"Sinovac safe and *halal*": The newsworthiness of religion on vaccine reporting in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

News media reporting on vaccines amid a global pandemic plays a vital role in not only communicating pertinent details, but also in shaping the public's attitude towards vaccines. Indeed, despite global efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 through vaccination, the public's attitude towards vaccines has been varied. This qualitative study attempts to discern the relationship between media reports and public concern by exploring religion as a newsworthy aspect for media reporting on COVID-19 vaccines in Malaysia. We drew upon insights from discursive news values analysis (DNVA) to examine news headlines from 10 Malaysian newspapers in English and Bahasa Malaysia. A focus group discussion (FGD) conducted with five selected members of the public supplemented the primary data. Findings show that religion is a newsworthy aspect of COVID-19 vaccine reporting in Malaysia, with newspapers utilising all nine discursive news values, particularly impact, eliteness, timeliness, and proximity, through the ways in which linguistic resources were utilised to frame the media reporting. This was particularly notable in the Bahasa Malaysia headlines, more than the English headlines. The FGD further reveals that religion is a powerful factor that can steer public reception for or against vaccines, a fact which has been exploited by the media. This paper, therefore, contributes to an emerging body of work on DNVA besides offering useful insights for media practitioners.

Keywords: ***Discourse analysis, discursive news values, media, religion, COVID-19***

INTRODUCTION

Amid an ongoing global fight against COVID-19, this study explores how religion is employed as a newsworthy aspect on COVID-19 vaccine reporting in Malaysia. Media reports about various COVID-19 vaccines have brought to light some deep-seated, sensitive, and thus, potentially damaging national, racial, and religious sentiments (Corbie-Smith, 2021; Pavlik, 2021; Sabahelzain et al., 2021). Salim (2012, p. 96) argued,

> *Vaccinations are highly politicised, and often spill over into issues of religion and ideology. They have been used as a platform of contesting agendas, and reactions against vaccinations often mirror deeper concerns of national and religious autonomy. Vaccinations have also been perceived as secular interventions detracting from religious understandings of disease, and often posing an affront to people who do not prescribe exclusively to biomedicine.*

Malaysia, a Muslim-majority, multiracial nation, is a suitable site to conduct this research. Due to Islam's position as the country's official religion (Wan Husin & Ibrahim, 2016), the study covers a wide-ranging purview on numerous issues, including vaccination. Malaysia started its nationwide COVID-19 inoculation programme, named *Program Imunisasi COVID-19 Kebangsaan* (PICK), on February 24, 2021. In general, the country's vaccination rates were good and comparatively faster than some developed countries (Chong, 2021: Our World in Data, 2021). At the time of writing this paper, 76.8% of the Malaysian population have been fully vaccinated by September 16, 2021 (Vaksin COVID-19, 2021).

Nonetheless, like many other countries, Malaysia too has had to grapple with a rise in vaccine hesitancy, even prior to COVID-19 (Wong et al., 2020). Religion has been linked to vaccine hesitancy among Muslims in Southeast Asia (see Mohamed, 2021; Muhammad Fuad & Hasanudin, 2021), particularly in Malaysia (Wong et al., 2020). This situation is likely related to the comprehensive Islamic rulings (*shariah*), under which Muslims are required to adhere to specific Islamic laws intended to safeguard their well-being through the regulation of *halal* (anything that is permissible) and *haram* (anything that is forbidden) (Azri et al., 2017; Sholeh & Helmi, 2021).

Wong et al. (2020) claimed that many Malaysian Muslims believe some vaccines are *haram* (impure) due to the presence of porcine gelatine (see Mohd Azizi et al., 2017), aborted foetal DNA, and other animal cells. However, regardless of the presence of such substances, religious jurists (*fuqaha*) and contemporary experts have unanimously agreed that the use of medication sourced from *haram* substances is warranted based on the prevailing *dharurah* (*darurat*), whereby a situation is evaluated as critical by physicians (Azri et al., 2017).

