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“Adolescents’ Engagement with the Media: A Process  
of Negotiating Meanings and Constructing Cultural  
Identities”

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*Especially dedicated to*

*My Sunshine, Amir Fariz Zakaria*

*&*

*My rainbow, Dani, Andi and Aaron*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Malaysia is a multiracial society, consisting of people from various races, with the majority being the Malay race. In its strive for modernity, Malaysia has introduced a lot of policies and new technologies, said to be for the betterment of the country. One of it is the satellite television broadcasts, which enable Malaysians to have access to foreign television channels and multitude of imported programmes. However, the influx of foreign programmes is a tremendous cause of concern for the Malaysian government because, on top of the government's apprehension in promoting unity and understanding between races within the Malaysian society, which includes Malays, Chinese and Indians, there is also now the concern of locals imitating and practising cultures which are deemed foreign and as threatening the society's cultures and traditions. With this regard, I see the integration of exposure to local and foreign text as a complex and multi-level negotiation process which may mould the Malaysian cultural identity. Thus, it interests me to ascertain how Malaysian, particularly Malay adolescents make sense of the television text in the process of constructing their cultural identity. Do adolescents look up to the programmes aired on television for guidance in creating their cultural identity and establishing their daily norms? This study builds on and contributes to work in audience reception and meaning making by trying to integrate the activities which have been identified by media effects scholars with a cultural studies approach of audience's decoding process of television text. I propose that audience's activities depict some of the struggles individuals face in their engagement with television and can be used to explain how they interpret television texts. My attempt to explore the notion of audience activities with relations to their decoding processes are empirically conducted through this research. The methodology employed for this research is twofold which involves content analysis and focus group discussion. The objectives of content analysis is to uncover the pattern of local Malaysian culture featured in the programmes and if there is any indication of 'foreign' values being showcased. The focus group discussion discovers how adolescents negotiate television text in the process of constructing cultural identity. Through this research, I found that the decoding process entails activities such as phases in exposure, orality and selectivity. It suggests that orality, especially, greatly helps adolescents in making sense of television text and influences the stereotypes on ethnicities that they make. This research also discovers if adolescents see themselves as being Malays or Malaysians. As such, this study provides additional insight into the process of decoding television text and meaning making.

