frequent function was semantic significance (3).

Findings indicate that advertisers strategically employ code-switching to enhance emphasis, ensure clarity, and prevent misunderstanding, particularly when equivalent terms in Malay are either unavailable or fail to convey the intended nuance. Common English expressions such as *sorry*, *excuse me*, *drive carefully*, and *bye* are preferred over Malay equivalents due to their perceived informality, brevity, and conversational ease.

Code-switching was also found to occur when speakers lacked registrational competence, opting for English terms like *smartphones* or *contact lens solution* over more formal-sounding Malay alternatives. Emotional expression was another key trigger, with English phrases used to convey anger, irritation, or sarcasm. Additionally, code-switching was utilized to capture attention, often at the beginning of conversations, and to adapt to the conversational context, including the formality of the setting, the participants, and the location.

The results further revealed code-switching as a means of aligning with a group's identity, with older speakers adopting youth slang, gaming jargon, and social media terms—even with mispronunciations—to connect with younger audiences. Finally, semantic significance emerged as a function for conveying vital linguistic and social information, with repeated or contextually contrasted words enhancing clarity, rhythm, and impact.

Overall, the study shows that code-switching in Malaysian digital advertising is a versatile communicative tool that serves multiple purposes, from enhancing persuasion to fostering social connection across generational and contextual divides.

Future studies could expand the scope by examining code-switching functions across a wider range of digital platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Facebook) to explore whether platform-specific features influence language choice and communicative strategies. Besides that, a comparative cross-cultural analysis could be conducted to investigate whether similar functions and patterns of code-switching occur in digital advertisements

in other multilingual societies, thereby deepening the understanding of its universality or cultural specificity.

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Intercultural communication and conflict in the classroom: A case study of a Generation Z student leader in Indonesian Islamic higher education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates intercultural communication and conflict management within a collectivist higher education context at Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris State Islamic University, Samarinda. Anchored in Hofstede's, Triandis', and Thomas-Kilmann's frameworks, the research examines students' cultural orientations, female class representatives' leadership negotiations, and classroom conflict dynamics. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with three purposively selected participants and cultural orientation mapping of 33 students from the 2022 Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program. Findings reveal that while most students exhibit collectivist, compromising tendencies to preserve harmony, the female class leader displays individualistic, competitive styles, creating contrasting expectations in decision-making. However, language mediation and respectful communication effectively bridge these gaps to facilitate consensus, while the female class president demonstrates transcultural leadership across institutional hierarchies. Ultimately, this study provides critical insights into how cultural orientations, linguistic mediation, and gendered leadership intersect to shape the negotiation of authority and interpersonal relationships in collectivist educational settings.

Keywords: *Conflict management, generation Z, classroom leadership, collectivism and individualism, intercultural communication, language and identity*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, language serves as both a means of communication and a cultural tool that shapes identity, preserves heritage, and governs social interactions (Alzubi et al., 2023). However, divergent language styles and cultural norms can trigger interpersonal conflict within diverse educational settings (Szóke, 2018). In Indonesia's collectivist environment, which traditionally prioritizes politeness, harmony, and face-saving (Tambunan et al., 2021), a generational divide emerges as Generation Z (Gen Z) increasingly embraces directness, self-expression, and digital hybrid identities, thereby challenging conventional norms and inducing classroom tensions (Musfirah et al., 2024). Consequently, robust conflict management has become a baseline for interpersonal and organizational success, placing a critical premium on leadership to cultivate collaboration and mitigate friction (Hajar et al., 2024).

Within this evolving landscape—and despite persistent male dominance—female leaders frequently employ strategic language as a means of cultural mediation, successfully balancing assertiveness with empathy while simultaneously navigating and reflecting contemporary cultural hybridity across modern leadership and gender discourses (Istiqomah et al., 2024). Although individualism–collectivism research widely addresses psychological and behavioral outcomes—such as emotional adaptation and academic resilience in East Asia (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014; Zhao & Hu, 2024)—it overlooks how language mediates cultural orientations in interpersonal conflicts and female leadership negotiations. Similarly, while Indonesian female leadership literature is expanding (Abidin & Tanjung, 2023; Syahrudin & Rohman, 2025), its focus remains confined to gender representation and socio-religious paradigms. Consequently, a critical empirical gap persists regarding linguistic orientations and the communicative negotiation of authority within educational settings.

Unlike previous studies, this research fills a gap in the literature by exploring how intercultural communication and conflict are linguistically embodied by Gen Z students in a collectivist classroom context. Focusing on a female student leader at a state Islamic university in Samarinda, Indonesia, this study examines the function of language as a cultural and interpersonal resource in mediating conflict and negotiating identity. Gen Z was chosen for its unique values, preferences, and mindsets (Ashaari et al., 2019; Aswaruddin et al., 2025; Fadillah et al., 2022; Fitriyani et al., 2024; Yudha & Praditya, 2020). Through the integration of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (DeVito's, 2023), Triandis' (1995/2018) individualism–collectivism framework, as well as Thomas and Kilmann's (2008) conflict management model, this study provides theoretical contributions to intercultural dialogue, gender-based leadership, and linguistic hybridity in Indonesian higher education, while offering practical implications for the development of students' intercultural competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language as cultural mediation

Language is essential for cultural mediation, enabling communication and understanding among diverse cultural groups in multilingual societies. It fosters inclusivity and reduces ethnocentrism, though it can also create hierarchies if mismanaged (Baraldi, 2017). In education, language media encourages intercultural understanding, which requires individuals to acquire language competence in order to engage meaningfully in conversation (Abdulrahman & Abu-ayyash, 2019; Wilhelm, 2019).

Individualist-collectivist orientation

The individualism-collectivism framework, developed by Hofstede and expanded by Triandis into horizontal and vertical dimensions, remains a cornerstone of cross-cultural research (An & Mai Phuong, 2019; Hornikx & de Groot, 2017). While Western societies traditionally champion personal goals, Asian cultures such as those in Indonesia tend to gravitate towards collectivism, prioritizing group harmony and conflict avoidance (Syarizka et al., 2021; Kim & Coleman, 2015). However, recent empirical evidence highlights the nuanced and evolving nature of these traits. For instance, classroom dynamics in Japan reflect blended approaches (Alshahrani, 2017), younger generations in Iran show individualistic shifts (Bidjari & Zahmatkesh, 2011) and individualists display lower tendencies toward academic plagiarism (Kasler et al., 2021). Furthermore, individualism does not inherently erode macro-level social welfare (Rutar, 2025). Driven by urbanization and globalization, contemporary cultural evolution has triggered widespread shifts in gender roles, family structures, and welfare attitudes, ultimately yielding a complex mix of cultural orientations across modern societies (Lansford et al., 2021).

Leadership and conflict management style

Effective leadership and strategic conflict management are critical drivers of organizational performance, employee well-being, and job satisfaction (Yueqin & Ling, 2024). Leadership styles often diverge along gendered and operational lines, ranging from servant and democratic approaches to autocratic and masculine models (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Herachwati & Basuki, 2012). These styles closely intersect with Thomas and Kilmann's five conflict-handling modes—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—which reflect varying degrees of concern for self and others (Patrissia & Jamalullail, 2024). Although cultural factors strongly dictate leadership effectiveness (Tang, 2024), comprehensive cross-cultural empirical studies remain significantly scarce (Lather et al., 2023).

Respectful communication

Respectful, considerate communication is cultivated through equal interaction, serving as the foundation for positive relationships across clinical, educational, and institutional settings (Azizi et al., 2024; Haddad et al., 2019). Global evidence demonstrates that structured training, local cultural contexts, and supportive frameworks enhance inclusive, respectful practices (Brownlow et al., 2021). In an increasingly globalized world, integrating cultural awareness into curricula is vital to equip individuals for diverse collaboration and conflict prevention (Awalluddin & Maznorbalia, 2023; Farid & Hakimi, 2025). Ultimately, culturally aware individuals foster respectful leadership, driving organizational engagement and loyalty within positive work environments (LaGree et al., 2023).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the essence of classroom conflict and intercultural communication within a collectivist educational setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). It was conducted with the 2022 cohort of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program at State Islamic University of Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda, Indonesia, selected for their intensive two-year history of interaction (Fitriyani et al., 2024). Data collection was initiated via a WhatsApp poll using 14 items adapted from Hofstede's cultural dimensions (DeVito, 2023) to capture preliminary cultural orientations. Out of 59 students, 33 responded voluntarily, providing descriptive contextual data for triangulation (Santos et al., 2020). Subsequently, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and non-participant observations. Three central figures in a specific classroom conflict were purposively selected: one female class leader and two class members (one male, one female). To ensure instrument quality, two doctoral experts in Communication Studies validated the polling items and interview protocols.

Calculations yielded an Item-Content Validity Index (I-CVI), S-CVI/Ave, and S-CVI/UA of 1.00, demonstrating excellent content validity (Polit & Beck, 2006). The interview guide for the leader was informed by Triandis' (2001) individualism-collectivism framework, while the guide for the members was adapted from Thomas and Kilmann's (2008) conflict management style model. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. Verbatim transcripts and observation notes were analysed using NVivo 12 following the recursive thematic analysis steps outlined by Castleberry and Nolen (2018): compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. The emerging themes were critically interpreted through the lenses of Hofstede's, Triandis', and Thomas-Kilmann's frameworks. Rigour was maintained through an audit trail and methodological triangulation across interviews, observations, and poll results (Santos et al., 2020; Song et al., 2018). The research flowchart is illustrated in Figure 1.

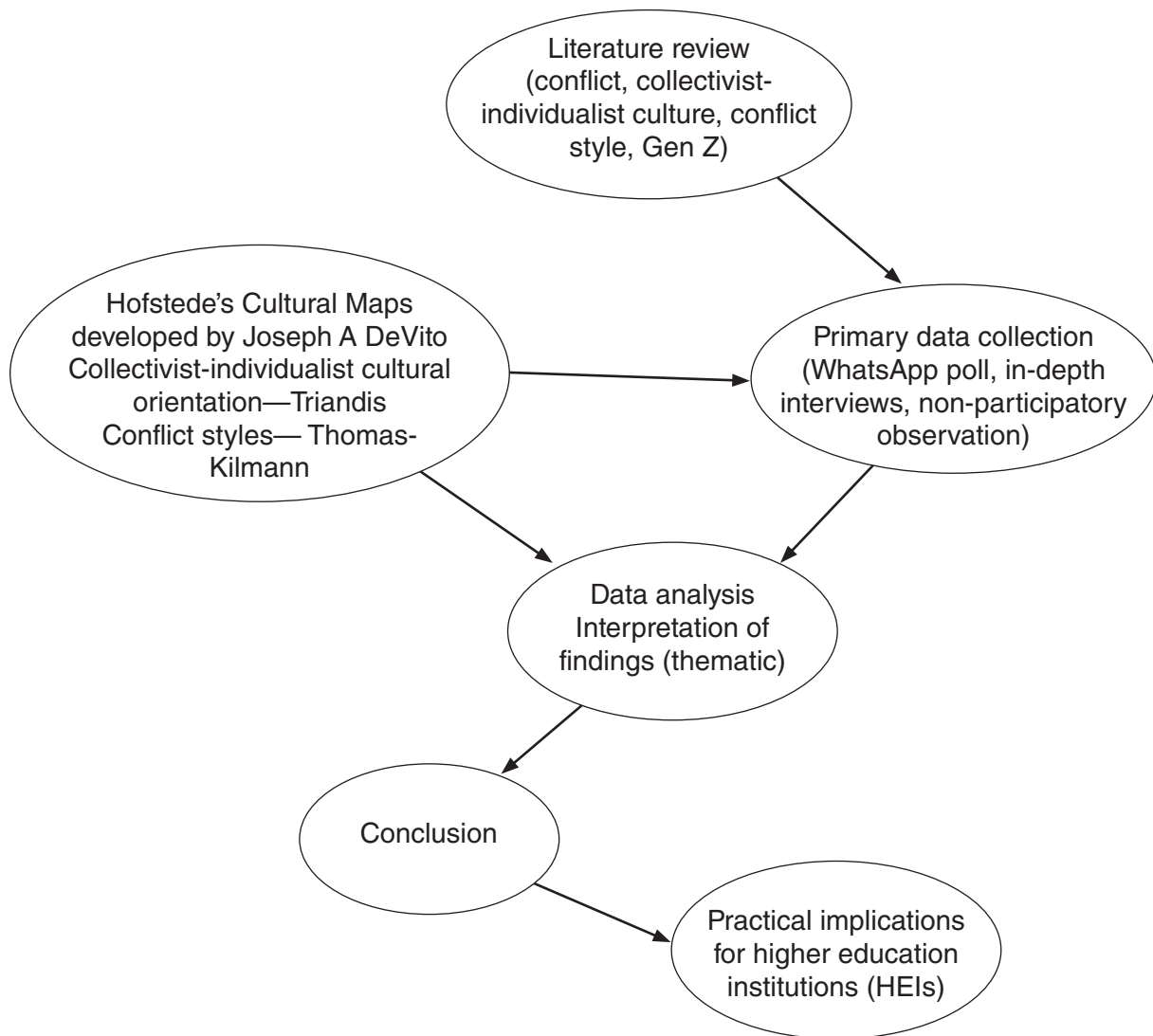


Figure 1. Research flowchart

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Cultural Map focuses on individualist and collectivist cultural orientations

Table 1. Cultural maps of individualist-collectivist from students of the Islamic and Broadcasting study program

Orientation of	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Success	33	100
Contributing to group efforts	31	93.9
The self is capable of surpassing others	2	6.1
Hero	33	100
No answer	1	3
A hero is a team player	26	79
A hero is someone who stands out from the others	6	18

The results of the WhatsApp polling, as shown in Table 1, reveal that the statement “*Success is defined as the ability to contribute to the group’s efforts*” was selected by 31 students, accounting for 93.9%. In contrast, the statement “*Success is defined as the extent to which one surpasses others*” was chosen by 2 students (6.1%). Regarding the concept of a hero, 26 students (79%) identified a hero as a team player, whereas 6 students (18%) perceived a hero as someone who stands out. One student did not respond to the concept of a hero, as they considered the statement inaccurate. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that contributions to group effort are a measure of success and that a hero is defined as a team player. It can be inferred that students in the 2022 cohort of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting program exhibit a collectivistic cultural orientation. However, several students, representing 6.1% and 18% of the sample, respectively, selected statements indicative of an individualistic cultural orientation. This subgroup consisted of more males than females.

Furthermore, the study results show that male students are predominantly individualistic. However, two female students—including the class leader—also exhibited similar orientations due to their parents’ diverse ethnic backgrounds. According to Triandis, individualistic and collectivist orientations are not determined by gender but by the interplay of social experiences. The presence of individualistic female leaders in collective classes can lead to differences in expectations of leadership and group participation, which may trigger class conflict in Asian societies (Karim & Samsudin, 2024).

Father is Javanese, while Mother is Dayak Bentian.

(Individual interview, Informant 1)

Father is Javanese; Mother is Madurese.

(Individual interview, Informant 2)

The Cultural Map focuses on masculine and feminine cultural orientations

Leadership and conflict, as reflected in students’ responses regarding strategies for addressing disagreements, are presented in Table 2 using Hofstede’s masculinity-femininity dimensions. Most students (91%) preferred compromise to resolving conflict, whereas only 9% favoured confrontation and striving to win. Similarly, when asked how they would act in a managerial position, 97% indicated that they would prioritise employee satisfaction, while only 3% emphasised competition and assertiveness. These findings suggest that feminine values were more strongly represented than masculine values within the classroom. According to Hofstede, (as cited in DeVito, 2023), feminine-oriented cultures tend to emphasise cooperation, relationship maintenance, quality of life, and consensus-building. In contrast, masculine-oriented cultures prioritise competition, achievement, and assertiveness. The predominance of compromising behaviour and concern for collective well-being among students therefore, reflects the broader collectivist and feminine cultural tendencies that characterise the classroom environment.

Table 2. Cultural Maps of masculine-feminine dimensions from students of the Islamic Communications and Broadcasting study program

Orientation	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Addressing conflict through compromise	30	91
Addressing conflict directly and striving to win	3	9
Total	33	100
When positioned as a manager of an organisation, prioritising employee satisfaction	32	97
When positioned as a manager of an organisation, emphasising competition and aggressiveness	1	3
Total	33	100

Conflict management style within a classroom setting

From this study, we found that participants' reported conflicts commonly involved class funds, friendship circles, assignment groups, and course scheduling (see Figure 2). Although these issues appear administrative in nature, the interview findings suggest that they frequently reflect broader tensions concerning collective interests, leadership authority, and group consensus. This finding aligns with Chiarelli et al. (2024), who defined conflict as an inevitable aspect of social interaction arising from differing goals, interests, or perspectives. Accordingly, conflict management styles are shaped by interpersonal relationships, contextual demands, and cultural values. In classroom settings, conflicts may stem not only from practical issues but also from differing expectations of leadership, participation, and decision-making.

We usually take a long time to agree on how the class fund balance should be allocated.

(Individual interview, Informant 1)

Our problems, for example, arise when there is a change in the course schedule by the lecturer. In the class, friendship circles have existed from the first to the sixth semester, so when we disagree, it tends to create factions and lead to mutual criticism.

(Individual interview, Informant 2)

The most frequent issues are related to the class fund and the division of groups for each course assignment.

(Individual interview, Informant 3)



Figure 2. NVivo research data visualisation of the in-depth interview results from 3 informants (2025)

Additionally, using Thomas and Kilmann's (2008) conflict management framework, the interview findings indicate that classroom tensions were closely linked to differing expectations of leadership and decision-making. As shown in Figure 3, the female class leader, who exhibited individualistic tendencies, was perceived by some students as insufficiently attentive to the classroom's collective atmosphere. Although she regularly sought input, participants reported that her own viewpoints often prevailed in final decisions. This finding is consistent with Kim and Coleman (2015), who found that individuals with stronger individualistic orientations tend to adopt more dominating conflict styles, while collectivist-oriented individuals prefer relationship-preserving approaches. Such differences in orientation may therefore have contributed to tensions in leadership practices and decision-making.

Moreover, one participant referred to the class leader as a "public enemy," suggesting that disagreement extended beyond specific decisions to include perceptions of her legitimacy as a leader. From a transcultural leadership perspective, these findings indicate that effective leadership in culturally diverse settings requires negotiating differing value orientations through communication and relationship management. Leadership effectiveness is thus shaped by cultural expectations of authority, participation, and collaboration (Or & Berkovich, 2023). When leadership styles misalign with dominant-group expectations, tensions may arise over decision-making processes and the representation of interests.