Yet, continued doubts over the *halal*-ness or extent of *halal* of vaccinations still prevail among some Muslims (Abdullah, 2020; Mohd Azizi et al., 2017; Zulkarnain et al., 2021), which can be used as media fodder to paint Muslims in a negative light (Ahmad, 2022). To substantiate their rejection of vaccines, some even appeal to the concept of the "ultimate authority" to suggest their complete submission to God. Brunei, for example, claimed to have successfully mitigated COVID-19 through "*vaksin ketuhanan*" (deity-related 'vaccines'), figuratively referring to the power of Islamic practices such as prayers, reciting the Holy Quran, and performing charitable acts (Mohamed, 2021). All these suggest the significance, complexities, and intersections between religious, medical, and media discourses within Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia.

Drawing upon Bednarek's (2016), as well as Bednarek and Caple's (2012, 2014), respective works on discursive news values analysis (DNVA), this study answers the call for researchers to identify news value reporting on vaccines in another language, besides English. Specifically, this study examined selected English and Bahasa Melayu (henceforth, BM) Malaysian newspapers. Although numerous studies have been conducted to examine religion's influence on the public perception of vaccines (see Rumetta et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020), they were not rooted in a discursive approach and were not focused on multilingual newspapers' data published in a multiracial setting. Therefore, we aim to contribute to the limited body of discursive work that investigates the influence of religion on media reporting of vaccines, especially in the Malaysian socio-political setting.

NEWS VALUES & NEWSWORTHINESS

The research sought to address two concerns: a) the ways religion is made newsworthy in the newspaper headlines on vaccines in Malaysia and b) readers' responses to these headlines. Further, this research attempted to examine selected news headlines that relate to COVID-19 following DNVA, centring on the construction of news values and newsworthiness (Bednarek, 2016; Bednarek & Caple, 2012, 2014).

Catenaccio et al. (2011) argued that linguists have only begun to take more weighted considerations in the production of news, instead of news as products. According to the authors, the production approach requires researchers to ask the pertinent question of "who's defining the news?", thus highlighting the role of stakeholders (media practitioners and the targeted readers, for instance). The authors further elaborated on the need for an approach that integrates divergent professional, cultural, and political perspectives on what constitutes news.

From the journalism and communication studies' lens, news values are generally defined as "properties of events or stories or criteria/principles that are applied by news workers in order to select events or stories as news or to choose the structure and order of reporting," (Bednarek & Caple, 2014, p. 136). Among journalists, the selection of what constitutes news is also decided upon based on numerous organisational, economic, and cultural factors (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

From a linguistics perspective, Richardson (2017) described news values as a list of criteria with which journalists use to assess what the audience deems as newsworthy to be read or watched. DNVA, therefore, focuses on the interconnectedness between linguistic and other semiotic resources that help establish newsworthiness. Table 1 summarises the nine news values proposed by the authors to help linguists explore how specific linguistic resources are utilised to achieve that objective (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, 2014).

Table 1. Discursive news values (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, 2014)

News value	Definition	Characteristics
Timeliness	Timely in relation to publication/broadcast	Explicit and implicit time references; verb tense and aspect; references to seasonal or current happenings/ trends
Consonance	[Stereo]typical	Evaluations of expectedness; similarity with past; constructions of stereotypes
Negativity	Negative aspects	Negative evaluative language; reference to negative emotion and attitude; negative lexis; other references to negative happenings (e.g., the breaching of socially approved behaviour/norms)

Table 1. (con't)

News value	Definition	Characteristics
Impact	Having significant effects or consequences	Evaluations of significance; reference to real or hypothetical important or relevant consequences
Proximity	Geographically/ culturally near	Explicit references to place or nationality near the target audience; references to the nation/community; inclusive first-person plural pronouns
Unexpectedness	Unexpected aspects	Evaluations of unexpectedness; comparisons that indicate unusuality; references to surprise; references to unusual happenings
Superlativeness	Of high intensity or large scope/scale	Quantifiers; intensifiers; including intensified lexis; references to growth/escalation; repetition; some instances of metaphor/personification/simile; comparison
Personalisation	Having a personal or "human face"	References to "ordinary" people, their emotions, experiences
Eliteness	Of high status or fame	Various status markers, including labels, recognized names, evaluations of importance, descriptions of achievement

For the link between news values and discourse, Bednarek and Caple (2014) further argued that "news values are thus defined as the 'newsworthy' aspects of actors, happenings, and issues as existing *in and constructed through* discourse," (p. 137), as well as the associated consequential effects. Thus, in this research, we paid particular attention to the ways religion is constructed as newsworthy through these nine discursive news values.

The principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), also grouped under Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) are embedded in DNVA. CDA is concerned with conducting an inquiry on social processes and structures that influence text production, which exposes the underlying workings of power in the production and interpretation of texts and meaning (Catalano & Waugh, 2020; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). This study anchored its analytical approach in Fairclough's (2013) three dimensions of discourse and discourse analysis which outlined the following dimensions: text analysis (description), discourse practice (interpretation), and sociocultural practice (explanation). Specifically, the dimensions of text and discourse practice involved the researchers interpreting the selected news headlines, whereas the dimension of sociocultural practice involved the application of data from the focus group discussion to better illuminate the other two dimensions.

RESEARCH DESIGN & DATA SOURCES

Data was collected from two sources: news headlines and an online focus group discussion (FGD). News headline data was gathered in April 2021. Headlines were selected as the primary data because they provide a summary of the news story that maximises newsworthiness and attracts readers by framing it from a specific angle (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). We inputted the keyword "vaccine" in the search function of chosen news platforms and found 31 headlines that featured religion, either directly or implicitly. Through purposive sampling, this number was reduced to 10. The number of headlines was largely determined based on existing discourse research on the media (see Ng, 2018; Shojaei et al., 2013), but also because we wanted a practical amount with which to work for the FGD. The selected news headlines were published between December 2020 to March 2021. The details are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Selected newspapers and their selected headlines

Newspaper/news portal	Language of publication	Quantity of articles taken
The Star Online	English	2
Berita Harian	Bahasa Malaysia	2
Harian Metro	Bahasa Malaysia	2
News Straits Times	English and Bahasa Malaysia	2
Borneo Post	English	2

A survey conducted by Vase.ai (2019) titled *Malaysia's 2019 Media Consumption* reported that four of the five newspapers selected are national newspapers that enjoy a large readership. This is with the exception of *Borneo Post*, a regional Malaysian newspaper that covers the East Malaysian states. Both English and BM newspapers were included to determine whether the construction of discursive news values differed between the two most widely spoken languages in Malaysia. We conducted the translation of the BM headlines ourselves as it is our shared mother tongue.

The analysis of the headlines was supplemented by findings from an online FGD, whose approach was informed by existing research (see Kumari et al., 2021; Ng, 2018). Whereas Ng's (2018) study selected four individuals, this research recruited five participants, each of whom had been given a pseudonym — a medical practitioner, Daniel (male, 30s); an academic and religious lecturer, Maryam (female, 40s); a journalist, Diana (female, 30s); a stay-at-home mother, who is also a certified lawyer (part-time) and currently a student of Islamic *Shariah*, Helena (female, 30s); and an undergraduate student, Suraya (female, 20s). These informants were selected because we wanted to capture a diversity of insights related to COVID-19 vaccine. For instance, we wanted to include the perspective of a relatively younger undergraduate student to explore how her views differ from those of older working professionals.

The FGD was conducted to better inform our analysis of the textual data, and to integrate the three levels of textual practice, discursive analysis, and social analysis (see Catenaccio et al., 2011; Richardson, 2017). We also included non-media practitioners besides one journalist to discover to what extent the "agency implied in the text" (Catenaccio et al., 2011, p. 1846) is practised among diverse recipients of news. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fact that the participants were scattered all over Malaysia, with one stationed overseas, we conducted the FGD virtually via Google Meet on May 30, 2021. The process took approximately 90 minutes, and the questions revolved around five topics related to vaccines: general thoughts; concerns; factors influencing public health concerns; the Malaysian media approach to vaccine reporting; and recommendations for local media reporting. The participants were also shown the selected headlines.

HEADLINE ANALYSIS

Drawing on DNVA, we examined all the news values that emerged from each headline (cf Makki, 2019). A similar approach was taken by Bednarek and Caple (2014), and it helped us see the interplay between the different news values, and the roles each played in the construction of religion as a newsworthy aspect.