## ABSTRAKT

Malaysia hat eine Gesellschaft, deren Bevölkerung viele verschiedene Volksgruppen umfasst. Die größte Gruppe bilden die Malaier. Im Streben nach Modernität hat Malaysia zahlreiche politische Maßnahmen und neue Technologien eingeführt, die zur Verbesserung des Landes beitragen sollten. Ein Beispiel dafür ist das Satellitenfernsehen, das der Bevölkerung Malaysias den Zugang zu ausländischen Fernsehkanälen und einer Vielzahl von importierten Programmen ermöglicht. Die Einfuhr ausländischer Programme ist jedoch ein Anlass zu großer Beunruhigung für die malaysische Regierung. Während diese bemüht ist, Eintracht und Verständnis zwischen den verschiedenen Bevölkerungsgruppen innerhalb der malaysischen Gesellschaft, wie zum Beispiel Malayen, Chinesen und Indern zu schaffen, wächst nun auch die Besorgnis darüber, dass die Einheimischen jene Kulturen imitieren, die als fremdartig und als eine Bedrohung für die Traditionen des Landes erachtet werden. Im Hinblick darauf betrachte ich die Integration von lokalen und fremden Texten als einen komplexen Verhandlungsprozess auf mehreren Ebenen, der die kulturelle Identität der Malaysier geprägt hat. Daher interessiert es mich zu erforschen, welche Bedeutung malaysische und insbesondere malayische Jugendliche im Prozess ihrer kulturellen Identitätsbildung den über den Fernsehkonsum erlebten Texten beimessen. Haben die Fernsehsendungen eine Vorbildfunktion für die Jugendlichen, wonach sie ihre kulturelle Identität und ihre täglichen Normen ausrichten? Diese Studie verwendet und ergänzt die Felder der Rezeptionsforschung und Bedeutungskonstruktion, indem sie versucht, das durch die Medienwirkungsforschung aufgezeigte Verhalten mit Erkenntnissen aus dem kulturwissenschaftlichen Ansatz über Dekodierungsprozesse der Rezipienten in Bezug auf Fernsehtexte zu vereinen. Ich stelle die Hypothese auf, dass das Verhalten der Zuschauer einige der Konfrontationen wiedergibt, die die Individuen beim Fernsehkonsum erfahren und als Erklärung dafür herangezogen werden kann, wie sie Fernsehtexte interpretieren. In dieser Arbeit versuche ich die Ausprägung von Publikumsverhalten in Verbindung mit den Dekodierungsprozessen empirisch nachzuvollziehen und darzustellen. Die hierbei angewendeten Methoden beinhalten Inhaltsanalyse und Fokusgruppendifkussion. Die Inhaltsanalyse dient dazu, die Muster der lokalen malaysischen Kultur, die in den Programmen dargestellt wird, offenzulegen und zu erfassen, ob es Anzeichen dafür gibt, dass dabei ‚fremde‘ Werte präsentiert werden. Die Fokusgruppendifkussion erforscht, wie Jugendliche Fernsehtexte in die Konstruktion ihrer kulturellen Identität miteinbeziehen. Diese Studie zeigt auf, dass die Dekodierungsprozesse Phasen der Rezeption, Oralität und Selektivität beinhalten. Insbesondere die Oralität hilft Jugendlichen dabei, Fernsehtexten Bedeutung beizumessen und beeinflusst ihre Stereotypen im Hinblick auf Ethnien. Es wird ebenso erforscht, ob sich die Jugendlichen selbst als Malayen oder Malaysier begreifen. In ihrer Gesamtheit gibt diese Studie originäre Einblicke in die Prozesse der Dekodierung von Fernsehtexten und in die Bedeutungsbildung von jungen Malaysiern.

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## CHAPTER 1

### 1.0 Introduction

'It will sound stupid if I speak Malay'<sup>1</sup>. This statement was made by a 19 year old Malaysian actress, Sharifah Amani, when giving her acceptance speech as Best Actress at the 19<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Film Festival in 2006.

Her statement sparked local interest and a lot of arguments between two groups of the Malay race: the devoted Malays who religiously practised Malay culture and tried their best to protect the language and those who see themselves as modern Malays, or Anglophiles, as some might call themselves. Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, who was the Malaysian Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister at that time described Sharifah Amani as rubbishing the Malay language and culture.

What was it that made Sharifah Amani so uncomfortable with her own culture? Why did she identify herself better with a relatively foreign English culture? This predicament is similar to what Haque (2006) observed is happening in the United Arab Emirates. Haque (2006: HSS6) noted that the younger generation in the eastern culture is moving rapidly in the direction of western ideals such as materialism and individualism in contrast to the concept of collectivism that is more representative of the cultures in Asia. How do Malaysian adolescents fare in relation to this?

Looking at or studying the Malaysian local media scene can probably help shed some light into this very interesting question. Findings by Rivadneyra (2006), Ward et al. (2005), Juluri (2002) and Llyod et al. (2001) clearly showed that television shapes adolescents' identity and culture. These authors agreed that adolescents construct a sense of generational, national, and global identity through watching television. Aasebo (2005: 185) claimed that television influences adolescents in social construction. Are Malaysian adolescents falling into the same predicament?

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<sup>1</sup> Malay in this context refers to Bahasa Melayu which is the official language in Malaysia. In the Malaysian constitution, the definition of a Malay is among others is on one who habitually speaks the Malay language.