Figure 3. NVivo research data visualisation of the in-depth interview results from 2 informants (2025)

Informants noted that the class leader sometimes negotiated for the common good. Members accepted her decisions in urgent situations or external matters, but demanded a shared opinion on internal matters to maintain harmony. This behaviour reflects a collectivist orientation and a compromising style (Thomas & Kilmann, 2008), in which consensus is built to maintain social cohesion (Liu, 2012). Classroom tensions were managed through linguistic mediation—such as discussion and consultation—rather than direct confrontation to negotiate meaning and reduce conflict. This aligns with the face-saving communication strategies and indirect interactions used in collectivist cultures to maintain relationships (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

Interviews based on Triandis' (1995/2018) framework revealed the coexistence of cultures in a female class leader: horizontal individualism (self-directed autonomy) and vertical collectivism (commitment to group responsibility). Although non-participant observation did not reveal any explicit conflict, she actively interacted with external stakeholders, including lecturers, administrators, and other class leaders. This phenomenon underscores the essence of transcultural leadership, where leaders must possess cultural adaptability and communication skills to bridge expectations and mediate diverse perspectives (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013). The role of the class president extends from internal management to mediation with external institutional actors. This study extends transcultural leadership research by demonstrating that such practices can emerge within a dynamic student organisation as it navigates cultural expectations.

Individualistic leadership orientation and knowledge management

A leader ideally maintains control over the knowledge processing environment (Purwanto et al., 2020). However, in an individualistic leadership landscape, the effectiveness of this control is often questioned because it tends to prioritise personal interests, hindering collaboration and equitable knowledge distribution. Leaders with this orientation tend to limit members' participation in decision-making and information sharing, ultimately reducing the quality of the group's knowledge management. Field findings indicate that female class leaders with an individualistic orientation rarely consider suggestions and input from group members. The ideas implemented are dominated by their own personal ideas, leading them to be perceived as a "public enemy." This phenomenon contrasts with the definition of leadership as the art of uniting organisational members, where a leader is required to understand their members' emotions in order to plan effective collective action (Yueqin & Ling, 2024).

Numerous studies demonstrate that a leader's personality and values shape team and organisational culture (O'Reilly et al., 2019). This aligns with a longitudinal study of ethnic minority adolescents in China, which concluded that individual-level collectivism facilitates adaptation, while individualism hinders it in the classroom (Zhao & Hu, 2024). While this finding differs from the situational leadership style of a female library director in Sleman, which is context-adaptive (Nizomi, 2019), it is consistent with the evidence that individualistic-oriented employees can improve organisational performance and productivity through HR management practices, even in collectivistic cultures (Cho & Yoon, 2009). In this case, the class president's individualistic tendencies enabled her to make quick decisions, especially when interacting with external parties.

Coexistence of horizontal individualism and vertical collectivism

This study revealed that the class president combined two cultural orientations. The first, a horizontal individualism, viewing oneself as an autonomous entity and upholding individual equality. This characteristic is reflected in her ability to complete tasks independently—a trait of individualistic cultures that encourage independent problem-solving (Benito-Gomez et al., 2020). The second, vertical collectivism which views oneself

as part of a collective and accepting hierarchy and inequality within the group. Collectivist characteristics are evident in a strong emotional attachment to the family as a centre of belonging, where sacrifice is considered normal. This aligns with the argument of Bartucz et al. (2022, as cited in Gorla et al., 2024) that individuals in individualistic cultures are still encouraged to rely on their nuclear family. Similar findings among students in Taiwan, Argentina, and the United States suggest that despite differing national cultural values, individualist and collectivist orientations can coexist at the individual level (Chiou, 2001).

Conflict management through language mediation and compromise

When individual characteristics are placed in a relational context, tensions that lead to organisational conflict are often inevitable. Therefore, effective conflict management is crucial for fostering healthy competition, collaboration, and communication (Abd Rahman & Abd Rahim, 2025). Interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in interpreting verbal/nonverbal cues, while self-disclosure contributes to a harmonious perception that minimises conflict (Indreswari, 2024). In the classroom, the class president's unilateral decisions are sometimes accepted (especially regarding external matters), but at other times, the majority of students demand collective decision-making to maintain harmony. Broader debates are usually framed around societal issues, positioning higher education as a space for diversity, equality, and inclusion (Chattopadhyay, 2022). This experience also prepares students for professional development, in which multicultural communication competencies are essential in diverse workplaces, such as those in Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2022).

Furthermore, language plays a crucial mediating role in managing classroom tensions. Students negotiate disagreements through discussion, consultation, and consensus rather than confrontation. This pattern reflects linguistic mediation, where communication facilitates shared understanding and the negotiation of cultural meanings (Baraldi, 2017). Students also practice respectful communication by listening to alternative perspectives and prioritising group harmony (LaGree et al., 2023).

In terms of conflict management styles, field findings indicate that: (a) the class leader dominates with a competing style (a style preferred in American culture) (Lather et al., 2023), whilst (b) class members tend to use a compromising style. This contrasts with Malaysian professionals who choose to withdraw for long-term harmony (Awalluddin & Maznorbalia, 2023) but aligns with research on Chinese and Korean populations (Lather et al., 2023) and Malaysian university students (Azmi et al., 2023), who choose compromise. The compromise approach reflects collectivist values that emphasise harmony, cooperation, group consensus, and respect for hierarchical structures (Pham, 2022).

For collectivist individuals, reaching common ground and sacrificing personal gain for the common good is natural (Awalluddin & Maznorbalia, 2023). This also indicates that intercultural communication competencies such as cultural sensitivity, empathy, communal flexibility, and social integration (Sarwari et al., 2024), are essential for creating an inclusive learning environment (Anuar et al., 2025). While this finding

differs from research by Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), which found that Chinese and Taiwanese people prefer avoidance compared to Japanese, Korean, and American people; it supports Kirkbride et al. (1991, as cited in Cai & Fink, 2002), who found that Hong Kong respondents prefer compromise. This variation is also observed among Romanian and Greek youth, who continue to favour collaborative conflict resolution even in collective contexts (Stefenel, 2014).

The influence of the digital era and globalisation on cultural shifts

Differences in cultural orientation and conflict styles can be influenced by parents' ethnic background, levels of parental warmth (Gorla et al., 2024), and exposure to textbooks that emphasise intercultural learning (Peskoller, 2025). However, the most significant factor is the penetration of the digital era. Social media is now an essential communication tool used by approximately 90% of college students in their daily routines (Nurfazri et al., 2024; Nurhasanah & S, 2024). Furthermore, nearly 70% of college students consider smartphones indispensable for academic activities (Obeso et al., 2023), with an average daily use of 2.5 hours among those aged 16–24 (Aazam et al., 2024). In fact, Gen Z in Indonesia recorded the highest smartphone usage, averaging 8.5 hours per day (Kim et al., 2020).

This situation strengthens evidence that media has a significant influence in shaping individual culture and conflict styles, regardless of the country of origin (Allison & Emmers-Sommer, 2011). Individualism and collectivism can coexist within a single cultural group as adaptive responses to globalisation and technology (Lansford et al., 2021), as seen in Korea's cultural shift (Lim et al., 2021). Conversely, value shifts in Poland are driven more by political and economic transformations (Czerniawska et al., 2021), while for immigrants in individualistic societies, self-concept significantly influences their management of intercultural conflict (Syarizka et al., 2021).

Interestingly, despite growing up in the digital age, 44% of Gen Z still crave teamwork and face-to-face interactions (Tonis et al., 2022). As the largest demographic cohort, Gen Z's dominance significantly influences cultural norms across regions ranging from the United States to Indonesia, as reported by White (2017, as cited in Subowo, 2021). Through social media, they become highly responsive to social realities and environmental issues. This explains why some students display an individualistic orientation despite being within the Indonesian national context, which is classified as collectivist and feminine (emphasising relational harmony and quality of life). The transformation of digital media has conditioned cultural orientations to be more fluid and less rigid. Although these students do not experience physical international mobility like French students (Bartel-Radic & Cucchi, 2025), intercultural competence and sociocultural awareness remain crucial in this multicultural era (Ngo, 2025; Syahrussalamah et al., 2025). This phenomenon ultimately supports Philipsen's view, as cited in Griffin et al. (2023), that culture is no longer geographically bound, but rather socially constructed and historically transmitted.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that classroom conflict in collectivist educational settings is driven by mismatched cultural orientations—specifically, between individualistic leaders and collectivist students—that directly clash with leadership and conflict-management expectations. While the leader adopted a competing style, students favoured compromise. However, social cohesion was maintained through language mediation, negotiation, and transcultural leadership that balanced internal classroom interests and institutional authority. Consequently, conflict dynamics depend heavily on communication strategies used to negotiate relationships and responsibilities. As a localised case study, these findings cannot be generalised across all Generation Z students. Theoretically, this research advances the understanding of micro-level intercultural communication in higher education. Practically, it highlights the urgent need for integrating early cultural competence and inclusive leadership training into university curricula to enhance students' academic and professional team-building skills.

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Cultural symbol and national identity in the Hui cuisine: Analysing food documentaries through the circuit of culture

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, food documentaries have emerged as a notable form of media that investigates the complex relationships among food, tradition, culture, and national identity. Chinese cuisine, renowned for its diversity, reflects the country's multi-ethnic composition, which includes minority groups such as the Hui, Uyghur, and Mongolian communities. The Hui people, one of the significant ethnic minorities in China, possess a rich culinary tradition deeply rooted in Islamic and halal practices. Their cuisine not only signifies their national identity but also serves as a potent cultural symbol. This research employed the Circuit of Culture to analyse the interplay between cultural representation and national identity in food documentaries. The research specifically focused on segments representing the Hui ethnic group from the three seasons of *A Bite of China* and *Once Upon a Bite*, as well as *Halal Flavour*. Through the qualitative content analysis of segments produced between 2016 and 2022, this research reveals the intricacies of Hui culinary traditions and the way these documentaries portray cultural symbols. By offering a comprehensive perspective on how national identity, cultural traditions, and cuisine interact within this community, the study enhances our understanding of the role food documentaries play in cultural representation. The findings carry significant implications for documentary filmmakers and cultural policymakers. This research investigates how these documentaries, situated at the intersection of food, cultural symbols, and media, contribute to the construction or transformation of national identity. These insights can inform the production of future documentaries, enabling a more accurate representation of cultural diversity, which, in turn, may contribute to the development of a more cohesive and unified national identity.

Keywords: *Hui cuisine, food documentaries, cultural symbols, national identity, Circuit of Culture*

INTRODUCTION

Hui cuisine, a significant cultural expression of the Hui ethnic minority in China, transcends its basic role as sustenance to embody a deep interconnection between religious observance, historical heritage, and ethnic identity. The culinary practices of the Hui people are strongly influenced by Islamic dietary laws, with the principle of halal governing both the types of food consumed and the methods of preparation (Youchun & Tian, 2019). This religious framework not only dictates dietary habits but also serves as a cornerstone of the Hui's cultural distinctiveness, reinforcing their unique religious and cultural identity within the broader context of China's multi-ethnic society (King, 2020). Food documentaries that focus on Hui cuisine offer a valuable lens through which to examine the symbolic meanings embedded in food practices. These visual narratives provide insight into the complex interplay between food, religion, and cultural identity, often highlighting themes of religious observance, cultural continuity, and communal solidarity (Tuxun, 2022). By portraying Hui food traditions, these documentaries contribute to the broader discourse on how food serves as a cultural symbol and a medium for expressing ethnic identity.

While the popularity of culinary documentaries has increased in recent years, a noticeable gap remains in academic research that specifically addresses the cultural symbols embedded in these films, particularly regarding their role in shaping the understanding of Hui cuisine. Although prior studies have examined the role of food in cultural representation at a general level (Bhattacharjya & Zhaohui, 2017; Dong, 2017), little attention has been given to how these symbols operate within the unique context of Hui culinary traditions and how they are depicted in documentary media. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how cultural symbols portrayed in Hui food documentaries reflect and reinforce key aspects of religious beliefs, cultural identity, and traditional practices (Ain, 2015).

This research aims to explore how cultural symbols in documentaries about Hui cuisine contribute to the preservation and reinforcement of Hui national identity within China's multi-ethnic landscape. By examining how food documentaries serve as a medium to express and sustain Hui cultural and religious values, the study sheds light on how national identity is communicated and maintained. This research provides insights into the complex relationship between food, culture, and media, offering a deeper understanding of how minority identities are integrated into the national narrative.

The findings of this study have important implications for documentary filmmakers, cultural policymakers, and media producers. By highlighting how documentaries represent cultural diversity, this research offers practical guidance for creating more authentic and inclusive narratives. For policymakers, these insights can inform efforts to promote greater cultural representation and cohesion in media. The study also offers targeted recommendations on enhancing media content to better reflect the richness of minority cultures in shaping national identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uniqueness of Hui dietary culture

The distinctiveness of Hui cuisine is often attributed to its observance of Islamic dietary laws. These practices are not only a matter of religious adherence but are also closely linked to the broader cultural and religious identity. Within this field, substantial previous research has laid a robust foundation for understanding the complex relationship between halal dietary norms and religious belief. Studies have shown that halal (permissible) and haram (forbidden) principles dictate food choices, preparation methods, and consumption practices, thereby maintaining religious purity and adherence within the Hui community (Bhatt, 2023). The prohibition of pork and specific slaughtering practices are critical in sustaining the community's religious identity (Ain, 2015). However, while these studies focus on religious adherence, they often neglect the symbolic meanings that food holds in the broader context of national identity, particularly through media portrayals.

Cultural transmission and cuisine

Hui cuisine also plays a vital role in the cultural continuity of the community, with food practices serving as a medium for transmitting traditions across generations. Research highlights how traditional Hui dishes, such as hand-torn lamb (手抓羊肉) and fried dough twists (馓子), are not merely sustenance but symbols of historical and familial heritage (Sun, 2022). Communal events, festivals, and family gatherings are essential for preserving these culinary traditions, as they reinforce both cultural bonds and ethnic identity (Guo et al., 2024). Despite this understanding, a gap remains in how the transmission of these traditions is represented in contemporary media, particularly in documentaries, which play an increasingly important role in narrating cultural stories.

Cuisine and national identity

Hui cuisine functions not only as a marker of ethnic and cultural identity, but also as a tool for negotiating the national identity within China's multi-ethnic society. Studies have shown that food practices are deeply tied to self-perception and external representation, reflecting the community's efforts to assert and maintain its cultural distinctiveness (Liu, 2021; Zhen et al., 2023). Hui cuisine serves as a means of expressing cultural and religious identity while negotiating its position within the broader social fabric (Weng, 2025). Although these studies recognize the importance of food in cultural identity, they often overlook how food documentaries mediate this process, particularly in shaping public perceptions and contributing to the construction or alteration of national identity. Documentary media provide important spaces for negotiating cultural meanings and identities. Li et al. (2023) demonstrated that documentaries are not merely representations of reality but also narrative forms through which social experiences and identities are constructed. This perspective provides a useful foundation for examining how Hui food documentaries mediate ethnic identity and national belonging.

Religious symbols in food

In Islamic cultures, including Hui culture, food holds deep religious and social significance, serving as both a material necessity and a symbolic medium for expressing religious piety, communal identity, and social cohesion (Geertz, 1973). The concept of “halal”, which denotes purity and adherence to divine law, is central to the religious practices of the Hui community and serves as a critical boundary marker distinguishing between permissible (“halal”) and forbidden (“haram”) foods (Liu & Lin, 2020). This strict adherence to Islamic dietary regulations reinforces both the religious and ethnic identity of the Hui, positioning food practices as a fundamental expression of cultural distinctiveness.

Signature dishes, such as lamb skewers and lamb soup, are not merely culinary staples but are also laden with religious symbolism, reflecting the community’s observance of Islamic principles and dietary restrictions (Wu et al., 2014). However, despite the importance of these food practices, there is a paucity of research examining how religious food symbols are mediated through contemporary visual narratives, such as food documentaries. This gap is particularly significant as media representation plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of religious and cultural identities (Caldwell, 2008). Understanding how Hui food practices are portrayed in the media could provide crucial insights into the broader discourse on the intersection of religion, culture, and media.

Cultural symbols and historical identity

Food also operates as a powerful symbol for the transmission of historical memory and the reinforcement of ethnic identity, particularly within diasporic and minority communities (Appadurai, 1981; Mintz, 1996). For the Hui, traditional cooking techniques such as charcoal roasting and steaming serve as tangible links to their ethnic and historical heritage, symbolizing a continuity of practices passed down through generations (Anderson, 2005). Culinary traditions, such as hand-pulled noodles, often associated with broader narratives of migration and intercultural exchange, exemplify how food can encapsulate the historical trajectories of a community, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging and historical continuity (Zhang & Ma, 2016). However, while the role of food as a marker of historical identity has been well documented in broader food studies (Mintz, 1996), a gap remains in scholarly attention as to how such cultural symbols are represented and mediated through food documentaries.

Given the increasing influence of visual media in constructing and preserving cultural narratives, exploring how these symbols are depicted in food documentaries is essential for understanding the ongoing negotiation of ethnic and historical identity in the contemporary media landscape (Sassatelli, 2012). The lack of research in this area underscores the need for a more nuanced examination of the media’s role in preserving and transforming cultural symbols within the Hui community. Fang and Mansor (2024) highlighted that visual signs convey cultural meanings through symbolic representation, demonstrating how media texts transform cultural elements into meaningful narratives. Similarly, Hui cuisine documentaries employ food-related symbols, traditional practices, and cultural spaces to construct representations of ethnic identity and historical

continuity. Visual representation further influences how cultural symbols are interpreted and circulated within media texts.

Culinary practices as social and cultural symbols

Hui cuisine is not merely about practices; they are deeply interwoven with the social and religious fabric of the community, playing a crucial role in the construction of both social cohesion and religious identity (Liu & Lin, 2020). Communal dining, particularly during religious festivals, serves as a critical site where social hierarchies and communal bonds are both reinforced and negotiated. Drawing from the theory of performative social practices (Butler, 1990), these food practices can be understood as symbolic acts that not only reflect ethnic unity but also continually reproduce the community's religious piety and social order. The shared consumption of halal food during communal events embodies a collective identity and reinforces the internalization of Islamic values within the community (Fischer, 2011). However, despite the centrality of these practices in Hui culture, their representation in contemporary visual media remains understudied.