BM headlines

Vaksin: NPRA tanya 300 soalan, pastikan vaksin selamat, berkualiti – Khairy
Vaccine: NPRA asks 300 questions, ensuring the vaccines are safe, of quality – Khairy
(*Harian Metro*)

The values of Impact and Eliteness are simultaneously established with the use of the image of Zulkifli Mohamed, the Religious Affairs Minister, on the cover. Moreover, the headline includes the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA), as well as Khairy Jamaluddin (otherwise known as KJ), the current Minister of Health, and the coordinating minister for PICK. Timeliness is established with the verb "*tanya*" (ask); however, as the headline is written in BM wherein verbs can be written without indication of any tenses, the construction of Timeliness is ambiguous. However, since this is the current global issue for many countries, the Timeliness value may be relevant to indicate that it is an issue that is still ongoing and pertinent. Impact is also established with the verb "ensuring" and the adjectives "safe" and "quality", and as the dash "–" attributes the statement to KJ, this suggests that the government is taking necessary steps to guarantee the safety of vaccines for the consumption of the Malaysian populace.

Vaksin halal COVID-19 demi penuhi keperluan Muslim
Halal COVID-19 vaccines for the sake of meeting the Muslims' needs
(*Berita Harian*)

This is a headline from a local newspaper addressing the prevalent *halal*-ness issue of the COVID-19 vaccines. The term "*halal*" in the headline simultaneously constructs Consonance and Impact values to refer to a hypothetical expectation of Malaysian Muslims who anticipate vaccines to be *halal*-certified before they are vaccinated. The phrases 'for the sake of' (*demi*) and meeting (*memenuhi*) also deliver the Impact value, suggesting the government's commitment to ensure "peace of mind among Muslims" as indicated in the article. Although "Muslims" here can refer to a wider Muslim audience beyond Malaysia, it still establishes the value of Proximity considering that most Malaysians are Muslims.

Malaysia rujuk ulama dunia mengenai fatwa ambil vaksin COVID-19
Malaysia refers to world ulama on fatwa for COVID-19 vaccination
(*Berita Harian*)

In the above headline, Proximity is established in "Malaysia", indicating to the readers that not only is the focus on the country, but also establishes its distinction from a geographically distant entity, which is the '*ulama dunia*' (world *ulama*). *Ulama* are essentially religious scholars who are recognised by the wider Islamic community as having specialised religious knowledge. Due to the reverence and importance of their tasks, they are also considered as guardians and expert interpreters of Quranic and religious laws — the phrase '*ulama dunia*' thus helps establish the values of Eliteness and Superlativeness. The values of Impact and Timeliness are also arguably present in the inclusion of the word "*dunia*" (world) and "*rujuk*" (refers); this is because the country has chosen to take guidance on the interpretation of Islamic law (*fatwa*) from scholars outside the country.

This helps underscore the religious importance of the issue on COVID-19 vaccinations, beyond Malaysia's own interests.

> *Saran keluarkan sijil halal untuk vaksin COVID-19*
> Propose to issue *halal* certification for COVID-19 vaccines
> *(Harian Metro)*

The values of Impact and Timeliness are established closely in the above headline. The Malay verb "*saran*" can be translated to multiple English equivalent terms such as suggest or recommend. According to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2017), the authority on BM, one of the meanings of "*saran*" includes to put forth an opinion to gain influence and support. The headline "Propose to issue" constructs the development of events one would have expected to happen (Consonance and Timeliness). The Consonance value of "propose" and Timeliness of "to" are constructed with the stereotypical belief that Muslims are expecting vaccines to be *halal*-certified. In fact, in 2010, Malaysia was announced as a potential producer for *halal* vaccines in the world (see Azri et al., 2017), and therefore the headline here alludes to this national commitment. On the other hand, the Impact value is constructed with the lexical item's *halal* certificate, which suggests that the *halal* status of vaccine shots is significant in allaying concerns among Muslims.

English headlines

> KJ receives first dose of Sinovac vaccine
> *(The Star Online)*

In the above headline, the value of Eliteness is established in reference to the coordinating minister for the COVID-19 immunisation programme, KJ. The use of the simple present tense of the verb "receives" suggests the recency of the event (Timeliness). Furthermore, the use of the quantifier "first" simultaneously helps to mark the values of Impact and Superlativeness, as it highlights the momentous event of KJ being the first Malaysian (and a government official, at that) to receive the Chinese-manufactured Sinovac vaccine. This is a significant inclusion as Malaysians were initially sceptical about the safety and efficacy of the Sinovac vaccine (Goh, 2021).