The emergence of various forms of media in Malaysia such as the internet and digital television have undoubtedly introduce foreign cultures into the local environment through their massive imported content such as the Venezuelan telenovelas, American soap operas and sitcoms, Indonesian sinetron and British comedies. Television stations also offer a lot of programmes that cater to specific ethnicities such as Malay, Chinese and Indian. Those subscribing to Astro (an acronym for All Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator; Malaysia's very own satellite television channel) have access to seven Indian channels, which include cartoons like *Spongebob Squarepants* translated to Tamil, 19 channels for Chinese viewers and eight channels targeted for Malays. Free-to-air TV also offers programmes according to these three main groups in Malaysia with the majority of programmes in *Bahasa Malaysia*<sup>2</sup> as *Bahasa Malaysia* is Malaysia's national language.

Malaysian audiences, therefore, are exposed to both Western and local cultures through their engagement with the media, especially television. The influx of different values that these imported programmes brought with them are notably detached from the local values and cultures, and therefore raises an important question: How do audiences negotiate the integration of international and locally produced media texts? This is especially interesting as Malaysia itself is a melting pot of different cultures, which includes Malay, Chinese, Indian and other numerous aboriginal tribes. Thus, not only do they have to understand their own cultures, but the interaction between the various races in Malaysia obviously requires one to understand other cultures as well. For instance, Malays will not only have to negotiate the television texts in creating their own culture identities as the television text also provides them with a depiction of Chinese and Indian cultures. So, how would being exposed to foreign cultures (from exposure to foreign programmes) alongside the various local cultures affect one's process of constructing his or her cultural identity?

My personal interest in this problem on the whole, involves the process of meaning making and how audiences engage with television representations, focusing on adolescents. For this study, I intend to concentrate on television as adolescents spend considerable time in front of

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<sup>2</sup> *Bahasa Malaysia* is Malay's mother tongue. It is also the national language, hence, the name which can be translated as Malaysian language.

the TV. Furthermore, in Malaysia, the percentage of households with access to television is 95.2 per cent as opposed to only 28.2 per cent with access to personal computer (Communications and Multimedia Selected Facts and Figures Q3, 2007).

This chapter aims to give a general idea on the research which I have conducted and put it into perspective. Firstly, I will I will address the aims and rationales of the research to give readers a better understanding on the focus of the study. Then, I will discuss the concept of cultural identity and elaborate on the multicultural society in Malaysia with the purpose of giving some general understandings to those who are not familiar with Malaysia and its society's background. This chapter provides a basis on the reason I find this research important, given that adolescents not only have to negotiate their multicultural surrounding and content on local television, but also foreign elements from imported television shows. As aptly said by Ahmad (2007: 147), it is important to develop an understanding between people of different cultures who are living in a multicultural society to form a harmonious society. He argued that differences, which is undeniably possible given the different ethnicities and ancestries, could pose a danger. Here, I will also elaborate on the idea of racial categorisation in Malaysia and give a brief overview on some of the characteristics of the three main races; Malay, Chinese and Indian.

Then I will move on to describe the broadcasting scenario in Malaysia. First, I will sketch Malaysia's colorful mass media history which started with the newspaper. It flourished and not long after that, radio was introduced to the public followed by the television. Next, I will give details on TV stations available and the programmes that they showcase. From merely national broadcasts by TV1 and TV2, the channels offered on free-to-air TV multiplied and audiences in Malaysia are currently spoilt for choice. I will also unpack the type of contents showcased on Malaysian TV and how it affects racial unity. This includes a few bloody tragedies with regards to racial disparity where one can clearly see how these tragedies gave a big impact to Malaysia's current policies and government decisions and the role of media in making the situation better. New legislations were introduced as the Malaysian government took an active stance to ensure that the mass media is beneficial for all.

In the following part, I will elaborate and discuss on adolescents and media. I will describe adolescents' use of television and some literature which discussed about the construction of identity in relations to young people. Some studies on young people and 'effect' studies will also be touched.

By considering the matters above, I was able to figure out the intricacies of my research and identify the matters that I should consider before undertaking the study. Finally, I will go over the organisations of this research to make it easier for readers who are thumbing through this thesis to know what to expect and what to look out for.