Research gap and contribution

The identified research gaps highlight several areas that require further exploration. First, there is limited research on how Hui religious food practices, such as halal regulations, are represented in visual media, particularly food documentaries, which play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Hui religious and cultural identity. Second, while food documentaries have the potential to act as a bridge between tradition and modernity, there is a lack of scholarly attention on how these media forms capture and communicate the complexities of Hui culinary traditions and cultural continuity. Finally, the representation of cultural regulations, such as halal certification, and their broader cultural and religious implications remain underexplored, leaving a gap in understanding how media influences the perception of food, religion, and identity in the Hui community.

Therefore, the research question is: How does the portrayal of Hui cuisine in food documentaries contribute to the construction of Hui ethnic identity within the broader context of Chinese national identity? What role do food documentaries play in shaping the public's perception of Hui identity? How is Hui cuisine represented as a cultural symbol in Chinese food documentaries, and what cultural meanings are conveyed through this representation?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the representation of cultural symbols in Hui cuisine as depicted in food documentaries. The analysis was framed through the Circuit of Culture framework, which offers a robust theoretical lens for examining how cultural symbols associated with Hui cuisine are produced, represented, and consumed within media narratives. The Circuit of Culture framework consists of five interrelated components: production, representation,

consumption, identity, and regulation. These components serve as the analytical guide for this study. The production aspect explores how Hui cuisine is created and presented in food documentaries. Representation focuses on the depiction and portrayal of Hui culinary symbols within the media. Consumption examines the audience's engagement with these representations and their interpretations. Identity examines how symbols reflect and contribute to the cultural, religious, and historical identities associated with Hui cuisine. Lastly, regulation addresses the influences and constraints imposed on the portrayal of these symbols.

This research specifically aims to uncover how cultural symbols in Hui cuisine reflect and shape religious, historical, and cultural identities through media representations. By integrating the Circuit of Culture framework, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between media portrayal and cultural identity in the context of Hui food practices. The primary data for this study were derived from selected episodes and segments of food documentaries that feature Hui cuisine as a central focus. The documentaries analysed include:

- *A Bite of China* (Seasons 1–3)
- *Once Upon a Bite*
- *Halal Flavour*

These documentaries, aired between 2016 and 2022, were selected for their significant viewership and detailed portrayal of Hui cuisine. Each episode or segment that specifically highlights Hui culinary traditions within these documentaries served as the unit of analysis. This selection criterion ensured an in-depth exploration of how Hui food and cultural symbols are represented in media.

This study examined the cultural symbols associated with Hui cuisine as depicted in the selected food documentaries. The data collection process involved identifying and analysing cultural symbols that embody religious, historical, and cultural meanings within the context of Hui food practices. The cultural symbols are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Hui cuisine cultural symbolism coding table

Category	Description
Religious symbols	Symbols and customs related to Hui cuisine, including:
– Halal practices	Description of halal food, including definitions, production methods, and slaughter processes.
– Islamic rituals	Dietary customs associated with religious rituals, such as Ramadan meal arrangements and Eid al-Fitr foods.
– Religious artifacts	Mention of religious symbols or items (e.g., mosques, Arabic calligraphy, prayers) and their relationship to food.
– Dietary restrictions	Specific dietary prohibitions related to Hui cuisine include the avoidance of pork.
Historical symbols	The historical and cultural heritage of Hui cuisine, including:
– Historical origins of dishes	Narratives about the historical origins of specific dishes and their connections to Hui culture or Chinese history (e.g., hand-pulled noodles, fried dough twists).
– Traditional cooking techniques	Descriptions of traditional cooking methods, such as charcoal grilling or steaming, and their significance in cultural transmission.

Table 1. (con't)

Category	Description
– Migration references	How migration history and cross-cultural exchanges influenced particular dietary habits and cultural development.
Cultural identity markers	Symbols related to cultural and ethnic identity in Hui cuisine, including:
– Community and food	Food rituals or communal activities related to community events (e.g., weddings and religious festivals) and their role in cultural identity.
– Attire and eating habits	Connections between traditional dress and food preparation or consumption, especially in the context of Hui culinary practices.
– Ethnic and religious identity	The role of food in symbolizing or reinforcing Hui and Islamic identity, particularly in comparison to other ethnic groups.
Culinary practices as symbols	Unique cooking practices and their symbolic meanings, including:
– Distinct ingredients	Use of specific ingredients, such as lamb and unique spices, and their symbolism in Hui cuisine and relation to religious or geographical factors.
– Cooking methods	Unique cooking techniques, such as steaming or slow cooking, and their cultural or religious significance, including how these methods are preserved or innovated.
– Serving and eating habits	Dining customs and table manners associated with family or religious activities, and how they reflect cultural values.

Each of these elements is examined to understand how Hui culinary traditions and cultural symbols are represented and interpreted in the media. The qualitative content analysis employed an iterative coding process to identify key cultural symbols related to Hui cuisine. This process involved both deductive and inductive coding strategies. For deductive coding, predefined codes were applied based on theoretical frameworks such as the Circuit of Culture and cultural symbolism theories, focusing on categories like religious symbols, historical references, identity markers, and culinary techniques. Inductive coding was employed to identify and incorporate new patterns and themes that emerged from the data. This included developing additional codes for cultural practices unique to the Hui, such as community-oriented cooking and religious practices associated with halal food. To ensure consistency and reliability, two coders independently reviewed the transcripts and visual data. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, leading to the establishment of a comprehensive coding framework for systematic data analysis.

The qualitative content analysis followed a systematic process of coding, categorization, and interpretation. The initial coding process was guided by concepts and categories derived from the literature, with a particular focus on key visual and textual elements related to Hui culture, including halal food practices, traditional ingredients, and religious rituals. These pre-established codes were informed by prior research on cultural identity and representation, and they were organized into meaningful categories based on their cultural significance and their role in constructing Hui identity. Once the initial codes were applied, they were grouped into higher-level categories reflecting broader cultural themes, such as religious adherence in food practices and national identity through cuisine.

Therefore, these higher-level categories provided a structured framework for examining the portrayal of Hui culture within the documentaries. Each category was analysed in relation to the broader social and cultural contexts, considering how the documentaries emphasized certain aspects of Hui identity while potentially downplaying or omitting others. The analysis then moved beyond simple categorization to explore the interconnections between these themes, focusing on how Hui food practices not only reinforced their religious and ethnic identity but also contributed to a larger narrative about national unity and cultural diversity within China.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Key cultural symbols in Hui cuisine

Table 2. Coverage of cultural symbolism in Hui cuisine

Category	Symbol	Coverage (%)	Analysis
Religious Symbols	Halal Practices	13.55	High coverage suggests halal practices are a primary cultural symbol in Hui cuisine, highlighting their importance.
	Islamic Rituals	12.66	The relatively high coverage of Islamic rituals highlights their significance in Hui cuisine, reflecting the impact of religious practices on the culinary culture.
	Dietary Restrictions	2.05	The lower coverage suggests that although dietary restrictions are present in Hui food culture, they are not frequently highlighted in the documentary.
Historical Symbols	Historical Origins of Dishes	10.11	High coverage reflects the importance of historical origins in Hui cuisine, indicating a deep connection to the past.
	Traditional Cooking Techniques	3.73	Lower coverage implies that traditional cooking techniques are less emphasized in cultural symbolism compared to other aspects.
	Migration References	4.33	Moderate coverage shows that migration history has some significance in Hui food culture, reflecting the impact of historical movements on cuisine.
Cultural Identity Markers	Community and Food	5.92	Moderate coverage suggests that food plays a significant role in community building and reinforcing cultural identity within the Hui population.
	Ethnic and Religious Identity	6.97	High coverage demonstrates that Hui cuisine is crucial for expressing ethnic and religious identity, highlighting its cultural significance.
Culinary Practices as Symbols	Distinct Ingredients	10.30	High coverage of distinct ingredients highlights their importance in cultural symbolism, making them key to the uniqueness of Hui cuisine.
	Cooking Methods	4.93	Moderate coverage suggests that cooking methods are a notable but secondary aspect of cultural symbolism, indicating less emphasis than on ingredients or historical references.
	Serving and Eating Habits	1.19	Lowest coverage suggests that serving and eating habits are the least significant in terms of cultural representation in the documentary.

Table 2 illustrates that the key cultural symbols in Hui cuisine include halal practices, Islamic rituals, the historical origins of dishes, distinctive ingredients, and the connection between food and community. These symbols highlight the importance of religion, history, cultural identity, and culinary practices in Hui food culture. In comparison, dietary restrictions, serving, and eating habits have lower coverage, suggesting they play a less prominent role as cultural symbols. Overall, religious symbols such as halal practices and Islamic rituals hold a significant place in Hui culinary culture.

Reinforcement of religious identity through food

The documentaries prominently featured Hui religious identity through the portrayal of halal food practices. They depicted ritual slaughter, the use of specific ingredients, and the avoidance of foods like pork, underscoring the central role of religious observance in Hui daily life and their identity as a Muslim minority in China. This supports the idea that food practices are both a marker of group membership and a means of cultural preservation.

Cultural integration and the narrative of national unity

Hui cuisine was depicted as both unique and integrated into China's broader culinary landscape. The documentaries highlighted Hui food practices while also emphasizing shared cultural values with the Han population, such as family, tradition, and communal meals. This presentation constructed Hui culture as an integral part of China's multi-ethnic unity, reflecting the state's emphasis on ethnic harmony and national cohesion.

Shifts in representation over time

In comparing documentaries from 2016 to 2022, a shift in how Hui culture was portrayed was revealed. Earlier works focused on the exotic aspects of Hui food, while more recent ones, such as *Once Upon a Bite*, framed it as part of a shared national heritage. This shift indicates an effort to integrate minority cultures into the mainstream cultural narrative, aligning with recent government policies on ethnic integration and cultural cohesion.

Modernity and tradition in tension

Another significant finding was the tension between modernity and tradition in the portrayal of Hui cuisine. On one hand, the documentaries celebrated the preservation of traditional Hui food practices, emphasizing their historical and cultural roots. On the other hand, there was also a focus on modernization, including the adoption of new cooking technologies, the commercialization of Hui cuisine, and the influence of global culinary trends. This duality reflects the broader societal tension between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing modern development, particularly in the context of a rapidly changing China.

Media's role in shaping public perception

The findings indicate that food documentaries do not merely record Hui culinary practices but construct particular ways of understanding Hui culture through visual

imagery, narration, music, and representations of communal dining. This observation is consistent with Fang and Mansor (2024), who argue that visual elements in screen media function not only as aesthetic choices but also as cultural and narrative tools. Food-related media similarly connect culinary practices with broader meanings concerning culture, religion, heritage, and identity (Miller et al., 2023). By presenting Hui cuisine as an expression of cultural heritage and social belonging, the documentaries may contribute to the public understanding of Hui traditions while positioning the Hui identity within the broader narrative of Chinese cultural diversity. Nevertheless, such mediated representations remain selective and may not fully reflect the diversity of lived experiences within the Hui community.

Cultural representation and identity: The role of Hui cuisine in Chinese food documentaries

Although food documentaries may contribute to the public understanding of the Hui culture, their representations do not necessarily correspond fully with how Hui communities understand and express their own identities. Since documentaries are produced for broad audiences, they may selectively emphasize visually distinctive or culturally unfamiliar elements of Hui cuisine. Such framing can simplify the diversity of Hui identity or portray it as exotic in comparison with Han Chinese culture. Consequently, a romanticized or homogenized representation may emerge, obscuring differences in culinary practices, religious observance, regional traditions, and everyday experiences within Hui communities.

While food documentaries can generate cultural pride by showcasing unique culinary traditions, they might also risk misrepresenting or commodifying Hui cuisine for entertainment purposes. This could create a disconnect between the public perception of the Hui identity and the authentic lived experiences of the Hui people. Hui cuisine can be seen as a symbol of the Hui ethnic group's religious and cultural identity, and food documentaries often capitalize on this symbolism. Dishes like “Yangrou Paomo” (mutton and bread soup) or “Hui-style beef noodles” are typically framed as culturally significant, representing the Hui's Islamic beliefs and their historical place within the Chinese society.

Documentaries may frame Hui cuisine as a cultural bridge that reflects China's multiculturalism. This representation can convey a message of unity in diversity, suggesting that while Hui food is distinct due to its Islamic roots, it is an integral part of the larger tapestry of Chinese cuisine. Documentaries might highlight the fusion of Hui cuisine with other regional Chinese cuisines, showcasing how the Hui community has interacted with other cultures over centuries. At the same time, the narrative of preserving authenticity—especially in relation to religious dietary laws (halal)—might be emphasized as a point of cultural pride and identity preservation.

These insights provide a structured framework for analysing how Hui cuisine is depicted in documentaries and its role in shaping and reflecting both public perceptions and Hui's self-identity. By focusing on the nuances of representation, you can gain a deeper understanding of how food plays a central role in the construction of ethnic and national identities in a multicultural society like China.

CONCLUSION

This paper significantly enhances our understanding of how Hui cuisine is portrayed in contemporary Chinese documentaries. It highlights the central role of food practices in reinforcing Hui's religious identity, illustrating how halal food practices and dietary laws are depicted as integral to the Hui's distinct ethnic and religious identity. Additionally, the study reveals how Hui cuisine is framed within the broader context of Chinese culinary diversity, reflecting the state's narrative of national unity and multicultural integration. This portrayal highlights shared cultural values while acknowledging the unique contributions of Hui cuisine, thereby contributing to the discourse on ethnic harmony and national cohesion.

Future research could further explore the impact of these media portrayals on Hui communities themselves. Investigating how these representations affect the Hui's self-perception and cultural practices will provide a deeper understanding of the internal effects of external portrayals. Comparative studies with other minority cuisines could offer insights into how different cultures are represented and integrated into the national narrative. Longitudinal studies could track how the depiction of Hui cuisine evolves over time in response to socio-political changes. Additionally, examining audience reception will reveal how various viewers interpret and react to media representations of Hui cuisine, informing the effectiveness of media in shaping cultural perceptions. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of these documentaries on the self-perception of the Hui community, particularly in urban contexts, where traditional identities are constantly being renegotiated.

In conclusion, this paper provides valuable insights into the portrayal of Hui cuisine and its implications for ethnic identity and cultural integration. By examining the intersection of tradition and modernity in media representations, the research highlights the significant role of food in shaping cultural narratives and societal attitudes. The findings underscore the importance of nuanced and accurate media portrayals in fostering a deeper understanding of minority cultures and contributing to more inclusive cultural policies. As media continues to play a significant role in shaping public perceptions, ongoing research in this area will be essential for promoting cultural appreciation and integration.

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Malaysian digital cosmopolitanism in humanitarian aid to Aceh during the 2025 Sumatra Disaster

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ABSTRACT

The 2025 Sumatra disaster triggered a massive humanitarian response, including from Malaysia, that delivered various forms of humanitarian aid. This paper examines how Malaysia's humanitarian organizations construct digital cosmopolitanism in providing aid to Aceh and how values and social relations underlying cross-border humanitarian solidarity are identified. Guided by the cosmopolitanism theory, particularly contextual cosmopolitanism and bottom-up cosmopolitanism, this research analyses how universal humanitarian values are negotiated through religious identity, cultural proximity, and digital participation. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, a digital media analysis of Instagram posts from humanitarian organisations based in Malaysia, namely Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM) and Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia was conducted. The results show that Malaysia's humanitarian aid to Aceh was driven by humanitarian principles, historical proximity, cultural ties, and Islamic solidarity that have long been established in the Malay Muslim region. Social media serves as the primary space for the formation of digital cosmopolitanism through cross-border symbolic participation. CSM represents digital cosmopolitanism based on mass reach, while GPM demonstrates community-based diaspora cosmopolitanism. The study shows that non-state actors have proven to be key drivers of effective and adaptive transnational solidarity. It contributes to expanding the corpus of digital cosmopolitanism by showcasing non-Western humanitarian practices that are contextual, relational, and rooted from the ground up.

Keywords: *Malaysian digital cosmopolitanism, humanitarian aid, non-state actors, 2025 Sumatra disaster*

INTRODUCTION

The disastrous flood that struck Sumatra (Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra), Indonesia in 2025 prompted massive humanitarian aid efforts from various countries to help the region recover. Malaysia too provided humanitarian aid to Aceh Province (“Aceh urges”, 2025). Humanitarian aid is not just an emergency response, but also a practice of Malaysian cosmopolitanism within the context of humanitarian solidarity in Southeast Asia (Klinke, 2024; Todorova, 2024).

Indonesia’s *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana* (BNPB RI) (National Disaster Management Agency) reported that as of January 13, 2026, the total number of fatalities from the Sumatra disaster has reached 1,189 lives. In Aceh Province, the death toll is 550, with 28 missing, and hundreds of thousands displaced. Additionally, many public facilities were damaged, including 141 healthcare facilities, 1,312 educational facilities, 631 places of worship, and thousands of roads and hundreds of bridges (BNPB RI, 2026).

Crises such as this raise normative questions about the ethical basis and motivation of cross-border aid practices. However, humanitarian aid is often provided by donor countries due to their interests or specific motives, such as political or economic interests, rather than based on the needs of the victims (Baydag, 2025). On the other hand, humanitarian aid is also often influenced by the geographical proximity, cultural identity, and history of the donor country (Bommer et al., 2022; Yabe et al., 2024).

The varied motives and backgrounds of these relief efforts become increasingly relevant when analysed within the context of Southeast Asia. In the Southeast Asian context, regional cosmopolitanism is often framed within the spirit of kinship solidarity, religious values that are alive in society, and historical proximity (Jong, 2025; Maknuniah et al., 2025). Thus, Malaysia’s humanitarian aid to Aceh can be understood within this framework of regional cosmopolitanism, where the principles of global humanity do not stand alone but intersect with Islamic identity, historical proximity, and cross-border social relations that influence humanitarian solidarity practices in Southeast Asia.

The intersection of universal humanity and religious identity finds its strong socio-political context in Aceh. Aceh is not just an administrative region of Indonesia, but a socio-political space with a strong Islamic identity and a long history of emotional ties with the Muslim Malay world, including Malaysia. In this context, Malaysia’s aid is not merely perceived as “foreign intervention,” but as a manifestation of Islamic brotherhood, which demands empathy, care, and concrete action during a crisis (Faridh et al., 2020). This shows that disasters can activate faith-based transnational solidarity that transcends national borders (Kasim et al., 2021; Missbach & Stange, 2021).