> Don't be choosy over COVID-19 vaccine brands, Sabahans told
> *(The Star Online)*

Here, the value of Negativity is established with the verb "don't be" and the adjective "choosy", thus referencing a discouraged form of behaviour of the targeted readers, the Sabahans. The reprimand specifically references to the public hesitancy "over COVID-19 vaccine brands". Sabahans here is the demonym of the citizens of the East Malaysian state of Sabah, and their concerted focus, compounded with the contracted form of "don't be" thus establishing the value of Personalisation. This value helps to establish a personalised touch that personally implicates the targeted readers in a conversation, besides constructing a geographical Proximity to the targeted readers. Interestingly, although the news was reported by a national newspaper (*The Star Online*), Proximity is established for a regional audience. Nevertheless, although Personalisation is apparent in the targeted subject of the

headline, the actor, the Sabah Community Development and People's Wellbeing Minister who "told" Sabahans, is omitted. This omission could be attributed to his position as a state minister, whom most national readers from the Peninsular Malaysia would not recognise.

> Sinovac vaccine safe and *halal* – Chinese ambassador
> (*The Borneo Post*)

In the above headline, Eliteness is marked by the mention of the Chinese-manufactured vaccine, "Sinovac", and "Chinese ambassador". With the phrase "safe and *halal*", the article headline further establishes the value of Unexpectedness. As products manufactured in China are often deemed as inferior in quality and not *halal* (Muhammad Khan & Ahmed, 2016; Lew & Sulaiman, 2014), the headline's emphasis on safety and *halal*-ness is thus constructing an element of surprise for the readers. One of the FGD participants, Helena also recalled how even her Malaysian Chinese mother and friends were reluctant to take Sinovac. The fact that an authority figure, the "Chinese ambassador" Ouyang Yuijing, is attributed to stating that the Chinese-manufactured vaccine is safe and *halal*, helps establish the value of Impact for the targeted Muslim-majority Malaysian readers.

> Covid vaccine gets nod from Islamic institutions
> (*The Borneo Post*)

The values of Timeliness and Impact are marked by "gets" and "nod", respectively; whereas the value of Eliteness is marked by "Islamic institutions". Although the headline does not make clear the identities of these Islamic institutions, most Malay-Muslim readers could assume that they would refer to local and/or international fatwa councils, which is confirmed in the body of the article to comprise authorities from Malaysia, the UAE, and the USA. Hence, the headline helps establish that the COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca, as indicated in the body of the article) has been approved for Muslim consumption.

> MyEG partners Zhifei to distribute "*halal*" COVID-19 vaccine in Malaysia
> (*News Straits Times*)

Eliteness is established by the inclusion of two establishments, the Malaysian government institution MyEG, and the Chinese biopharmaceutical company, Zhifei. Here, Timeliness is established through two ways: i) the use of the simple present tense verb "partners"; and ii) the use of the infinitive verb "to distribute". The former indicates to the target readers that the Malaysian institution has established a cooperation with the Chinese company to disseminate *halal* COVID-19 vaccines in Malaysia. The value of Impact is indirectly constructed with the geographical proximity marked by "Malaysia" as well as the cultural proximity indexed by *halal* that further serve to underscore the relevance of the news to the targeted Malaysian readers.

> Malaysia to intensify COVID-19 vaccine development with UAE, says Agong
> (*News Straits Times*)

In this headline, Proximity is established with the readers, geographically with "Malaysia", and culturally with "Agong", which is the shortened Malay designation for the Malaysian King. The Agong is the guardian of both Malay customs and traditions, as well as Islam as the religion of the Malays. Eliteness is thus also established here, though "says" arguably carries more of a general reporting tone than the more weighted authoritative tone of verbs such as "decrees". This intriguing observation indicates a distinction in the use of certain grammatical features between BM and English newspapers. This is because BM newspapers/news outlets would use the verb '*titah*' (decrees, commands) to attribute to any statements made by the King (see Azil, 2021; Mat Ruzki, 2020).

Moreover, Timeliness is marked by the simple present tense verb "says" attributed to the Agong, to inform the Malaysian public of the country's future plan vis-à-vis vaccine development. This is made specific in the infinitive verb "to intensify" which also establishes the value of Superlativeness. The news values, coupled with the inclusion of another Muslim country UAE as the vaccine development partner, help to imply that the Agong's (and thus, Malaysia's) concerns are on developing *halal* vaccines for its Muslim populace. Impact is therefore established for the targeted Muslim readers.

INSIGHTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD)

A secondary data set was collected from a FGD and analysed to understand the readers' reactions to both the BM and English analysed headlines. For brevity, a summary of the participants' responses is highlighted here whilst their responses to headlines are subsumed under the subsequent section.

When asked about their overall reception towards vaccines and vaccination, all five participants were supportive of vaccination efforts and believed that vaccination is an effective medical approach to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. However, Maryam admitted that she was concerned about the adverse effects following immunisation (AEFI) and claimed that expressing her doubts resulted in her feeling judged and further mislabelled as an anti-vaxxer. She further claimed that doctors' inability to counter well-founded doubts from well-meaning individuals like her have come across as "almost insulting", a sentiment to which Daniel, a doctor himself agreed to, as although doctors are well-versed in medical knowledge, they do not necessarily establish good rapport with their patients.

When discussing the participants' concerns regarding vaccines, they are primarily centred around the fear-inducing and counter-productive approach that has been employed to spread information on vaccines in Malaysia. Heated debates took place among Maryam, Daniel, and Helena who brought religion to the forefront without much prompting. Reiterating her religious background, Maryam argued that "in Islam, we have two ways [of educating], *tarhib* and *targhib*," whereby the former refers to intimidation tactics and the latter, welcoming and pleasant (Nur & Hasnawati, 2020). She claimed that in Malaysia, public information on vaccines is relayed via *tarhib* methods meant to induce fear, whereas Islam says people should not be made to feel scared of things. Helena countered Maryam with the Islamic principle of *sadd al-zarai*, explaining that such approaches are sometimes necessary to prevent widespread damage and ills to society (Harun et al., 2018). According to Daniel, the problem arose and persists because of misinterpreted religious quotations and *hadiths*, and Malaysians' lack of medical literacy.

Participants spoke about the importance of social media platforms when discussing factors that can influence public health concerns on vaccines. As a journalist for one of the established newspaper outlets in the country, Diana stressed the need to rely on registered media, and not on social media such as Facebook. Regarding unverified information

circulated via WhatsApp, Diana, Daniel, and Maryam believed that correct information needs to be disseminated quickly whilst still being mindful of the chosen method for dissemination. Daniel further implored medical professionals to reach out to misinformed Muslim communities to allow for a more equitable level of doctor-patient communication.

Two issues stood out among the participants when asked about their thoughts on the reporting of vaccines by the Malaysian media: i) generational differences in media consumption between Gen Z and the older generations, which lead to; ii) the utilisation of trendier social media platforms such as Twitter and TikTok versus Facebook. Countering Diana's call that the public should revert to mainstream verified media, university student Suraya asserted that "*Twitter is like the newsletter for us*" and that it is a more effective source of information for the younger generation. Diana stressed that the government should also take a fair share of the responsibility to refute any misinformation regarding the vaccines as "*we as the media cannot do anything about it. We do not have the answers.*"

In closing the discussion, the participants put forth suggestions on vaccine reporting by the media in Malaysia. Daniel and Suraya vouched for information that is demographically tailored and delivered to specific target groups. Maryam called for a *targhib* (welcoming) approach that focuses on the benefits of getting vaccinations. Daniel agreed with this stance, although Diana cautioned that the media has taken to "scaring" the public because they believe that the public is simply not listening. Helena suggested that vaccination should be made into a social media trend through people's active postings upon getting vaccinated, a view which was shared by Diana and Suraya.

DISCUSSION

Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study aimed to identify discursive news values constructed in local newspapers through the selected headlines, and to explore the audience's perceptions on them in relation to religion. The research questions have been answered via findings from the textual and discursive analysis of the news headlines, which reveal that religion is a newsworthy aspect in the reporting of COVID-19 vaccines in Muslim-majority Malaysia. The insights from the FGD partially support the analysis, as the aspects of religious sentiments in the BM and English headlines were interpreted rather differently by the participants.

The religious element was discursively constructed in and through the headlines with the help of all nine of Bednarek's (2016) discursive news values, with four of the most prominent being Impact (9), Eliteness (7), Timeliness (7), and Proximity (5). Meanwhile, Superlativeness (3), Consonance (2), Negativity (1), Unexpectedness (1), and Personalisation (1) were minimally utilised. Depending on the authors' perspective, Consonance could be interchangeable with Unexpectedness.