### **1.1 Aims and rationales of the research**

A society rich with traditional beliefs and culture, Malaysia, according to Shamsul (2005: 3pp) can be considered as a plural society as it comprises of different communities living together (Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnicities) while not necessarily having close or meaningful bonds with each other, thus "stimulating a sense of ethnic identity and separateness" (Milner, 2008: 121). Although they live together, the different races and ethnicities in Malaysia have different beliefs and traditions, thus stimulating a sense of ethnic and cultural identity.

In essence, Malaysia seems like a trouble free country where its' plural society live peacefully amongst each other. However, it must be pointed out that there were several tragedies, such as the 13 May 1969 and the Kampung Medan racial riot in 2001<sup>3</sup>, which were greatly influenced by racial disparities. These tragedies may be due to the lack of understanding of the different cultures practiced by the different races, as noted by Syed Hussin (2008: 171), there is a social distance between the various races and "most Malays do not know Chinese values very well and most Chinese are quite ignorant of Malay values, despite the fact that they have been living side by side for so long."

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<sup>3</sup> The Kampung Medan incident was a clash between Indians and Malays which resulted in death and injuries. It supposedly started when an Indian security guard ruined a Malay resident's wedding party. (Prasana Chandran, 2002)

Given the circumstances, it does seem like a daunting task to promote unity especially given that the society which was inherited after being colonised were racially segregated and categorised, which has undoubtedly left a huge impact. After gaining its Independence from the British in 1957, the new government had a difficult time to create a unified society. The racial segregation by British has somewhat increased disparity and created a feeling of insolence among people of different races. In addition, the Malaysian society is also divided according to social class (Shamsul, 2005; Syed Hussin, 2008) and tensions are easily generated based on this number of differences. So, what can be done in order to foster a better understanding between these races?

This is where mass media, especially the television, can play a big role. Syed Hussin (2008: 171) commented that mass communication has not been used to its full effect to promote a better understanding of people of different cultures and values. But, how affective can the television be as a tool to promote racial unity?

The media industry in Malaysia is flourishing and the country now boasts six free-to-air television channels and also a satellite broadcasting service. This means that audiences are exposed to a variety of content in the media. Thanks to the rebranding of several free-to-air television stations, the six channels are packaged according to specific races, for example TV1, TV3 and TV9 for the Malays and 8TV for the Chinese. Astro also offers packages tailored for the needs of these different races as channels with Malay, Chinese and Indian dialects are often grouped together and offered in one exclusive package. My questions are: how will this approach help foster unity amongst the society members? How is this going to help young Malaysian understand the cultures of those in different races? Can a Malay better understand a Chinese with this specially tailored television channels to suit a specific race? Will it affect the process of socialisation among the youth of different ethnicities? Will it create bias and stereotypes about people of different culture backgrounds? As it is, in a finding by TV 3 on top television programmes on free-to-air-television watched by Malay and Chinese adults, the top 9

programmes are programmes in their native dialects<sup>4</sup>, respectively. So, would this approach help them to understand other cultures better or increase racial disparity instead?

Not only that, satellite broadcasts by Astro exposes Malaysians to foreign culture as well, such as American and Japanese culture. So, apart from negotiating meanings from local television texts, Malaysian audiences are also trying to decode meanings of the foreign contents. Already, Syed Husin (2008: 185) noted that in the process of modernisation, “Western elements become stronger (and), the traditional elements (with relations to culture) tend to get correspondingly weaker.” So, how do audiences negotiate the different values and beliefs showcased on television? Are they becoming more westernised or does it make them more aware of their culture identity?

The debate on westernisation, cultural imperialism and Americanisation, especially in relations to the media, therefore, is a tremendous cause of concern for the Malaysian government. On top of the government’s apprehension in promoting unity and understanding between each race within the Malaysian society, there is also now the concern of locals imitating and practising cultures which are deemed foreign and as threatening the society’s traditions. However, it must be pointed out that there is a lack of empirical evidence with regards to the claim of westernisation through the media. Hence, I believe that this research would greatly be beneficial in shedding some light into this matter. My interest in looking at identity in a cultural environment as opposed to other constructs like technology is precisely because I want to look at how cultural identity fare in times of modernity, especially with the influx of information from various sources.