Although research on cross-border humanitarian aid is quite extensive, some studies still position the state as the primary actor, focusing on formal mechanisms, humanitarian diplomacy, and strategic interests (Dreher et al., 2024; Hoshiro, 2024; Kim et al., 2025). This approach often overlooks the normative, cultural, and social dimensions of humanitarian solidarity. In the disaster context, social relations, identity, (Asror & Rosyid, 2025; Gamlen & Chakma, 2025; Travers, 2024; Xiong & Li, 2024), and digital

platforms become important spaces where transnational connections, and collective identities are negotiated (Akqmie et al., 2025).

Thus, this article will further analyse Malaysia's humanitarian aid to Aceh as a practice of contextual and layered cosmopolitanism. Using the 2025 Sumatra disaster as a case study, this article not only describes the forms of aid provided but also analyses the values, motives, and social relations that underpin them. This research is important because it attempts to expand the understanding of cosmopolitanism beyond the Western normative framework, and to show how universal human values can be negotiated within regional and religious identities in the real practice of humanitarian aid.

Furthermore, this research also highlights the role of non-state actors in bridging the principles of cosmopolitanism and humanitarian aid practices in the field, such as volunteer organisations like Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM) and Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia. The involvement of civil society organisations, diaspora networks, and transnational communities demonstrates that cosmopolitanism is not only monopolised by the state, but also practiced by social actors operating across borders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cosmopolitanism in international relations studies

The concept of cosmopolitanism has become a controversial subject in international relations research, particularly within the context of global ethics and responsibility between states. In general, the concept of cosmopolitanism is based on the idea that all people share the same moral standards regardless of their citizenship, ethnicity, or political affiliation (Hoyer & Ybema, 2025; Ogunbanjo & Oyedokun, 2024). Within this framework, moral obligations are the responsibility of the entire world and are not limited by the principles of state sovereignty. Many cosmopolitan thinkers, both classical and contemporary, have developed this kind of perspective, which emphasises the importance of global solidarity to overcome human suffering and inequality.

In its development, cosmopolitanism has become a social and institutional practice and is no longer merely an abstract moral principle. Most research indicates that cosmopolitanism has been embodied in the form of international regimes, systems, or global organisations for regulating humanitarian standards (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2026; Liu, 2025). In this sense, cosmopolitanism is often associated with global governance, international humanitarian law, and institutionalised humanitarian aid mechanisms.

However, this universal-institutional cosmopolitanism approach still faces criticism. According to some academics, the discourse on cosmopolitanism often overlooks historical, cultural, and social contexts, and the principles of cosmopolitanism that are applied tend to be elitist and abstract (Ackroyd, 2024; Merkle, 2024). This critique claims that cosmopolitanism's universality often reflect Western experiences and values, making it insensitive to the diverse ways non-Western people understand solidarity and moral responsibility (Jung, 2025).

Solidarity, identity, and religious-based humanitarianism

Identity, local values, and religion play a significant role in humanitarian aid practices, responding to the limitations of universal approaches and the tendency towards state-centrism (Sabates-Wheeler & Barker, 2024). These studies, when examined closely, explain that rather than relying on abstract universal principles, human solidarity should be built through social proximity, religious relationships, and shared history. This means that humanitarian aid, as a moral act, is inherent in specific social relationships.

Additionally, contemporary cosmopolitan literature also places religious-based humanitarianism as a central focus. Studies show that religious values can serve to encourage individuals and groups to recover from humanitarian disasters (Wilkinson & Tomalin, 2025). Principles such as moral responsibility, human solidarity, and social responsibility can be implemented through fundraising, volunteering, and international aid.

Intertwined with this, the memory of a shared past as former colonial states is also often used to understand regional solidarity in Southeast Asia. In short, the dynamics of identity and cultural relations have always been linked to humanitarian aid practices. These factors contribute to understanding who is “worthy” of receiving aid and how.

Non-state actors and cosmopolitanism from below

There is extensive literature explaining the role of non-state actors, particularly civil society organisations, diaspora networks, and transnational religious groups, in the practice of cosmopolitanism and humanitarian aid (Gamlen & Chakma, 2025; Öberg, 2026; Rejón et al., 2025). In the contemporary digital environment, the role of non-state actors is increasingly shaped by social media platforms that function not only as communication channels but also as spaces where information circulation, public attention, and collective engagement are constructed. Increasingly today, social media has created new patterns of dependency in accessing and sharing information, where users actively participate in producing and reproducing digital narratives (Jun & Firdaus, 2023).

The role of these non-state actors is important because they are considered to be the facilitating agent that matches international humanitarian values with the local needs of affected communities (Asquith, 2024; Brun & Horst, 2023). Non-state actors, particularly the diaspora, often operate through social relationships, emotional bonds, and moral responsibilities rooted in cross-border collective experiences (Fihel et al., 2025; Godin & Cadeau Héritier, 2025; Husein et al., 2024). This is different from countries that operate through bureaucratic mechanisms and strategic interests.

This involvement of non-state actors was later termed “cosmopolitanism from below” (Hall & Werbner, 2020; Schiller et al., 2011). This term describes how humanitarian principles are applied to everyday social actors, such as diasporas and transnational community networks. In this perspective, cosmopolitanism is brought to life through the collective actions of communities that transcend geographical boundaries, rather than by global organisations or states (Correia, 2025; Dutia, 2025). The diaspora emerges as the main actor of practical, contextual, and socially rooted cosmopolitanism due to migration experiences, cross-cultural living, and involvement in transnational social networks.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative digital content analysis complemented by descriptive engagement metrics to examine how Malaysian humanitarian organisations constructed digital cosmopolitanism through Instagram during the Sumatra flood disaster from December 2025 to January 2026. The study focused on the Instagram accounts of Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM)/ @cintasalammalaysia, and Global Peace Mission Malaysia (GPM)/ @gpmmalaysia. These accounts were selected because they function as organisational channels for disseminating humanitarian information, mobilising donations, and reporting field activities in Aceh. The research population consisted of all Instagram posts uploaded by both accounts during the disaster-response period. From this population, 28 posts were identified as relevant to the Aceh flood response and were included as the research sample through purposive sampling. The sampling criteria required that each post refer to the flood disaster, Aceh, Indonesian victims, humanitarian assistance, fundraising, volunteer mobilisation, aid distribution or post-disaster recovery. Posts unrelated to the disaster, general organisational announcements, or duplicate content were excluded.

The unit of analysis was the Instagram post, including its caption, image or video, hashtags, mentions, organisational symbols, call-to-action messages and engagement indicators. Data were collected manually by documenting each post according to upload date, thematic content, visual representation, narrative framing, and audience response. Audience engagement data, including likes, comments, shares and reposts, were recorded to calculate total engagement, average engagement per post and engagement rate by followers. These metrics provide a descriptive indicator of audience interaction with humanitarian frames and were used to support, rather than determine, the qualitative interpretation.

The coding process followed three sequential stages. First, each Instagram post was read repeatedly to identify meaningful textual and visual elements contained in images, captions, hashtags, organisational symbols, and call-to-action messages. During this stage, initial descriptive codes, such as victims' suffering, donation appeals, volunteer deployment, aid distribution, religious expressions, and gratitude, were assigned to relevant segments of each post. Second, conceptually similar codes were grouped into broader analytical categories through an iterative clustering process. Third, these categories were interpreted thematically to examine how CSM and GPM Malaysia constructed humanitarian solidarity by linking local suffering with transnational moral responsibility and digital cosmopolitanism.

Audience engagement was measured using quantitative data from each upload, including the number of likes, comments, shares, and reposts. Total engagement (TE), which is the accumulation of types of interactions, average engagement per post ($\bar{E}$) which measures the intensity of audience engagement, and engagement rate by followers (ERF) which is the ratio of engagement relative to the number of account followers, are engagement metrics used in digital communication research.

$$TE = \sum(L+C+S+R)$$

$$\bar{E} = \frac{TE}{n}$$

$$ERF(\%) = \frac{\bar{E}}{n} \times 100\%$$

Note:

TE = Total engagement across all posts

L = Number of likes

C = Number of comments

S = Number of shares

R = Number of reposts

$\bar{E}$ = Average engagement per post

n = Number of posts analysed

F = Number of account followers

ERF = Engagement rate by followers (in percent)

The clustered posts were examined through a qualitative sentiment analysis that considered the emotional tone, moral orientation and communicative intention of each post. Sentiment analysis was not applied as automated computational classification, but as an interpretive procedure to identify whether the dominant tone of each post expressed grief, urgency, compassion, hope, gratitude, religious duty, organisational pride or collective responsibility. Interpretation was derived through repeated reading of captions, observation of visuals, and comparison across thematic clusters and engagement patterns.

FINDINGS

Two Malaysian-based humanitarian organisations, Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia and Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM), were selected as the subjects of this study. Both organisations actively produced humanitarian aid content for the 2025 Sumatra disaster in Aceh. Although both organisations work in the field of global humanitarianism and use Instagram as their primary communication tool, they have different organisational characters, audience bases, and digital strategies. With these differences, GPM and CSM proved interesting to compare, especially in regard to how digital cosmopolitanism is manifested through uneven patterns of engagement. Generally, GPM Malaysia adopts a communitarian humanitarian communication strategy, whereas CSM reaches a broader digital audience. These organizational differences provided the basis for comparing their respective forms of digital cosmopolitanism.

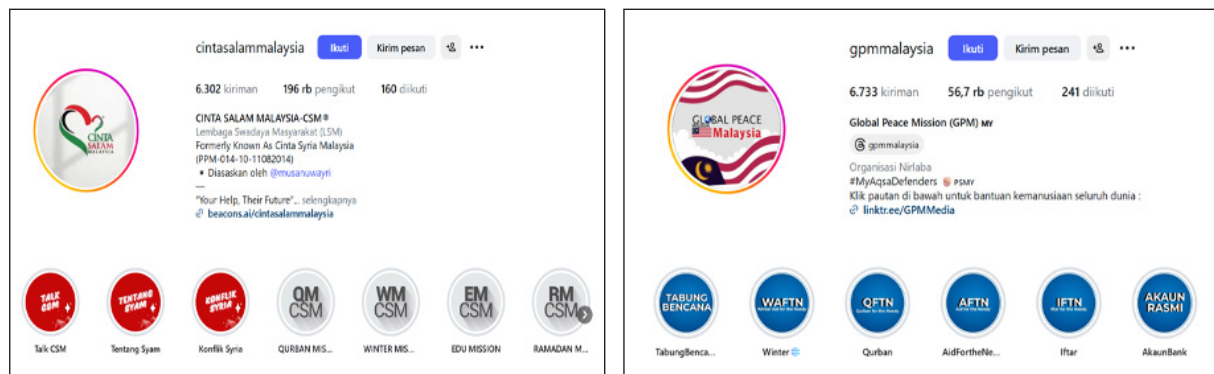


Figure 1. Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia and Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM) Instagram profile views

Digital cosmopolitanism based on mass reach on CSM's social media

The engagement results from posts on the Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM) account demonstrate digital cosmopolitanism practices focused on mass reach and broad public resonance. CSM's ability to mobilise humanitarian solidarity through digital visibility mechanisms, content circulation, and the intensity of cross-network message distribution is demonstrated by the large number of audience interactions it accumulated. The results show that CSM demonstrates digital cosmopolitanism through high public engagement, extensive content circulation, and widespread humanitarian visibility. However, the dominance of sharing and reporting also suggests that participation often takes a symbolic form rather than humanitarian engagement.

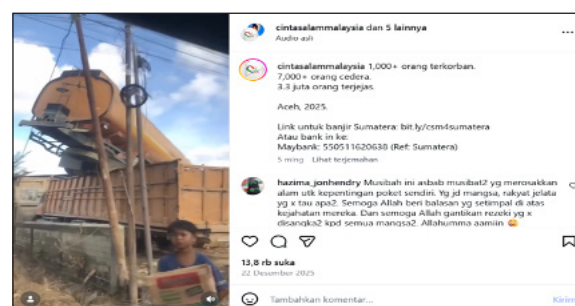


Figure 2. CSM's Instagram post presenting disaster impact information



Figure 3. CSM's Instagram post showing deployment of humanitarian volunteers from Malaysia to Aceh



Figure 4. CSM's Instagram post showing CSM volunteers departing for humanitarian relief operations in Aceh



Figure 5. CSM's Instagram post highlighting disaster impact and humanitarian donation appeal

Table 1. Distribution of engagement for CSM's Instagram posts

Code/ Upload date	Like	Comment	Share	Repost
Post-1/ December 19, 2025	2,248	71	319	497
Post-2/ December 22, 2025	13,800	119	1,086	3,163
Post-3/ December 23, 2025	4,128	63	66	329
Post-4/ December 24, 2025	3,194	48	8	120
Post-5/ December 25, 2025	1,717	30	21	158
Post-6/ December 26, 2025	4,684	72	32	299
Post-7/ January 25, 2026	1,760	9	9	87
Post-8/ January 26, 2026	620	7	10	62
Post-9/ January 27, 2026	2,794	10	5	146
Post-10/ January 27, 2026	754	4	14	81
Post-11/ January 28, 2026	437	3	1	39
Post-12/ January 29, 2026	423	6	1	15
	36,559	442	1,572	4,996

CSM received 43,569 interactions from 12 posts related to humanitarian aid for the people of Aceh. This figure is based on the average engagement per upload, calculated by dividing the total engagement by the number of uploads analysed ($n=12$). The results show that each upload on the CSM Instagram account generated an average of approximately 3,631/3,630.75 interactions, indicating that the audience is highly responsive to the humanitarian content posted. Next, follower engagement (ERF) was calculated by comparing the average engagement per post to the number of account followers ($F=196,000$), and then multiplying by 100 percent. The result shows that approximately 1.85% of all CSM account followers were actively engaged with each post. This level of engagement indicates that CSM has a high capacity to mobilize digital public attention toward cross-border humanitarian issues. However, this high engagement also implies that the practice of digital cosmopolitanism on social media is greatly influenced by the dynamics of platform visibility. In other words, public attention can increase rapidly, but is potentially temporary and dependent on the circulation of digital content.

$$\begin{aligned}
 TE &= 36,559 + 442 + 1,572 + 4.996 = 43,569 \\
 \bar{E} &= \frac{43,569}{12} = 3,630.75 \\
 ERF(\%) &= \frac{3,630.75}{196,000} \times 100\% = 1.85\%
 \end{aligned}$$

The analysis above shows that audience interaction in Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM) account's posts is not reactive, but rather highly participatory and cross-border in scale. The engagement patterns indicate that CSM content has the ability to consistently capture public attention, particularly through sharing and reposting practices. In this context, the message conveyed through these interactions transforms into a form of collective dissemination of humanitarian narratives in the digital space, no longer consumed solely by individuals. This dynamic within the context of digital cosmopolitanism demonstrates how moral bonds, solidarity, and empathy can be built and shared in digital spaces without being hindered by geographical boundaries or citizenship identity alone. However, the dominance of sharing and reposting practices also indicates a dependence on the logic of social media platforms, where emotional, visual, and easily disseminated content tends to gain greater visibility compared to more substantive forms of humanitarian communication.

The extent of audience engagement with CSM posts indicates that social media serves as an important instrument where human values can be discussed and interpreted. The resonance between the narratives built by CSM and the audience's responses shows that digital solidarity does not entirely stem from an abstract universal humanitarian awareness. In the context of Aceh, the closeness of religious and cultural identities between the Malaysian society and the Acehnese society as fellow Muslim communities also strongly influences the public's resonance with the humanitarian issue. Thus, the digital cosmopolitanism practiced by CSM operates not only through the value of global solidarity, but also through communal-based moral bonds and regional cultural proximity. This shows that everyday digital communication practices not only strengthen modern cosmopolitanism, but also demonstrate how global solidarity on social media often moves in a hybrid manner between universal humanitarian values and local or religious identity affiliations.

Humanitarian communication patterns in GPM's social media strategy

The coding results indicate that GPM's humanitarian communication is primarily organised around themes of volunteer experiences, aid distribution, cross-border humanitarian cooperation, and community participation. These themes are consistently reflected not only in the visual representation of humanitarian field activities but also in the hashtags, captions, and audience responses that accompany the Instagram posts. Several posts employed hashtags such as *#PeduliBanjirAceh*, explicitly framing humanitarian assistance as a cross-border solidarity initiative. Likewise, audience comments frequently expressed appreciation using phrases such as “*Terima kasih Malaysia*”, “*Terima kasih saudara-saudara GPM*”, “*Terima kasih sahabat Malaysia*”, and “*Terima kasih semua rakyat Malaysia terkhusus Tim GPM Malaysia*”, indicating that humanitarian assistance

is interpreted not merely as disaster relief but as an expression of enduring social, cultural, and religious ties between Malaysia and Aceh. Rather than focusing primarily on fundraising appeals or emotional disaster narratives, GPM's communication consistently foregrounds volunteer participation and collective humanitarian action.



Figure 6. GPM's Instagram post showing diaspora-based humanitarian mobilization for Aceh flood relief



Figure 7. GPM's Instagram post showing community-based humanitarian assistance distribution



Figure 8. GPM's Instagram post showing public comments expressing transnational humanitarian solidarity between Malaysia and Aceh



Figure 9. GPM's Instagram post showing humanitarian captions, hashtags, and audience responses supporting cross-border humanitarian solidarity.

Table 2. Distribution of engagement for GPM's Instagram posts

Code/ upload date	Like	Comment	Share	Repost
Post-1/ December 10, 2025	1,252	82	54	96
Post-2/ December 12, 2025	63	1	4	6
Post-3/ December 12, 2025	587	4	83	129
Post-4/ December 12, 2025	66	2	9	6
Post-5/ December 12, 2025	71	3	7	5
Post-6/ December 13, 2025	97	2	2	6
Post-7/ December 14, 2025	200	18	1	15
Post-8/ December 15, 2025	151	5	9	26
Post-9/ December 15, 2025	89	3	9	15
Post-10/ December 17 2025	51	2	4	3
Post-11/ December 17, 2025	80	4	7	11

Table 2. (con't)

Code/ upload date	Like	Comment	Share	Repost
Post-12/ December 22, 2025	120	6	14	17
Post-13/ December 22, 2025	463	7	25	56
Post-14/ December 24, 2025	77	3	2	2
Post-15/ December 29, 2025	108	3	6	11
Post-16/ December 30, 2025	55	4	1	2
	3,530	149	237	406

The analysis of 16 Instagram posts uploaded by GPM Malaysia recorded a measurable audience engagement, generating a total of 4,322 interactions during the observation period, based on the composite engagement calculation, which included likes, comments, shares, and reposts. This figure shows that the issue of humanitarian aid in Aceh continues to attract attention and digital audience participation, even though it does not operate on a large viral scale. These findings indicate that the practice of digital cosmopolitanism does not always rely on high public visibility, but rather grows through more limited and repetitive engagement patterns based on the moral proximity of certain communities. Thus, the digital interaction space built by GPM Malaysia demonstrates a form of selective transnational solidarity. This pattern suggests that audience engagement is shaped by moral affiliations, diaspora networks, and more specific humanitarian orientations.

$$\begin{aligned}
 TE &= 3,530 + 149 + 237 + 406 = 4,322 \\
 \bar{E} &= \frac{4,322}{16} = 270.1 \\
 ERF(\%) &= \frac{270.1}{56,700} \times 100\% = 0.48\%
 \end{aligned}$$

If we look at the upload level, total engagement resulted in an average of 270.1 interactions per upload. This value is indeed much lower compared to the engagement pattern of the CSM account. However, it actually indicates a different character of digital participation. Audience engagement on the GPM Malaysia account is not shaped by high content circulation or mass reach expansion, but rather by relatively stable and repetitive interaction patterns among audiences with a connection to humanitarian issues or specific diaspora networks. In this context, the digital cosmopolitanism of GPM Malaysia demonstrates a more communitarian form of solidarity, where the interconnectedness of identity and moral relationships has a greater influence than the logic of social media virality.