Literature (Abdullah, 2020; Azri et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2020) and our data have demonstrated that religion is a highly pertinent and sensitive issue in Malaysia. Eliteness, the inclusion of reputable and well-known persons and institutions, is therefore an important discursive value which serves to add weight to any claims made in the name of religion. This is evidenced from the inclusion of high-ranking officials such as KJ and religious scholars (*ulama*). This, as was attested by the FGD participants, is especially true for BM headlines. Although Eliteness is also apparent among the English headlines, FGD participants noted that its value did not come from its association with individuals and institutions affiliated with religion, but more on the respective parties' efforts to produce vaccines.

Impact is the most prominent discursive value identified in both the English and BM headlines. Although the repertoire of linguistic features associated with Impact include words

such as momentous, historic, and crucial (Bednarek & Caple, 2012; Bednarek, 2016), the examined headlines in this paper constructed Impact in a more implicit way using religious jargon such as "*halal*" and "*fatwa*". Malaysians, especially Muslims, would immediately understand the significance of such fundamental terminologies. However, Impact was also constructed through words such as "*selamat*" (safe), and "*berkualiti*" (of quality).

This study has highlighted several insights that could be used to further build upon the DNVA framework. Specifically, Bednarek and Caple (2014) called for more researchers to work with languages other than English, and as the discussion on Impact has shown, linguistic resources differ considerably in diverse repertoires. This is also attested in the final two of the most prominent values — Timeliness and Proximity — which further contribute to a more diverse understanding and application of the DNVA framework. As previously indicated, many of the linguistic forms in several headlines translated from the Malay language represent the value of Timeliness. The value that stresses on recency is relatively difficult to determine in Malay headlines as verbs in the language can be syntactically correct without indication of any tense. The operationalisation of these discursive news values can also be expanded. For instance, Proximity is not just confined to names of places denoting geographical closeness to the target audience, but it can also connote individuals whose affiliation is closely linked to a particular culture and place (the Agong, for example).

Although we found religion to be apparent in the headlines of both languages, this was not an observation noted by the FGD participants. They remarked that religion was much more foregrounded in BM headlines compared to English, where terms such as *halal*, *ulama* and Muslim are used in the former, whereas the latter lacked emphasis on religion. When asked to further clarify on this distinction, Daniel asserted that the "Sinovac safe and *halal*" headline emphasises safety before *halal*. The factor of this circumstance is indefinite, but Diana suggested that "*the Malay headline has a specific target audience,*" while the English dailies such as *The Star Online*, *New Straits Times*, and *Borneo Post* "*speaks to more people,*" indicating a more diversified Malaysian audience.

With vaccine refusal and hesitancy on the rise among Malaysians (Wong et al., 2020), it comes as no surprise that the value of religion is highlighted, as this issue has been debated not only among Malaysians, but also around the world (Chimuanya & Igwebuike, 2021; Powell et al., 2016; Raghupathi et al., 2020). The majority of the participants cited that the headlines implied a negative image of Muslims amongst the audience, where they suggest that "*Muslims are against vaccinations*" (Daniel), and the sole purpose of the sensational headlines are to "*convince these religious people more for taking the vaccine*" (Suraya). Despite this, the participants agreed that the thorough guidelines enshrined in Quranic principles amplify the beauty of the religion, and the roles of Islamic scholars in (re)constructing guidelines (*fatwa*) to help Muslims in times of a global health crisis (Helena).

Interestingly, we saw further negation of the issue when Maryam stressed that the *halal*-ness of the vaccines is not the main deterrent among "*those (who are) in the field of religion*", but rather AEFI (see Powell et al., 2016; Raghupathi et al., 2020). Although seemingly secular in basis, Maryam offers a religious metaphor that has been used among her circles to convey their concerns about AEFI:

> "*Like the birds that Allah SWT has given wings so that they can fly. And similarly, humans have also been given a complete body, so we can fight off the infections ourselves. So, why is there a need to inject foreign substances into the body? That's the main issue.*"

It is thus suggested that the media may not be focusing on the fundamental issue of vaccines, but rather are repeatedly amplifying religious-based vaccine hesitancy using news values such as Eliteness, Impact and Timeliness. While the concern of religion has been indicated in many studies (Azri et al., 2017; Kasstan, 2020; Mylan & Hardman, 2021; Rumetta et al., 2020), it is also important for the Malaysian media to note (and report) that religious belief is not the sole issue with respect to vaccine hesitancy.