Collectively, these empirical findings, together with the recurrent humanitarian narratives found in captions, hashtags (*#PeduliBanjirAceh*), and audience comments expressing gratitude toward Malaysia and GPM Malaysia volunteers, suggest that GPM Malaysia constructs digital cosmopolitanism through a diaspora-based humanitarian communication pattern. Rather than relying on platform virality, GPM Malaysia maintains cross-border solidarity through repeated volunteer participation, community-

oriented humanitarian action, and moral relationships rooted in the historical, cultural, and religious ties between Malaysia and Aceh.

Comparative analysis of digital cosmopolitanism in CSM and GPM Malaysia

The comparative analysis of GPM Malaysia and CSM demonstrates that digital cosmopolitanism is expressed through different communication models in humanitarian contexts. CSM generated greater engagement than GPM Malaysia. This is due to a larger follower base, a broader content distribution pattern, and the ability to leverage its social media visibility mechanisms through numerous shares and reposts. In this context, CSM represents a type of visibility-based digital cosmopolitanism, where cross-national solidarity is built through increased public reach, the dissemination of emotional content, and the rapid spread of humanitarian narratives in the digital space.

Conversely, the GPM's engagement patterns were fewer in quantity but consistent in their interaction structure. The engagement of GPM Malaysia audiences tends to form through more segmented diaspora networks and humanitarian communities, unlike CSM which operates through the logic of mass engagement. In this context, GPM's digital cosmopolitanism operates through meaningful engagement based on communal moral proximity rather than virality.

CSM shows how global solidarity can be expanded through the mechanisms of digital visibility and massive public participation. Conversely, GPM Malaysia represents a more communitarian form of digital cosmopolitanism, where cross-national solidarity is built through more limited moral affiliations, sustained social relationships, and closer diaspora identities. Therefore, these findings suggest that digital cosmopolitanism is not entirely universal, but often moves in a hybrid manner between global humanitarian values and local, religious, and communal identities.

Table 3. Observed pattern of digital cosmopolitanism in Malaysian humanitarian communication

Analytical Dimension	Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM)	Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia
Primary communication orientation	Visibility-oriented humanitarian communication	Community-oriented humanitarian communication
Dominant coded themes	Victims' suffering, donation appeals, emotional humanitarian appeals	Volunteer experiences, aid distribution, humanitarian cooperation, community participation
Audience engagement pattern	High interaction, extensive shares and reposts, broad public participation	Moderate but consistent interaction within humanitarian and community networks
Digital communication logic	Expands visibility through content circulation and platform virality	Sustains engagement through repeated community interaction and humanitarian participation
Primary solidarity mechanism	Mass public mobilisation	Diaspora and community-based moral relationships
Total Engagement (TE)	43,569	4,322

Table 3. (con't)

Analytical Dimension	Cinta Salam Malaysia (CSM)	Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia
Average engagement per post	3,630.75	270.1
Engagement Rate by Followers (ERF)	1.85%	0.48%
Model of digital cosmopolitanism	Visibility-based digital cosmopolitanism	Diaspora-based communitarian digital cosmopolitanism

The comparative analysis presented in Table 3 demonstrates that there are two distinct models of digital cosmopolitanism in responding to cross-border humanitarian issues. The CSM model focuses on mass reach and public visibility, where solidarity is built through the widespread dissemination of humanitarian content and platform virality. Meanwhile, GPM Malaysia represents a model of diaspora-based communitarian cosmopolitanism, where solidarity is sustained through selective yet relatively stable audience engagement within humanitarian and community networks. Figure 10 synthesises these comparative findings into a conceptual framework illustrating the two models of digital cosmopolitanism identified in this study.

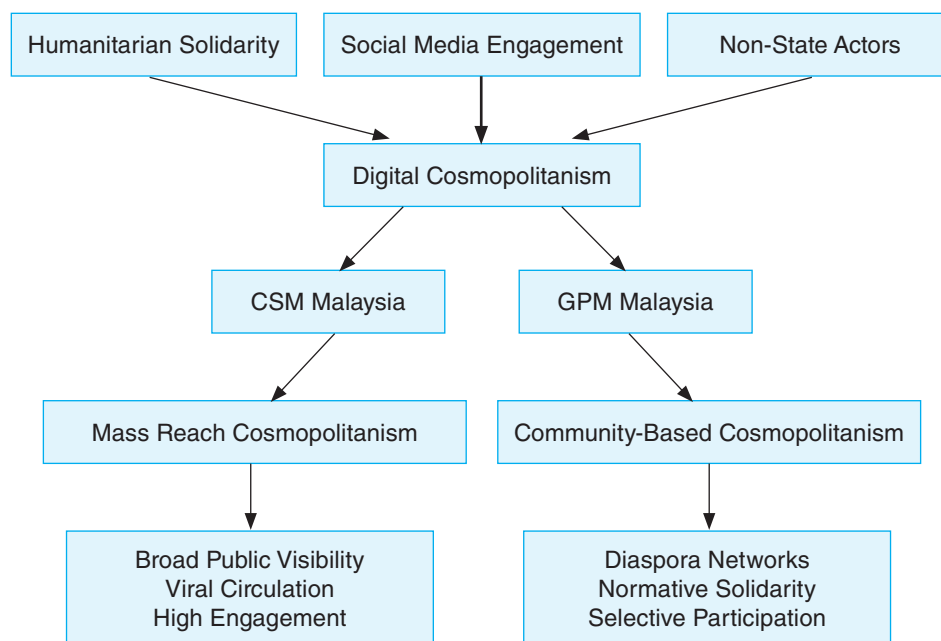


Figure 10. Conceptual model of visibility-based and diaspora-based digital cosmopolitanism in Malaysian humanitarian aid

DISCUSSION

Digital cosmopolitanism as a strategy for international solidarity

This study reinforces the understanding that digital cosmopolitanism should be understood as a digitally mediated social practice operating on the basis of cross-border solidarity. In other words, digital cosmopolitanism cannot be measured solely by the level

of visibility and intensity of interaction on social media. Social media spaces are used in a humanitarian context as places where empathy for the suffering of others is discussed and expressed through symbolic actions such as liking, commenting, and sharing content (Yuetikuer, 2026).

Additionally, the digital cosmopolitanism found in this study exhibits diverse forms and orientations. This shows that digital cosmopolitanism is contextual and depends on how human organisations frame issues, construct narratives, and leverage the use of social media platforms (Minchilli, 2024; Pardosi et al., 2024).

In a broader framework, these findings contribute to the theoretical debate on cosmopolitanism by demonstrating that digital media has expanded the space for articulating solidarity beyond formal institutions and national borders. The emerging digital cosmopolitanism is not always explicitly deliberative or political, but often manifests in the form of empathy, symbolic support, and grassroots participation that accumulates (Jeffres et al., 2004; Pajnik & Ribać, 2025).

Malaysian cosmopolitanism: From normative principles to contextual practice

The Malaysian cosmopolitanism that provided humanitarian aid to Aceh during the 2025 Sumatra disaster has evolved into a contextual practice rather than a universal ethical principle. Social, historical, and cultural ties underpin Malaysia's humanitarian aid to Aceh. This shows that cosmopolitanism occurs through the interaction between universal human values and the regional social structures that encompass them.

Additionally, this humanitarian aid effort demonstrates that cosmopolitanism has evolved from a global ethic to a relational ethic. This means that cosmopolitanism has evolved into a moral response rooted in social relationships experienced collectively, rather than simply an impersonal moral obligation (Fernandez et al., 2025).

This confirms the criticism of Western cosmopolitanism, which often overlooks the local aspects of human solidarity. Malaysia's aid to Aceh demonstrates that universal humanitarian principles can be negotiated and translated through the region's historical and cultural experiences. Further, Malaysia's humanitarian aid represents a hybrid cosmopolitan practice in which universal humanitarian values intersect with the regional identity (Berndsen et al., 2024). This means that cosmopolitanism should not necessarily be seen as the antithesis of local identity, but can operate in a complementary or mutually reinforcing manner.

Solidarity among fellow Malays and Islamic brotherhood as a moral foundation

This study shows that Islamic brotherhood and kinship solidarity serve as the moral foundation that motivates Malaysian humanitarian organisations, GPM Malaysia and CSM to provide aid to Aceh. In this context, solidarity is not merely an expression of cultural or religious empathy, but serves to shape the perceptions of moral obligations and responsibilities across national borders (Arcos González & Gan, 2024). Therefore, humanitarian aid is not seen merely as a universal altruistic act, but as an ethical

response supported by an awareness of the long-standing historical and social ties between the people of Malaysia and Aceh.

Islamic brotherhood and solidarity among people of the same ethnic group also serve as a source of social legitimacy, facilitating aid from other countries (Lukmanulhakim & Samuri, 2023). This means that the religious and cultural identity helps frame Malaysia's aid as internal solidarity within a moral community, rather than as an external interventionist practice. This bond of solidarity and brotherhood then strengthens social trust between donors and recipients, while also reducing the likelihood of resistance to external actors (Abdul Ghani & Said, 2025; Ambrosini, 2024). This kind of legitimacy is important in crisis situations because it allows aid to move more quickly, efficiently, and sustainably.

Furthermore, Malaysia's aid practices have high moral and Islamic brotherhood resonance because Aceh has a long history of Islam and strong ties with the Malay-Muslim community (Safari et al., 2024). Therefore, Aceh, as a disaster-affected region, plays an active role in activating this dimension of solidarity. Thus, the social context of Aceh shapes how aid is viewed and interpreted, where disaster is seen as a moral call to remove the suffering of the community or related societies. This shows that cosmopolitanism does not emerge in a vacuum but is mediated by the identity configurations and social memories inherent in Malaysia.

GPM Malaysia and CSM as actors of digital cosmopolitanism from below

Within the framework of bottom-up cosmopolitanism, which is a form of cosmopolitanism that grows from the social practices of non-state actors (Susanti & Hamdani, 2024), GPM Malaysia and CSM operate as humanitarian actors mediating cross-border solidarity through grassroots initiatives enabled by digital technology. There is no national mandate or international policy framework that encourages the cosmopolitan practices undertaken by GPM Malaysia and CSM. Instead, they did so as a moral response to the disastrous conditions experienced by the people of Aceh, which were framed and disseminated through social media.

CSM and GPM Malaysia serve as a link (mediator) between local suffering and global concern. Simple digital actions like liking, commenting, and sharing content have become cosmopolitan participation mechanisms that allow cross-border audiences to engage in humanitarian action symbolically. This practice demonstrates that digital cosmopolitanism does not always take the form of political deliberation or policy advocacy, but often manifests as an aggregation of micro-actions that collectively build transnational spaces of solidarity.

By positioning CSM and GPM Malaysia as actors of cosmopolitanism from below, this research demonstrates that the dynamics of digital media and non-state actors cannot be separated from the discourse of modern cosmopolitanism. Social media enables cross-border solidarity and opens up space for more participatory and inclusive forms of cosmopolitanism. Therefore, the digital humanitarian practices carried out by these two organisations expand the understanding of cosmopolitanism as a social project that not only originates from above but also grows from below through everyday digital interactions.

Theoretical contributions

This article contributes to the literature on humanitarian solidarity governance by reframing cosmopolitanism, not as an abstract universal ethic imposed from above, but as a situated, digitally mediated, and organisationally enacted practice. The findings show that Malaysia's humanitarian solidarity with Aceh emerges through the interaction of universal humanitarian concern, Malay-Muslim historical proximity, Islamic brotherhood, and digital participation. In doing so, the study highlights the limitations of state-centric and Western-oriented approaches to cosmopolitanism, which often privilege formal humanitarian diplomacy, institutional regimes, and moral abstraction while paying less attention to religious identity, cultural memory, and regional social relations. The findings suggest that Malaysia's humanitarian assistance to Aceh can be understood as a form of contextual and layered cosmopolitanism, in which universal humanitarian responsibility is expressed through Southeast Asian social proximity and Islamic moral obligation. This perspective broadens existing discussions of non-Western humanitarian practices and digital cosmopolitanism.

More specifically, this study demonstrates how non-state humanitarian organisations can transform local suffering into transnational moral concern through digital communication. Rather than treating Cinta Salam Malaysia and Global Peace Mission Malaysia merely as aid distributors, this study perceives them as organisational actors that frame humanitarian narratives, visualise suffering, mobilise donations, document aid distribution, and sustain public engagement through Instagram. Through thematic coding, sentiment interpretation, and engagement metrics, the findings illustrate how humanitarian organisations organise solidarity by shaping the emotional, moral, and practical pathways through which audiences participate. In this sense, solidarity is shown not as a spontaneous social reaction, but as a communicative process facilitated through organisational practices.

Overall, the findings indicate that Malaysian humanitarian organisations mobilise cosmopolitan responsibility through the interaction of moral proximity, digital visibility, and organisational communication. Rather than positioning cosmopolitanism solely within state-centred institutions, this study illustrates how it is enacted through humanitarian NGOs, volunteers, diaspora communities, and digital publics. Furthermore, engagement metrics are interpreted not simply as indicators of popularity, but as empirical evidence for how humanitarian messages are received, circulated, and sustained in digital space. These findings provide empirical insights into how digital communication supports the organisation of empathy, legitimacy, mobilisation, and cross-border humanitarian responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's humanitarian aid to Aceh after the 2025 Sumatra disaster demonstrates a layered, contextual, and relational practice of cosmopolitanism. Universal human values are combined with religious identity, history, and regional social proximity, transforming the concept of cosmopolitanism into more than just an abstract moral principle. In

other words, cross-border solidarity arises from the kinship ties and strong moral bonds between the people of Malaysia and Aceh.

Additionally, social media plays a crucial role in shaping and disseminating cross-border humanitarian solidarity. Through digital platforms, the values of empathy and care can be translated into public participation. The different audience engagement patterns between GPM Malaysia and CSM show that digital cosmopolitanism can be practiced through various strategies, be it emphasising community bonds or aiming for a wide public reach.

Finally, this paper proves that cosmopolitanism is not only practiced by states or global institutions, but also by non-state actors through everyday social practices. The role of humanitarian organisations, diaspora networks, and transnational communities demonstrates that global solidarity can be built from the ground up, based on social relationships and mediated by digital technology, utilising social media. Thus, cosmopolitanism needs to be understood as a flexible practice rooted in the social context, particularly in the experiences of states and societies in Southeast Asia.

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Social media personal branding: Analysing social media influencers' branding efforts on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

The notion of self-branding has drawn myriad academic responses over the last decade. A personal brand allows you to control your own narrative and can help you stand out from competition. Today, the new digital media environment has empowered women to market themselves as brands. Although there is a growing interest from both academic and practical perspectives in exploring the impact of social media on individuals' self-branding, there remains a lack of empirical research that systematically investigates the methodologies on how an individual employs or constructs and reinforces their branded identity through social media platforms, especially on Instagram. Through content analysis, this study analysed posts from the top 10 female Malaysian social media influencers' Instagram accounts according to a systematic coding scheme. The selected influencers articulate a form of entrepreneurial femininity that draws upon post-feminist sensibilities and the contemporary logic of self-branding. The findings suggest a significant proportion of the social media influencers' followers are susceptible to the influence exerted by their strategic utilization of technological features in conjunction with their distinctive modes of self-presentation. Drawing upon these insights, the current study contributes to both the theoretical understanding and practical applications within the domain of self-branding via social media.

Keywords: *Self-branding, social media, postfeminism, Instagram, self-presentation, social media influencer*

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in technology have revolutionised consumer engagement, enabling diverse activities on social media platforms. The advent of Internet-based social media has empowered individuals to communicate with hundreds, even thousands of people about their products and businesses (Ajina, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Sukiman et al., 2023). Instagram stands out for its emphasis on visual aesthetics, making it suited to promoting beauty products, body ideals, and luxury lifestyles (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Instagram also facilitates user engagement through follower accumulation and brand connectivity, as well as fosters social interactions among consumers (Blight et al., 2017; Kacar, 2023).

Fashion enthusiasts have effectively utilised Instagram's aesthetic appeal and extensive reach to achieve popularity and success. For instance, the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs)—individuals who share fashion tips and promote products through social media accounts and blog posts—has captivated fashion brands (Casalo et al., 2020). These SMIs are recognised as powerful channels for spreading information about new products, sparking trends, and driving sales. Known as “Instafamous” (Jin et al., 2019; Piehler et al., 2022), these Instagram personalities have thrived on the platform due to its capacity for social interaction and visual storytelling. This environment allows users to craft personal narratives and identities that attract audiences (Abidin, 2016; Yoo, 2023). As SMIs gain prominence among businesses, they have become an increasingly effective marketing strategy, particularly in the fashion industry, where Instagram is a dominant platform for promotional activities (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

SMIs have evolved into marketable commodities via social media platforms that enable the creation of public personas. According to Sethi et al. (2024), these platforms empower SMIs to challenge conventional standards of beauty and identity through autonomy, creativity, and self-expression, especially in the fashion and beauty sectors. Social media allows SMIs, particularly women who develop self-brands, to break free from traditional moulds, promoting a sense of empowerment and independence (Fan & Chan, 2023; Miguel et al., 2024). However, despite this perceived empowerment, self-branding practices are deeply rooted in a neoliberal capitalist framework, which often reinforces existing hierarchies related to class, gender, and aesthetics (Chidgey, 2021; Marwick, 2013). This paradox highlights the tension between the apparent freedom of self-expression within the context of social media and the underlying social norms that shape these practices, particularly in the context of Asia.

Given this context, it is crucial to examine how female SMIs on Instagram navigate and negotiate the ideological demands of neoliberalism while constructing their personal brand identities. This study also addresses literature gaps on gender issues in Asia—an area underexplored within cultural and communication studies, anthropology, and history (Chintrakarn, 2024), and echoes calls for further investigation into female empowerment (Gomez-Borquez et al., 2024; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Mager & Helgeson, 2011), particularly in the Asian context (Klose & Jebin, 2024). Specifically, this study investigated the self-

branding practices of Instagram SMIs from the lens of postfeminism in addressing the following questions:

1. What are the predominant types of content in these social media influencers' posts?
2. What can the way in which Malaysian female social media influencers portray themselves through images tell us about their personal brands?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-branding on social media

Self-branding on social media has become a pivotal aspect of digital identity management, with individuals increasingly curating their online personas to align with both personal and professional goals. Conceptualised as a strategic and self-instrumentalizing practice from its emergence in the 1990s, self-branding has evolved into a valuable, intangible form of social capital, particularly for aspiring workers (Blyth et al., 2024; Gandini, 2016). This form of social capital enables individuals to access new work opportunities, making self-branding an essential tool for career advancement in the digital age.

Generally, self-branding is described as a fusion of self-presentation and personal branding, emphasising the portrayal of one's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience (Adji, 2024; Schau & Gilly, 2003). This aligns with Jacobson (2020) who specifically explained personal branding as referring to "the process an individual uses to develop and market themselves to others. Personal branding is an act of agency as an individual actively—consciously or subconsciously—performs an identity". Parallel to this, is a concept that mirrors Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation. The transition from private to public self-presentation on social media has amplified the importance of personal branding (Belk, 2013; Miguel et al., 2024).

SMIs utilise self-branding to construct and project an authentic self-image through strategic content creation, visual presentation, and audience engagement (Enke & Borchers, 2021; Erz & Christensen, 2018). They are actors who build significant relationships and influence through online content and utilise self-branding to craft and disseminate an authentic digital persona that resonates with their audience (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Heeris Christensen et al., 2024). This process often involves self-presentation strategies, such as depicting the physical body, to construct a digital likeness (Miguel et al., 2024; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Content creation strategies, including media vividness and interactivity, play a crucial role in attracting and retaining followers (Lou & Xie, 2021), underscoring the importance of maintaining a persuasive, engaging online presence.

Goffman's gender framework

Erving Goffman's 1979 framework on gender representation offers a critical lens for understanding how gender roles are depicted in popular media. Rooted in his earlier work on self-presentation, the framework examines how individuals package and edit their public selves to conform to societal expectations and project desired impressions (Goffman, 1959). For Goffman, self-presentation is a strategic, selective process aligning

one's public image with audience expectations, ensuring a positive evaluation of these projected identities (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

Goffman's gender advertisements framework identifies several elements through which gender is portrayed: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal. These elements collectively highlight the societal norms that reinforce gender hierarchies, frequently portraying women in subordinate, submissive roles. Goffman (1959) highlighted the pervasive portrayal of women in ways that reinforce their perceived inferiority in popular media.

The framework's relevance endures in contemporary research, particularly in the examination of the sexualization and objectification of women in media. Although Goffman initially avoided direct examination of sexualization—likely due to the concurrent efforts of second-wave feminists who campaigned against such depictions—scholars have since extended his framework to incorporate this critical dimension (Goffman, 1979). Researchers have adapted the framework to better understand sexualization in media representations. For instance, Kang (1997) expanded Goffman's original coding scheme by adding categories such as body display and independence, which have revealed a significant increase in the depiction of women in nude or partially nude states.

These adaptations have enriched the empirical analysis of women's sexualisation and objectification in popular media. Earlier studies utilising Goffman's analytical approach continue to demonstrate that despite feminist activism, the portrayal of women as sexual objects remains a prevalent issue (Bell & Milic, 2002; Blyth et al., 2024; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Uski & Lampinen, 2016). Thus, the current research seeks to explore how female SMIs portray themselves through images in digital environments to further understand the portrayal from the lens of Goffman's framework.

Postfeminism

Celebrity remains an under-theorized concept within the dominant frameworks of postfeminist media cultures. As social media has reshaped the landscape of everyday media engagement among young people in recent decades, scholars have examined youth online cultures as potential spaces for more dynamic democratic participation, particularly in relation to the feminist discourse (Jackson, 2018, 2021; Kanai & Zeng, 2024). Within these digital spaces, postfeminism operates as a key ideological framework, reinforcing notions of individualism, choice, and empowerment while simultaneously embedding these values within the structures of neoliberal consumer culture (Chen & Liebler, 2024; Scharff, 2024).

A defining feature of postfeminism is its emphasis on autonomy, self-expression, and self-governance, particularly in young women's engagement with media and consumer culture. This perspective has expanded understanding on women's self-branding, which sees femininity tied to the body while reframing female subjectivity as shifting from external objectification to internalized self-surveillance and self-discipline (Chen & Liebler, 2024). The resurgence of feminist discourse within digital spaces is evident in mainstream media's renewed interest in feminist narratives, celebrity endorsements of feminism, and the proliferation of online activism (Mendes et al., 2019; Steele, 2021). As

Baer (2016) asserted, “digital activism constitutes a paradigm shift within feminist protest culture” (p. 18) and a sizable body of feminist media studies research now highlights the benefits and pitfalls of such activism (for example, Jackson et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2019; Steele, 2021).

Postfeminism’s entanglement with neoliberalism further complicates this discourse. As Chidgey (2021) argues, postfeminist subjectivity aligns with neoliberal capitalism, wherein individuals continuously work on and improve themselves, relying on personal effort rather than collective action. Within this framework, the self becomes a branded entity, strategically curated through narratives of autonomy, choice, and empowerment (Chen & Liebler, 2024; Miguel et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in digital spaces, where young women, influencers, and celebrities construct and monetize their identities through self-presentation strategies.

An emergent phenomenon within this context is the celebrity-activism nexus, in which digital self-branding intersects with social justice discourses. While often positioned as progressive, these forms of activism remain embedded within consumer capitalism, challenging the assumption that postfeminist cultures are inherently depoliticized (Chidgey, 2021; Walters, 2025). From this perspective, digital content studies increasingly situate influencer identity as shaped by both individual agency and broader socio-political frameworks (Miguel et al., 2024). This highlights the tension between self-branding as an act of empowerment and its complicity in reinforcing neoliberal postfeminist ideals.

METHODOLOGY

The selection of 10 female influencers for analysis was based on a systematic approach that considered their presence and recognition in Malaysian media articles listing influential female social media personalities, alongside their follower counts. The articles referenced were “Top 24 Instagram Influencers in Malaysia – A Diverse List” (Ai, 2022), “The Best Malaysian Fashion Influencers to Follow in 2024” (Salehaldin, 2024), “8 Top Social Media Influencers Who Go Beyond the Web” (Ashraf, 2023), “Top 10 Female Influencers in Malaysia in 2024” (Taslaud, 2024), “The Top 30 Instagram Influencers in Malaysia” (Howe, 2023), and “Top Moms to Follow on Instagram in Kuala Lumpur” (Little Step Asia, n.d.).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify Malaysian female social media influencers who had substantial public visibility on Instagram and whose content was relevant to visual self-presentation and personal branding. The final sample was determined using four criteria. First, the individual had to be a Malaysian female social media influencer with a publicly accessible Instagram account. Second, she had to be included in at least one of the selected Malaysian media lists. Third, her Instagram content had to demonstrate a substantial emphasis on visual self-presentation, lifestyle, fashion or personal branding. Fourth, follower count as of 7 March 2024 was used as an indicator of platform visibility. Individuals whose public presence was unrelated to influencer-style content or whose accounts did not provide sufficient analysable material were excluded.

Based on these criteria, 10 social media influencers were retained for analysis. Table 1 presents their Instagram handles, follower counts and frequency of inclusion in the selected media articles.

Table 1. Top ten SMIs

Name	Instagram Handle	Follower Count as of 7 March 2024	Number of Mentions in Selected Articles
Neelofa	neelofa	8,700,000	2
Atita Haris	atitaharis	843,000	1
Christinna Kuan	ms_kuan	814,000	1
Bella Khann	bellakhan	805,000	1
Jenn Chia	soimjenn	595,000	1
Jane Chuck	janechuck	593,000	2
Athirah Kamaruzzaman	tyrakmrzmn	518,000	1
Iza Hamid	thepinkstilettos	455,000	1
Teoh Ju Wei	juweiteoh	413,000	2
Tara Choi	tara_choi_	376,000	1

Sampling and data collection

In this study, content analysis was employed to empirically analyse user profiles on Instagram. A total of 3,856 Instagram posts were gathered from the identified social media influencer accounts using the 4K Stogram software from Jan 2023 to Dec 2024. The unit of analysis was each individual image; for carousel posts, all images were included to ensure a comprehensive and well-rounded representation of the influencers' visual content.

To assess intercoder reliability, three coders independently coded 40 units, representing 10% of the complete dataset. Inter-coder agreement was systematically evaluated using Holsti's (1969) percent agreement index, with a standard threshold of 0.7. Coders engaged in regular reviews of unit classifications and collaboratively resolved any discrepancies to uphold consistency throughout the data analysis process. This approach not only safeguarded the reliability of the study but also strengthened the rigor of the findings, offering a robust understanding of SMIs' self-branding practices within the social media context. The overall reliability coefficient was 0.90, which exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70. In regard to category-specific scores, the coefficients ranged from 0.84 to 0.95. Disagreements were reviewed and resolved through discussions before the remaining units were coded.

Development of coding categories

The image content category was mainly used to evaluate the feminist presentation, utilizing the gender advertisements framework proposed by Goffman (1979). The framework includes five sub-concepts: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordinates, and licensed withdrawal. Seven subgroups—stance, pose, touch, withdrawal, body display, breasts area, and braless—were designed to study gender display. In addition, for the image content category, items were adapted from Liu and Suh

(2017) and the coding schemes from Kang (1997), Hatton and Trautner (2011), as well as Hu et al. (2014). Table 2 highlights the coding system employed for analysis purposes.

Table 2. Coding scheme of content analysis

Category	Subcategories	Coding Scheme
Image Content		
(Goffman, 1979; Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Hu et al., 2014, Kang, 1997; Liu & Suh, 2017)	Theme	selfie: 1, portraits: 2, friends/family: 3, food: 4, gadgets: 5, pets: 6, activity: 7, captioned photos: 8, landscape: 9, fashion: 10
	Number of People in the Photograph	solo:1, two to three: 2, group: 3, none: 4
	Stance	posed leg bent:1, sitting: 2, walking: 3, standing: 4, squatting down: 5, lying: 6, other: 7
	Pose	normal:1, suggestive: 2, overly sexual: 3
	Touch	no touch:1, casual touch: 2, provocative touch: 3
	Withdrawal	gazing the viewer: 1, averting gaze: 2, covering face: 3, back to the camera: 4
	Body Display	unrevealing: 1, slightly revealing: 2, revealing: 3, naked: 4
	Breast Area	not a focal point: 1, somewhat emphasized: 2, major focus: 3
	Braless	yes: 1, no: 2, unknown: 3
Composition Elements		
(Liu & Suh, 2017; Ramos-Serrano & Martnez-Garca, 2016)	Type of Shot	close shot: 1, medium shot: 2, wide shot: 3, cut-in shot: 4
	Camera Angle	high: 1, low: 2, eye angle: 3
	Visual Composition	the rule of thirds: 1, highlighted: 2

Ethical considerations

This study analysed publicly accessible Instagram posts from identifiable social media influencers. Although the content was public, ethical safeguards were applied to minimise privacy and reputational risks. Only data relevant to the research questions were collected, and findings were reported in aggregate form without reproducing individual posts or making claims about personal intentions. No private or restricted content was accessed, and the dataset was stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected from Jan 2023 to Dec 2024. The data collection yielded 3,856 posts on Instagram from the aforementioned 10 social media influencers. These data were analysed according to the coding categories developed.

Table 3. Results of image content analysis relating to theme and number of people in the photograph

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content – Theme	Selfie	1	407	11
	Portrait	2	2,104	55
	Friends/Family	3	901	23
	Food	4	79	2
	Gadgets	5	31	1
	Pets	6	7	0
	Activity	7	146	4
	Captioned Photos	8	0	0
	Landscape	9	29	1
	Fashion	10	152	4
Image Content – Number of People in the Photograph	Solo	1	2,553	66
	Two to Three	2	937	24
	Group	3	366	9
	None	4	0	0

Table 3 shows that the Portrait theme was the most prevalent, accounting for 55% of occurrences. This was followed by the Friends/Family category at 23% and the Selfie category at 11%. These were followed by Activity and Fashion (both 4%). The majority of the posts analysed contained only one person in the image (66%), with the remaining images largely containing two to three people (24%). This coincides with results seen in Liu and Suh's work (2017), with portrait being the highest chosen theme. Only 9% of the analysed images depicted group photos, and none of the images contained an absence of people.

Table 4. Results of image content analysis relating to gender display

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content–Stance	Posed leg bent	1	18	0.5
	Sitting	2	1,053	27.3
	Walking	3	149	3.9
	Standing	4	2,404	62.3
	Squatting down	5	83	2.2
	Lying	6	93	2.4
	Other	7	56	1.5
Image Content – Pose	Normal	1	3,817	99.0
	Suggestive	2	39	1.0
	Overly sexual	3	0	0.0
Image Content – Touch	No touch	1	2,000	52
	Casual touch	2	1,855	48
	Provocative touch	3	1	0

Table 4. (con't)

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content–Withdrawal	Gazing the viewer	1	2,184	57
	Averting gaze	2	1,396	36
	Covering face	3	136	4
	Back to the camera	4	140	4

For the Stance subcategory, the most popular were Standing (62.3%) and Sitting (27.3%), corresponding to Liu and Suh's (2017) study. The Posed Leg Bent stance was the least popular (0.5%). Similarly, out of the 3,856 posts, none contained depictions of provocative touch. The majority of the images (52%) contained no touching at all, while 48% depicted casual touches. In the Withdrawal subcategory of Image Content, most of the analysed posts featured the SMI looking directly at the camera/viewer (57%). Another 36% showed the SMI averting her gaze from the camera. Only 4% of the posts had the SMI covering her face and 4% showed the SMI with her back to the camera.

Table 5. Results of image content analysis relating to body aesthetics

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content – Body Display	Unrevealing	1	1,505	39
	Slightly revealing	2	2,271	59
	Revealing	3	80	2
	Naked	4	0	0
Image Content – Breast Area	Not a focal point	1	3,466	89.89
	Somewhat emphasized	2	385	9.98
	Major focus	3	5	0.13
Image Content – Braless	Yes	1	12	0.31
	No	2	3,843	99.66
	Unknown	3	1	0.03

The results in Table 5 for Body Display, Breasts Area, and Braless subcategories show that these 10 Malaysian female SMIs opted for modesty in most of their Instagram posts. Nearly all the analysed posts from these SMIs were found to be “Normal” in pose (99%), that is, the poses within the image were largely neutral with no suggestive or sexual overtones. None were overtly sexual, and only 1% was categorised as “Suggestive.” Up to 59% of the posts showed the SMI only slightly revealing her body, while 39% had an unrevealing body display. The breast area was not a focal point for most of these 10 SMIs with 89.89% of the posts not featuring the breast as a focal point, and the SMIs were wearing bras in 99.66% of the posts that were analysed.

Table 6. Results of composition element

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Composition Element – Type of Shot	Close shot	1	271	7.0
	Medium shot	2	2,202	57.1
	Wide shot	3	1,364	35.4
	Cut-in shot	4	19	0.5
Composition Element – Camera Angle	High	1	436	11
	Low	2	340	9
	Eye level	3	3,080	80
Composition Element – Visual Composition	The rule of thirds	1	3,813	99
	Highlighted	2	43	1

Table 6 shows the results of photography composition elements following subcategories adapted from Ramos-Serrano and Martinez-Garca (2016). Medium shot (57.1%) and wide shot (35.4%) were the most popular shots. Relating to camera angle, the majority of photos were captured at eye level (80%), followed by high level (11%) and low level (9%). From a visual perspective, 99% of photos featured SMIs adhering to the rule of thirds, whereas 1% applied centre positioning. This finding is in contrast to Liu and Suh's (2017) study.

DISCUSSION

The following section examines the research questions in relation to the empirical findings. For *RQ1* (*What are the predominant types of the content in these social media influencers' posts?*), results reveal that the Portrait and Selfie themes exhibit considerable similarity (Table 3). The primary distinction lies in the method of image capture: Selfie images were taken by the SMI herself, whereas Portraits were captured by another individual. The combined frequency of these themes (66%) aligns precisely with the “Image Content – Number of People in the Photograph” data in Table 3, which indicates that 66% of posts features a single individual. For SMIs, self-presentation captivates and sustains follower engagement, building a narrative of personality for the audience.

Their individual identity serves as both the focal point and the primary appeal (Bagozzi, 2025; Ki et al., 2020). This accounts for the frequent use of selfies and self-portraits in their content. As forms of self-portraiture, these self-focused images function as visual commodities that contribute to social currency and digital consumption—a strategic tool for constructing specific self-narratives, be it that of an “extremely marketable, wealthy, and famous celebrity self” or an “ordinary” individual seeking social validation through engagement metrics such as “likes” (Berio, 2025; Iqani & Schroeder, 2015; Susilo et al., 2024). From a postfeminist perspective, the predominance of selfies and portraits reflects the centrality of the individual woman as the producer, subject and manager of her own public image.

Postfeminist culture places strong emphasis on autonomy, personal choice and self-expression, while also encouraging women to continuously monitor, improve and present themselves as desirable and marketable subjects. The repeated visual positioning of the influencer as the main subject therefore, reflects both individual agency and the neoliberal expectation that the self should be strategically managed as a personal brand. Following that, the prominence of “Friends/Family” as the next most frequent content theme is consistent with the self-focused content strategy. Social connections are an important part of personal identity, and by incorporating their social circles into their posts, SMIs reinforce and enrich their online brand identity (Davlembayeva et al., 2025; Pan et al., 2025).