However, Diana believes that *halal*-ness is one of the most fundamental concerns on vaccines which need to be reported on and asserted that journalists find it challenging to report on other issues besides religion on mainstream media. This is not surprising since "journalists are often dependent on input from public health officials" (Powell et al., 2016), which then feed into and shape the mainstream perspectives. This can be damaging to the public as news media often employ discursive tactics to frame ideologies and propagate hidden biases (van Dijk, 1984, as cited in Catalano & Waugh, 2020). Helena asserted that overtly religious headlines show "*how weak our aqidah (faith) is,*" and she argued that religiously driven media reporting causes misrepresentation of religious folk as vaccine-hesitant. Though the concerns over vaccine ingredients are valid, the implication gives rise to bias, as negative vaccine news can influence the public vaccine sentiment and attitude (Das et al., 2021). In a wider implication, healthy discussions on vaccines could not be effectively performed, as underlying issues (besides religion) are not adequately addressed and accurately conveyed to the public.

Thus, the "contesting agendas" as stated by Salim (2012) and debates surrounding autonomy were observed among the FGD participants. The majority of the participants noted on the critical tone the headlines (particularly, in BM) took when reporting on vaccines for the targeted Malay-Muslim audience, suggesting that the latter are resistant to vaccines due to religious concerns, which is staunchly opposed by Maryam. This interesting finding warrants further investigation as it suggests a discrepancy between newspapers' beliefs on what aspect of religion is newsworthy versus the Malay-Muslim audience's beliefs.

Yet, although *halal*-ness has been linked to vaccine hesitancy among Muslims (Mohd Azizi et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2020), it is also one way the Malaysian government can exhibit its legitimacy and authority as a premier hub for *halal* innovation. Since the past decade, Malaysia along with other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been working towards building a global *halal* hub for vaccines (Ahmed et al., 2018). The country's efforts towards this goal have received further attention amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as is evident from two of the headlines examined.

It is thus crucial for the media to provide constructive perspectives involving a whole spectrum of ideas to ensure transparency and accuracy of information that may impact public perception on preventive health measures and decisions on the public's well-being (Deiner et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2016; Raghupathi et al., 2020). We agree that such approaches, especially in a critical situation like the COVID-19 pandemic are warranted, because limited perspectives may cause fear, distrust, and misinformed decision-making among the public (Deiner et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2016; Raghupathi et al., 2020). Vaccines provide an environment where diverse communities may discuss their cultural health beliefs and practices. Therefore, it is important for Malaysian media to promote healthy discussions and address pre-existing beliefs and false claims by emphasising established scientific evidence. Misrepresentation of reality by the media could negatively impact not only the audiences' trust and credibility of the media, but also public health initiatives. As indicated by Das et al. (2021), the necessity for comprehensive media mapping and tracking with scientific data is crucial to sustain public concern on vaccines, improve coverage, and become a dependable resource of scientific commentary for public health agencies.

CONCLUSION

Going beyond simply reporting the links between religious beliefs and attitudes towards vaccination, this paper has demonstrated the vital role which language plays in constructing news values and newsworthy aspects to the media's intended audience. More pertinently, this paper has highlighted the ways through which linguistic devices were utilised in newspaper headlines, thus revealing how religion is exploited as a newsworthy tool to frame media reporting on COVID-19 vaccines in Malaysia. Beyond textual analysis, this paper has also shown that DNVA needs to be supplemented with interviews to explore parallels and contradictions between what the media regards as newsworthy and the target audience's needs, interests, and reception. Critical linguists have a unique role to play in bridging this gap. Our paper has shown that DNVA analysis is useful not only for media practitioners, but also for linguists working with media texts, processes, and production.

Furthermore, the chosen research setting of Malaysia revealed linguistic insights of a distinct socio-political context and on a language besides English. Bednarek and Caple's (2014) and Makki's (2019) call for a linguistically diverse DNVA analysis is warranted as this paper has indeed disclosed a distinct play of semiotic resources and exposed cultural and religious ideologies underlying the current conventional style of Malaysian media's reporting of COVID-19 vaccines. Evidently, the chosen setting has also made it possible to unveil the more broadened operationalisation of certain discursive news values. As such, the discursive approach employed has further contributed to a much richer understanding and application of DNVA.

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