In respect to *RQ2 (What can the way in which Malaysian female social media influencers portray themselves through images tell us about their personal brands?)*, the visual self-presentation of Malaysian female SMIs on Instagram reflects a curated personal branding strategy that aligns with both cultural norms and audience expectations (Bagozzi, 2025; Ki et al., 2020; Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2025). The emphasis in most of these SMIs’ content appears to be on the face rather than on the body, thereby centring attention on the SMI as an individual. This is supported by the data showing that 66% of all posts featured a solo subject, and 55% consisted of portrait images, indicating a strong focus on individual identity and self-representation.

Further analysis reveals that 99% of the poses were coded as “normal,” while only 1% were suggestive and none were overtly sexual. Similarly, in terms of body display, 59% of images were slightly revealing, 39% unrevealing, and none depicted nudity. The breast area was not a focal point in 89.89% of posts, and 99.66% of the influencers were observed to be wearing bras, reaffirming a modest aesthetic. These findings suggest a conscious distancing from hyper-sexualized content, which may be perceived as incongruent with the values of Malaysia’s predominantly conservative population, particularly the 58% Malay-Muslim demographic (Agil et al., 2022). These findings are particularly relevant to the postfeminist theory, where femininity is often constructed through a combination of apparent freedom and continuous bodily self-regulation.

Although women are positioned as autonomous individuals free to choose how they present themselves, their appearance remains subject to expectations concerning attractiveness, respectability, discipline and marketability. The prevalence of neutral poses and restrained bodily display may therefore reflect carefully regulated self-presentation rather than as straightforward evidence of either empowerment or oppression. Within the Malaysian context, this tension may be intensified by cultural expectations surrounding modesty and feminine respectability. The visual branding practices observed in the study suggest that the SMIs negotiate individual visibility without relying heavily on overt sexualisation—a culturally situated form of postfeminist self-branding in which autonomy and self-expression operate alongside social expectations concerning appropriate feminine appearance (Agil et al., 2022).

Moreover, 57% of the influencers’ images show them gazing directly at the viewer, while only 36% averting their gaze. This visual engagement strategy facilitates a parasocial connection with followers, enhancing perceptions of authenticity and accessibility (Kress

& van Leeuwen, 2006; Webb, 2020). Such techniques are consistent with personal branding goals, where trust and relatability are crucial to building long-term audience relationships (Miguel et al., 2024). Findings illustrate that Malaysian female SMIs appear to construct personal brands that balance aesthetic appeal with cultural sensitivity. Their branding is characterized by modesty, direct engagement, and self-focused imagery—strategies that position them as relatable yet aspirational figures. This indicates that personal branding on Instagram is not merely a display of individual agency but a nuanced negotiation with prevailing cultural scripts and audience expectations (Sanchez-Amboage et al., 2024; Zainudin et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical insights into how Malaysian female social media influencers (SMIs) construct personal brands through visual self-presentation on Instagram. The findings demonstrate an emphasis on modesty and individual representation, with 66% of the analysed posts featuring solo images and 99% displaying neutral poses. Suggestive poses accounted for only 1% of the dataset, while overtly sexual poses were not observed. These patterns indicate that the influencers' visual content was organised around self-focused imagery, restrained bodily presentation and controlled visual display. The frequent use of direct gaze (57%) and portrait-style imagery further demonstrates direct visual address and individual visibility, although the study does not establish how audiences interpreted these features.

These patterns may reflect the influencers' negotiation of postfeminist ideals of autonomy, self-expression and empowerment within a sociocultural context shaped by traditional values and neoliberal expectations (Jackson, 2018, 2021; Kanai & Zeng, 2024). Instagram therefore functions not only as a platform for self-promotion but also as a space for constructing public identities through strategic visual practices. The influencers' personal brands are communicated through self-focused imagery, bodily presentation, gaze and visual composition, illustrating a culturally-situated visual storytelling (Bagozzi, 2025; Ki et al., 2020; Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2025). The transition from private to public self-presentation further highlights the importance of personal branding in digital environments (Belk, 2013; Miguel et al., 2024). This study contributes to discussions of digital identity and influencer culture in Southeast Asia without drawing conclusions concerning trust, purchase behaviour, influence or parasocial relationships, which were not directly measured (Adji, 2024; Blyth et al., 2024).

Limitation and recommendations

A notable limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on macro- and mega-influencers, whose branding strategies are shaped by visibility, large follower bases, and commercial partnerships. This focus may not represent all SMIs, particularly micro- and nano-influencers, who maintain more authentic and niche-specific audience relationships. Therefore, the findings may have limited generalisability across influencer tiers. Future research should adopt stratified sampling across tiers to provide an understanding of

branding practices. This recommendation aligns with findings that highlight authenticity in micro-influencer branding (Belanche et al., 2021; Ceylan & Hayran, 2025) and show that parasocial interaction and audience trust vary according to influencer scale and content type (Balaban et al., 2022).

Another limitation is the study's reliance on quantitative content analysis. Although useful for identifying statistical patterns and correlations, this approach provides limited insight into the context-specific motivations and meaning-making processes underlying SMI branding. By reducing consumer-influencer interactions to predefined variables, it may overlook themes involving identity performance, narrative construction, and affective resonance (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Given the relational and performative nature of influencer personal branding, qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, or narrative analysis, could offer insight into how SMIs and followers co-construct brand meaning. Future studies should integrate interpretive methods to examine subjective experiences and symbolic interpretations that quantitative tools may not capture (Liu et al., 2025).

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Framing systemic communication practices to facilitate functional relational dynamics between service providers and people with disabilities

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, systemic structures such as healthcare institutions and workplace communities continue to scaffold along frameworks that tighten barriers and endorse exclusion for persons with disabilities (PWD). Previous studies have highlighted a complete mismatch between PWD needs, institutional regulations and implementation of initiatives. However, there is a lack of research exemplifying how macro-level structures and norms create micro-level barriers in communication. Enhancing accessibility to services through informed methods of communication can be achieved when service systems are built in tandem with PWD needs and wants. This study interviewed a cross section of individuals with various disabilities in the state of Selangor to exemplify how PWDs' lived experiences reflect a larger scale breakdown in communication. A social constructivist paradigm was adopted to show how PWDs interact with the different layers of their societal systems. Merton's functionalist theory was utilized to guide the study to identify manifest and latent functions of communicative practices, particularly in relation to how these practices contribute to gaps in the relational dynamics between service providers and PWDs. Findings indicate that established systems reinforce exclusionary communication practices, administrative structures signal resistance to change, and collectively, cultural-specific norms obstruct the transmission of educated exchanges in public spaces. The study concludes that a more functional relational dynamic can be facilitated by aligning the manifest function of Selangor's PWD policies on actual intended outcomes, mandating a universal multimodal information design for all public service providers, and necessitating a training program that emphasizes human-centric strategies.

Keywords: *People with disabilities, systemic communication practices, functional relational dynamics, manifest and latent functions, accessibility to services*

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of artificial intelligence (AI) and assistive technologies, lies the most basic form of human connection: communication. Communication is the gateway to participation in society, and access to rights and services. This implies that one's quality of life may be compromised when meaningful interactions and exchanges are impeded by a range of socio-psychological factors, organizational practices or entrenched cultural norms. Inclusivity, framing and communication are key identifiers (Chew & Abdul Latif, 2022). In Malaysia, person with disabilities (PWD) are more often than not, the segment of society that are at a disservice when it comes to accessing healthcare, public facilities, employment and education due to gaps in communication.

These gaps exist because a comprehensive guide in managing and executing this form of communication is not straightforward given the complexity and limitations of the societal construct. The multifaceted needs of PWD which can range from speech, language, voice and hearing, for example, demand more of a tailored user tool (Hickey et al., 2024). In other words, to properly reach out to PWDs, forms of communication must not only be user-friendly, but also be human-centric with a sensitivity towards differently abled individuals. This scenario is exacerbated by the fact that many individuals are from low income groups that are trying to make ends meet.

Despite the fundamental principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the legal framework provided through the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685) at the national level, as well as state-level laws such as the Selangor Women and Children Enactment, there remain gaps and challenges in the implementation of policies and legislation aimed at safeguarding the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Selangor, Malaysia. The predominant debate that current studies are bringing to the fore is the issue of accountability (Mukhriz et al., 2024; Wan et al., 2025).

This study argues that the root cause of these barriers is more of a systemic nature with communication challenges at the core. While this is not a new scholarly concern, there remains a dearth in studies that show how macro-level limitations create micro-level barriers in communication due to the manifest and latent functions of dialogic and semiotic responses. The accumulative effect across the various layers of institutional arrangements and regulatory governance coupled with societal perceptions, mindsets and practices creates environments that are not conducive for PWDs who are trying to gain access to any form of services, assistance, and support. Further, entrenched systemic structures maintain a stranglehold over communicating effectively with PWDs, aggravating a greater disconnect.

Hence, this study explores how disability-related initiatives and institutional practices function manifestly and latently in shaping the lived experiences of PWDs. This will enhance our understanding of how the micro-level day-to-day communication encounters shape the lived experiences of PWDs in accessing essential services. Further to that, how these cumulative experiences affect broader structural and institutional contexts are also identified. It is hoped that the findings of this study will allow for more

functional and effective communication strategies that enrich the relational dynamics between service providers and PWDs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability in Malaysia: Selangor in context

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Malaysia continue to face complex and multidimensional challenges that significantly affect their quality of life, particularly in terms of cost of living, education, and healthcare. The growing number of registered PWDs in Malaysia further compounds these challenges. As defined by *Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya Malaysia* (Persons with Disabilities Action Plan) 2016–2022, PWD refers to individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments that hinder their full participation in society. Reports indicate that there are 703,287 active PWDs, as of December 2024 with various conditions as follows: hearing, visual, mental, physical, learning, speech and multiple disorders (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2024).

The current Madani government has implemented various measures to ensure that the PWD community is not sidelined and receives the necessary support. Through collaboration with *Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Orang Kurang Upaya* (the National Council for Persons with Disabilities) and various other agencies, a multi-sectoral approach is being utilized to address these societal issues, as outlined in Section 3(1) of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008. Although Malaysia has made progress in promoting the rights and inclusion of PWD, existing literature indicates that there are still substantial gaps that hinder the full realization of their rights within society (Mohd et al., 2023; Omar et al., 2023). These challenges stem not only from systemic issues such as policy implementation and governance, but also from deeply rooted societal attitudes and physical barriers that limit access to basic services and development opportunities.

Wan et al. (2025) in their recent study of PWD challenges in Selangor, provided a comprehensive approach to not only understanding their predicaments in terms of cost of living, but also showcased through rigorous analysis, how a lack of understanding and a lack of communication with PWDs is in need of dire attention. Their study brings to the forefront sustainable and practical implementations for the state legislation to consider, after thorough interviews and focus group discussions with the affected PWD community and their caregivers. In the same vein, Mukhriz et al. (2024) took a holistic look at PWD care in Malaysia, studying the trends and challenges affecting this group with the hope at drawing attention to the fundamentals that are involved in providing for the PWD community. These studies showcase how PWD nuances need to be operationalized.

Accessibility of services

Providing services and enabling their accessibility requires different support systems in terms of whom the intended beneficiaries are. In the context of Selangor and much of the Malaysian states, there is no denying that there are targeted services, encompassing education, exemptions, welfare and job support, that are provided to the PWD community.

There are a number of studies that acknowledge the extent to which government policies and measures have been undertaken to ensure that the strategies are inclusive, adaptable and all-encompassing (Santoso et al., 2025; Tan et al., 2025). While the intention to uplift PWDs exists, it falls short on execution and delivery.

Studies have shown that while there is a legal mandate to ensure equal access to public facilities, education, employment, and healthcare services, various barriers still persist. Among the common complaints are the lack of attention to physical accessibility in public spaces and buildings, the inadequacy of disable-friendly transportation systems, and the insufficient provision of support facilities within educational institutions (Abdul Wahab et al., 2025; Fadzil et al., 2025; Wan et al., 2025).

While these concerns recur and continue to surface in recent studies, many websites and applications, including those designed to assist people with disabilities, still fail to meet digital accessibility standards; what more can be expected of built environments and interpersonal communication needs (Ali et al., 2024; Jaafar et al., 2024). These barriers make it difficult for PWDs to access essential services and fully participate in community life, particularly when gaps exist in the communication medium and channels themselves. Addressing these challenges requires not just awareness and understanding of a PWD-centric approach, but also involves an underlying nomenclature. This is where systemic structures and policies inhibit instead of facilitating ecosystems that are founded on symbiotic relationships.

Systemic structures and policies

Studies have shown that while remedial measures are put into place for tracking and monitoring purposes, in most cases they often exclude PWD as part of the integral systemic structure. If at all, there are provisions made for PWD, the mediums are either inadequate or ill-equipped. For example, policies such as the Selangor Uniform Building by-laws are questionable when limitations of the physically disabled are understood. Existing studies have highlighted the limited awareness and understanding of relevant laws and policies in addressing shortcomings concerning the limitations of PWD. It is in fact ironic that policies that have been put in place to assist have paradoxically generated unintended disservices through weak implementation and enforcement. Relatedly, systemic structures have been found to foster unchecked and uneven implementation of rules and regulations (Ahmad et al., 2024; Said et al., 2024).

Contrary to these studies, Ali et al. (2024) approached this predicament from the point of view of the Department of Social Welfare (JKM). Their study highlighted not only how PWD policies are intended to alleviate difficulties, but also the importance of progress monitoring and collaborations across government and non-governmental organizations. Other studies have similarly identified gaps and challenges that arise when PWDs try to access the benefits of well-intended policies. These challenges include physical barriers associated with the built environments of healthcare institutions as well as attitudinal factors that serve as a barrier to approachability and interaction between administrative personnel and PWDs (Awang et al., 2024; Vasu & Hui, 2024). Further, literature points to low awareness levels and sub-par service delivery systems as persistent

challenges (Ali et al., 2024; Zulkipli et al., 2024). These findings indicate that execution of policies often fail due to fragmented service providers and inadequate examination of broader systemic consideration. This gives way to resistance, misconceptions and grounds for excusable poor conduct and behaviour when dealing with PWDs.

Communication practices and spaces: Relational dynamics in context

The observation of relational dynamics to ascertain communication trends and establish a frame of reference has been used in many contexts. Yusof et al. (2025) for instance, explored the self and the other in an educational setting that brought about perspectives of self-image, self-control and appreciation of others. In the context of this study, earlier literature reviews have shown a persistent lack of competencies in the implementation and reinforcement of disability-related initiatives, mainly stemming from accountability issues. Equally concerning are the impending cultural and systemic stereotypes, societal ostracization and unfounded assumptions about PWDs (Wan et al., 2025).

Similar studies have also highlighted communication practices that create uncomfortable or exclusionary spaces in which PWDs feel unwelcome. Evidence also suggests that limited receptivity toward PWD-related issues can emerge early in the life course, highlighting the need for more inclusive environments and sustained exposure to PWDs within educational settings. These observations align with broader findings that identify attitudinal barriers among administrative and support staff which impedes inclusive engagement (Kassim et al., 2024; Vasu & Hui, 2024; Wan et al., 2025).

While these studies highlight related visible reactions and responses that are associated with discrimination, stigmatization and social isolation issues, far more is communicated through everyday infrastructural omissions. Basic provisions such as designated parking spaces, mobility support, and ramps remain underdeveloped in many settings, raising important questions about the implicit messages conveyed to PWDs in such contexts. There is a need to understand that communications extend well beyond verbal and non-verbal. Elements such as signage, instructions, readability, overall atmosphere, just to name a few, constitute communication. In fact, the semiotic repertoire is endless in this context. Evidence of this disconnect is reflected in findings that show students with disabilities in selected higher institutions of learning not being provided designated parking spaces; this implicitly communicates an unspoken message of disregard for the basic needs of PWDs (Rahman et al., 2024).

Merton's theory: Manifest and latent functions

This study utilized Merton's Functionalist theory to understand how communicative patterns, trends and practices bring about overt and hidden messages. It provides two key concepts that are useful to analyse the functions of social actions and social institutions, namely manifest functions and latent functions. Manifest functions can be referred to as the intended and openly acknowledged consequences of any given action, program or policy. These functions are often communicated as the objectives that institutions or authorities claim to pursue.

Latent functions, on the other hand, refer to the unintended, hidden or unrecognized consequences as a result of actions, programs, or policies implemented. These consequences may be either beneficial or harmful in which the latter is also known as latent dysfunctions. Previous researches have highlighted that applying this theoretical framework to examine challenges helps uncover critical underlying nuances that give rise to unintended outcomes, including effects that undermine or counteract intended goodwill and formally articulated functions embedded within institutionalized, centralized, and regulatory structures.

This framework allows researchers to analyse the consistency between planned intentions and actual outcomes, as well as instances where such alignment is absent. Since manifest function is evident through what is reported, recorded, and openly discussed, this paper highlights openly declared policies and initiatives by the Selangor state in the effort towards a PWD friendly and socially inclusive community. The manifest function is also discussed using data obtained from relevant stakeholders to showcase the extent to which such manifest functions serve their purpose.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and interview procedure

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 participants comprising persons with disabilities (PWDs), caregivers, representatives from civil society organizations, and disability rights advocates over a three-month period. These included PWDs with hearing, visual, mental, physical, learning, speech and multiple disorders. The inclusion criteria for this study comprised persons with disabilities registered with JKM, as well as primary caregivers who were directly involved in their daily care. Participants were required to have experience of receiving or managing disability-related assistance.

The interviews aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by PWDs in their daily lives, as well as their perspectives on existing policies and services. The semi-structured approach provided the researcher with the flexibility to adapt questions according to the flow of the conversation, thereby enabling participants to share their experiences and viewpoints more openly and comprehensively. In contrast to saturation-driven sampling, a case-oriented qualitative design was employed where analytical emphasis was placed on idiographic depth and contextual meaning, rather than cross-case repetition and thematic redundancy.

The interview sessions, guided by a social constructivist model, involved co-constructing meanings, negotiating shared values and generating implications for a range of stakeholders, including government institutions, service providers, communities, and families. The interview questions covered healthcare and medical services, personal assistance and care, housing and accessibility, transportation and accessible public transportation, employment and income support, mental health and well-being services, education and skills development as well as utilities and daily living costs.

These areas were identified as key priorities of the study enabling a deeper examination of the systemic factors underpinning the issues raised during the interviews.

Rigour was ensured through thick description and systematic coding using Nvivo. By integrating participants' narratives with a structured research framework grounded in Merton's Functionalist theory, the study established a methodological basis for developing policy-oriented insights and proposing more effective interventions based on findings that have manifest and latent functions.

Research framework

This study not only critically evaluated what should happen as per the intended effort (manifest) but also looked at the unintended consequences that arise in practice (latent), often producing barriers for PWDs as revealed through stakeholders' lived experiences. Drawing on an integrative research framework grounded in social constructivism, the empirical material in the form of narrative responses was utilized to highlight how communication barriers emerged through relational dynamics, institutional norms as well as contextual constraints. These findings then informed communication strategies that could facilitate more robust and functional relational dynamics between institutions and PWDs to ensure better accessibility to services. The research framework in Figure 1 explains how the study was conducted.

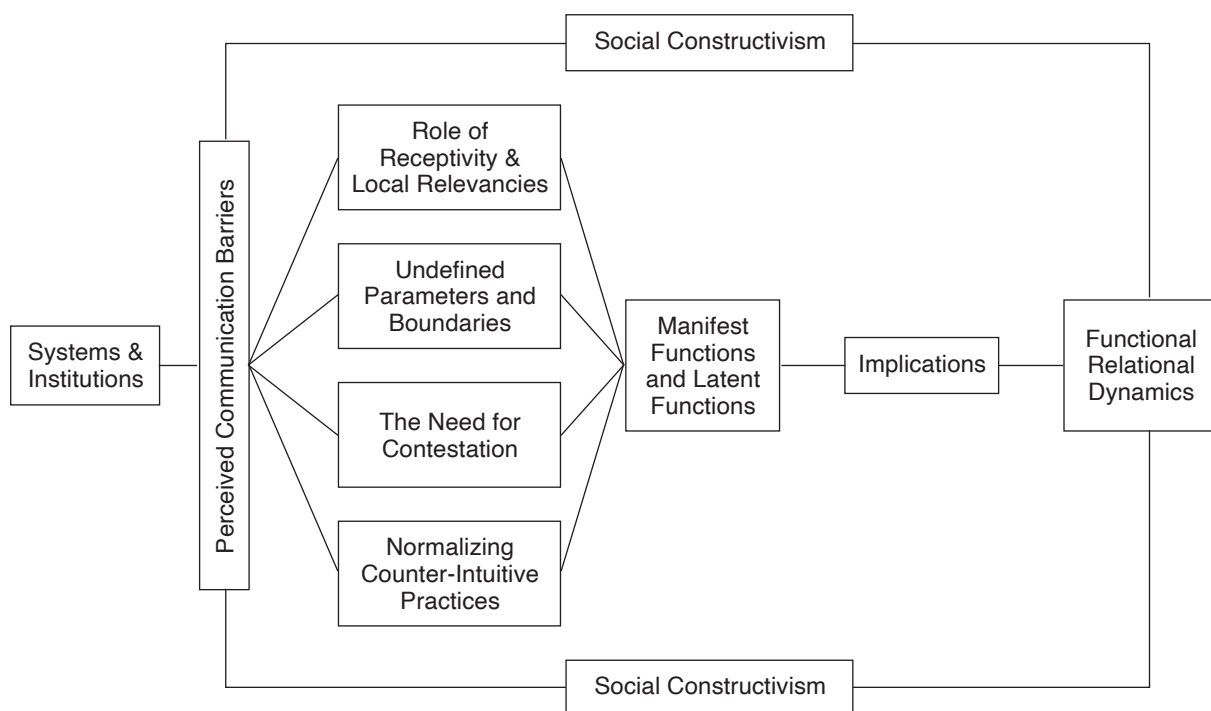


Figure 1. Research framework

FINDINGS

Analysis of the data indicates that the perceived communication barriers are not singular or episodic. Rather, the barriers emerge through on-going relational and contextual encounters categorised as the role of reciprocity and local relevancies, the presence of undefined parameters and boundaries, contestations of place and space as well as

the normalization of counter-intuitive practices. These mechanisms structure how interactions between persons with disabilities (PWDs) and institutional actors unfold as well as shape expectations, responses and the flow of communication across different service contexts as further elaborated below.

The role of receptivity and local relevancies

The study found that while the government and co-responding bodies have in fact taken action and provided specific facilities across socio-economic structures that are meant to support PWDs, the actions are in fact misaligned as it fails to take into account the nature of its beneficiaries. Basic “customer service” practices within government agencies and service sectors were frequently described as insensitive to the needs of PWD, especially in terms of attentiveness and responsiveness. One of the participants shared that “... *for a PWD, they sometimes need more attention from the nurses. But they are really busy that they do not have the time and would ignore the PWD. This would make the PWD feel sensitive*” (P15IDF).

Such interactions reflect not only a lack of attentiveness but also generates feelings of vulnerability and embarrassment making PWD patients self-conscious during service encounters. Similarly, another participant recounted an incident at a hospital “... *a hearing customer [behind me] noticed that I am writing to communicate. That customer interrupts by jumping queue and starts speaking to the staff. The staff attends to this hearing customer that interrupted, while half-way attending to me. It is like I was put on hold*” (P14IDF). This interaction illustrates the ableist norms and communicative priority that implicitly marginalizes PWDs within everyday institutional exchanges.

In addition, operations and systems which are intended to facilitate, such as information on websites, Instagram posts on social media platforms, were highlighted by the participants as not only ironic but also counter-intuitive in a society that thrives on relationships, group orientation and symbiotic connections. According to the participants, information often failed to reach them due to the inaccessible formats as well as the dissemination strategies which did not adequately account for PWD as a distinct audience.

One of the participants described his encounter with a government officer when seeking further information, “*ada kita ada dalam* [trans: we have, we have in] *website. I'm like saying, go and look at your website. Blind person cannot read KKM website. Announcements are not screen reader friendly... [and] where did you promote? Oh, Instagram. Yes, a PWD like myself is going to go on Instagram to read your posters...autistic person who already have limited interaction is just going to go and create an account on Instagram, is it?*” (P6IMEN). These responses demonstrate that communication is not framed around the realities, languages and lived experiences of PWDs. It is instead framed around ableist norms that which is often limited, ill-suited, inaccessible and inconsistent for the diverse range of PWDs.

Undefined parameters and boundaries

There is a lot of vagueness surrounding directives, instructions, labels and terminology pertaining to information dissemination and consumption. There is a heavy reliance on

unspoken understandings and cultural nomenclature in making sense of information and what is being communicated. One of the participants shared that *“Deaf people don’t receive information on public announcements when there is any emergency happening at public transport like LRT. They have to find out for themselves to know what is happening through social media such as Facebook, Twitter. So Deaf people are usually left out from any kind of emergency announcements”* (P5IDF). This example indicates that there are no clear written guidelines, notices nor emergency signages that facilitate informed behaviour and practice.

Findings also show that on the one hand, there are situations where there is no information, and on the other hand, there are instances where there is underutilized information. For example, when new state-wide initiatives were introduced, many OKU individuals were unaware or received a lagged update. Quoting from them, *“...Selangor Mobility and a few services have come out. So very convenient...[but]They [PWD] don’t know. So, I feel like the, OKU generally are not very well informed of a lot of things that happened around them...”* (P1CVG). This quote is a clear indication of poorly executed communication, often not efficient in addressing the targeted beneficiaries.

In the same vein, definitions of the multiples abilities and disabilities have not been specified in a way that operations, systems and governance recognize, acknowledge and align at the ground level. In fact, institutional actors tend to rely on assumed norms of disability that fail to capture the diversity of PWD experiences. Hence, constructed realities supersede actual realities. One of the participants highlighted, *“We have many blind adults. A lot of them are Indian and Chinese, who never went back to school to learn Braille. So, giving them Braille is pointless”* (P8IB). These scenarios outline several undefined parameters and boundaries leading to distorted communications and misled dialogues, misguided facilitation as well as misunderstood needs and wants.

The need for contestation

PWDs’ continued battle to own their spatial and social design in the region has been a longstanding one which begs the question as to why gaining equitable access to participation is something that needs to be claimed and not imbedded by default to reflect a shared and inclusive society. This raises critical questions about why equitable participation must be negotiated, rather than assumed. The continued absence of wheelchair-accessible entrances in government buildings and eateries exemplifies how exclusion is communicated through design. Such spatial arrangements limit not only physical access but also opportunities for interaction, visibility, and voice, reinforcing perceived communication barriers at both symbolic and practical levels.

One of the participants shared, *“I have taken the LRT to Taman Jaya but at times the lift does not work and then it is so difficult for someone like myself who is wheelchair bound. My mother has cried on several occasions when she has had to manage me by herself when the lift does not work or there are issues with the train services.”* (P2IM). In fact, participants also emphasized that essential accessibility features such as ramps, inclusive toilets and designated parking are often limited to specified locations, rather than being systematically integrated across public and private domains. Urban development and

city planning consultations often exclude the voices of the diverse group of PWD. For instance, the planning and upgrading of LRTs, tactile pavements and lift access is not central to the early design but needs to be repeatedly lobbied and tabled for.

One participant highlighted this pattern in relation to public transport infrastructure: *“We need to build facilities which are disabled friendly. For example, we build LRTs and then after that we have to do repair work because they are not friendly. Why didn’t they include them from the beginning? Bukan benda yang kita tak tau”* [Trans: It is not something we don’t know]” (P13OLD). This suggests that facilities for PWD is not assumed as a baseline requirement, but rather treated as an optional measure, making access conditional. Accessibility challenges also extend into everyday social spaces: *“I find difficulties if I go to other peoples’ houses, even to go into the washroom is difficult. Gonna be difficult to enter, too narrow the space, the other uneven surface. So you have to remember if its possible. Spacing must be looked into...”* (P12IDIS). Steep stairs and narrow aisles in public spaces are a testament to how the PWD symbol, although displayed as compliance, is in fact arbitrary.

Normalizing counter-intuitive practices

The behavioural patterns underlying each action or inaction stem from grounded social framing. Embedded in everyday practices are the deeply rooted cultural associations of disability with sympathetic acts prompted through learned behaviour or by perceived altruistic obligations. It does not help that facilitating PWDs is seen as charitable and morally driven. While such responses may appear benevolent, they inadvertently reinforce the notion that facilitating PWD is an act of charity rather than a matter of rights. Consequently, accessibility and support are framed as discretionary “hand-outs” rather than institutional responsibilities. This normalization is further sustained by the *“tidak-apa”* (trans: it’s okay) attitude, which fosters complacency and lowered expectations toward PWDs. As one caregiver explained, *“... No, he can’t even take care of himself so we don’t expect him to work. Until 20 he attended a special class in a normal school and after that if they can’t work, they just stay home”* (P4CM).

Such narratives illustrate how exclusionary assumptions are internalized and reproduced within families and communities, which is a by-product of transforming structural barriers into seemingly natural outcomes. Furthermore, this progression is evident in organizational practices, particularly within public services, where policy intentions fail to translate into meaningful implementation on the ground. One of the participant stated that, *“If you actually go on ground and you actually look at how OKU has to go to healthcare, it’s a completely different policies and what’s on ground never usually match. If the national report don’t align, let me tell you, state governments don’t even know that these things exist”* (P6IMEN). Within the context of communicative barriers, these counter-intuitive practices become normalized through routine inaction and weak institutional accountability. As a result, systemic exclusion is sustained not through overt discrimination, but through everyday indifference that renders accessibility invisible, optional, and ultimately negotiable.

Accountability and enforcement are the hallmarks of creating assurance that policies and regulations are honoured. However, in most governmental institutions and related administrative offices, the personnel often demonstrate sub-par responses when engaging with matters concerning PWD. This lack of competence and preparedness was starkly captured by one participant who observed a Ministry of Health presentation, “*I just watched, I listened to the paper from MOH key officer presenting the MOH disability plan. I’m takut lah. I’m takut [trans: I’m scared. I’m scared]. They have no clue what they’re talking about!*” (P13OLD). Such encounters signal not only weak institutional capacity but also showcases indifference or even dismissive responses toward PWD.

DISCUSSION

Manifest functions

Selangor state is recognized as one of the most developed and progressive states that is not only concerned with the issues of PWD, but also takes proactive measures to strive towards achieving a socially inclusive society. In line with the national commitment made through the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 which affirms equal access to all, Selangor has set up welfare support such as Anak Istimewa Selangor (ANIS) and Yayasan Warisan Anak Selangor (YAWAS) to provide various programs, intervention and aids to PWDs. The intended functions are to provide early intervention therapy, direct healthcare support, as well as enhance the well-being of PWD. Thus, the manifest function of these initiatives aims to reduce healthcare disparities and ensure that no one is left behind, in addition to promoting a better quality of life for PWDs through planned interventions.

Selangor state officials have also been publicly committed to improving accessibility and other support services for PWDs. For example, the introduction of *Mobiliti Selangor*, which includes a free PWD-friendly Demand Responsive Transit (DRT) van that can be utilized within selected areas in Selangor. This effort was manifestly curated to meet the demand of First-Mile-Last-Mile of PWDs (Dewan Selangor, 2023). Other efforts include *Khairat Darul Ehsan*, financial assistance or condolence contribution, which also include PWD recipients as well as *Skim Mesra Insan Istimewa* (SMIS), which gives an annual RM150 shopping voucher for registered OKU members.

These manifest functions were acknowledged by the participants as being introduced to improve PWD accessibility and help them cope with rising living costs. In fact, several participants explicitly expressed their gratitude toward the state government for such initiatives, noting that the state has been more proactive and forward-thinking than other states in Malaysia. This is consistent with Oliver (1990)’s notion of The Social Model of Disability which highlights intentional designs. When explicit objectives of disability legislation and interventions meet in the middle, it reduces economic and social barriers.

Latent functions

(a) Structural

There is a common neglect in understanding that the beneficiaries should also include PWD parents and caregivers. Being so, the facilitation goes beyond just providing support for PWD alone. Relational dynamics subsists on an ecosystem where all entities involved feel supported via physical, social and psychological means, which can all be communicated through proper channels and mediums of information. Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his Ecological Systems Theory, argues for this point of view that sees individuals as part of an interconnected system. Being so, a shift in one person inevitably affects everyone else in the community. However, the current predicament here reflects a latent assumption within policy design that supports compartmentalization, rather than situated within a broader relational ecosystem.

In addition, the transportation support initiatives, for example, disproportionately benefit PWDs who are located at central locations. It undermines the fact that many government agencies and PWD themselves may not be located in these areas. This spatial concentration overlooks the realities of PWDs and government agencies operating in peripheral or non-central areas, thereby producing conditional accessibility. This echoes Wahab et al. (2025) who questioned the feasibility and practicality of the newly introduced rail transit system in Kuala Lumpur in emerging economies. Their critique emphasized how built environments and public services often fail to comprehensively address diverse passengers including PWDs, thereby reproducing exclusion through selective infrastructural upgrades. Such selective implementation reflects a broader policy–practice disjuncture where inclusion is asserted rhetorically but unevenly realized. This obliviousness coupled with the selective nature of implementing upgrades to services continue to marginalize and sideline PWDs, which is in fact ironic in a high-context collectivist society such as Malaysia.

(b) Interpretive

Administrative structures that seem to normalize inadequacies contribute to systemic stagnation. As a result, institutional receptivity remains low with no increased agency on the part of the PWD, despite empowerment being the intended purpose and expected outcome. These dynamics are reflected in the challenges faced by the Department of Social Welfare in its effort to empower PWD through their services and facilities (Ali et al., 2024). The issue lies not with the manifest intentions, i.e. programs and training, support from other parties, observation and monitoring, but with the hidden and unrecognized consequences of a social and institutionalized pattern of communication that is often overlooked. These structural limitations include issues related attitudes, manpower constraints, lack of awareness and understanding of PWD, and weak policy enforcement (Ali et al., 2024). Counter arguments also suggest that PWDs are perhaps also overly dependent on government assistance, potentially affecting agency and co-dependence that contributes to a lag in the system (Madyaningrum, 2022).

In the same vein, discussion on readiness and preparedness highlights the roles of both the service providers and the beneficiary stakeholders in shaping outcomes

(Salamzadeh et al., 2022). These can be considered latent behaviours or structures that emerge unintendedly. In extending this analysis, this study posits that a vicious cycle has been created, whereby both service providers and PWDs are less reactive and less responsive to any form of change, or alternatives as preconceptions and assumptions take precedence.

There is evidence that everyday communication with PWDs often fails because there is a jarring disparity between urban and rural PWD needs, where some implementations are centralized while some are decentralized; some policies emulate western philosophies while some emanate from eastern philosophies. Such fragmentation renders efforts to communicate in a relatable manner difficult to achieve in practice. Often, basic communicative factors, as highlighted in this study, strengthen cultural barriers leading to dysfunctional relational dynamics. This aligns with earlier findings that identify social disgrace as a lived phenomenon affecting PWDs and their families (Hou et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Overall, the findings and aforementioned discussion reveal several evident disparities between the Selangor State government's manifest functions drawn up on paper (policy objectives) and the practical latent dysfunctions that emerged during the execution phase of the said programs in the real world. Initiatives rolled out by the state such as ANIS, YAWAS, Mobiliti Selangor and Khairat Darul Ehsan programs are all well-intended to improve the quality of life of the PWDs in Selangor. However, many of these initiatives fell short of achieving their manifest functions upon implementation.

The study recommends aligning the manifest function of Selangor's policies for the PWDs with a focused approach on actual intended outcomes during the implementation phase. To mitigate possible backlashes as previously reported in the findings of the study, the task force mandated with drawing up statewide policies should embrace a social constructivist approach and ensure the active participation of and continued consultation with PWDs from the start of the initiative itself. This co-construction approach to policy making will enable the state to move away from a bureaucratic top-down approach to one that empowers PWDs to be architects of their own inclusion.

Next, to narrow the emergent digital gap, a universal multimodal information design should be mandated for all public service providers to ensure that the manifest function of the drawn-out initiatives reach PWDs in its intended form. Websites should be optimized for screen readers with the use of diverse repertoire of visual, auditory and haptic text alert elements so that the messages reach the PWDs, especially those who are visually impaired and hearing impaired. This would also be another way of empowering them by enabling them to access pertinent information independently, instead of always having to depend on able-bodied individuals for information sharing and updates. This approach would go a long way in reducing the present-day challenges to access and communication.

Furthermore, attempts to do away with the charity model which foregrounds a feeling of pity and robs PWDs off their dignity would necessitate a training program that emphasizes compassionate, human-centric strategies for true social inclusion to take place. The module should be made compulsory for all frontline staff in public services and its content should draw attention to high-context nuances such as body language and facial expressions that correspond with the type of disability. Public services personnel should also uphold a code of conduct whereby they communicate with the PWDs directly and not through caregivers. Acknowledging their presence is a positive step towards fostering a more inclusive context. Personnel should serve PWDs as part of a standard service delivery benchmark set by the respective public services departments and not view it as an obligation or moral favour.

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