This is especially interesting because according to scholars, culture identities are constantly undergoing transformation. According to Singh (2010), diverse cultures are getting assimilated and diffused, thanks to the emergence of various visual sources, which leads to the creation of a homogenised culture: “A culture which is not confined to any kind of physical barriers” (Singh, 2010: 86). Does Malaysia fall into this predicament? If so, what concerns me is that how do we ensure that the transformation would not in any way make people forget about

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<sup>4</sup> Malays native dialect is the Malay language while Chinese mainly speak Mandarin and Hokkien.



their roots, values and beliefs? This is especially so in the era of technological advancement, satellite television and access to the world via the internet, whereby people are constantly exposed to new ideas, values and perspectives.

As it is, audiences in Malaysia are exposed to a lot of foreign programmes because importing foreign programmes are less costly than producing a local programme. Moreover, there is currently no law or legislation which imposed the ratio of foreign content to local content. The government hopes for a 60 per cent local content and 40 per cent foreign content ratio, but, this desire has yet to be attainable as the number of production houses in Malaysia that are able to produce local programmes is still inadequate. Thus, audiences' exposure to foreign programmes means that they are positioned in a struggle, as aptly pointed out by Hall (1980), in a conscious effort to make meanings from the polysemic texts. Also, the integration of exposure of local and foreign text will also mean that the construction of their cultural identity will involve a complex and multi-level negotiation process. This is worrying, especially because media literacy amongst youth is low, as claimed by Llyod et al. (2001: 472) in their research on Botswana teens. With this in mind, I would like to see the kinds of meanings Malaysian adolescents make, in their struggle to negotiate local and foreign texts, especially in relations to the construction of their cultural identity.

Furthermore, according to Gerbner (2002: 43pp), children and adolescents are easily influenced by messages disseminated through television. These messages, he claimed, can influence their perception and behavior. As it is, many Malay youngsters nowadays mostly wear jeans and t-shirt instead of the traditional *baju kurung* and from several personal conversations with them, some were not able to recognise local delicacies and beverages but had no problem in identifying the golden arches of McDonalds and Coca Cola. This is a shame because even though we are going through a modernisation phase, some aspects of our culture should still be cherished and remembered. But the question is, should media be blamed for these changes?

With this situation in mind, I was interested to gauge how young people thought of their culture being represented on television, with particular interest on the Malay culture. Were they

able to find out more about their cultural tradition from television? Do they think the programmes shown on television portray reality and truth?

My interest in this matter on the whole involves the process of meaning making and how audiences are engaged with television representation. My concern is to find out if the various visual sources from television, which is coincidentally mostly imported from United States, encourage Malaysian adolescents to slowly embrace western cultures, hence forgetting the local cultures, values and beliefs that Malaysians are known for. Or, will the constant exposure to western culture makes them realise the importance of inculcating local traditions and encourages a revival of old traditions, values and beliefs? My interest to study adolescents is because they are the people who will be Malaysia's future leaders. Dato' Seri Najib Razak (2011) himself expressed the importance of the younger generation, regarding them as the nation's savior. Findings from this research will benefit the Government in understanding how media can play a role in constructing cultural identity, especially amongst adolescents.

As a researcher, I will be looking at adolescents as active audiences; pictured as selective, rational and individualistic. In discussing about the concept of active audiences, my interest lies in the encoding/ decoding model which was developed by Hall (1980). Hall (1980) maintained that audiences are active in decoding messages but he was concerned with the class struggle faced by audiences in decoding messages, particularly on the media. He argued that audiences are able to decode messages and make sense of the messages in three ways: within the dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated or oppositional code (p. 171- 173). However, it must be pointed out that I am not planning to position the way audiences decode television texts, be it in the hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional viewpoints. Instead, I will explore and gauge the process of meaning making and in this case, the activities which take place in the process of decoding and making meanings. Taking into account the fact that messages are polysemic, I propose that activities which revolve around the process of decoding and making sense of television text should be looked at in order to better understand how they create meanings in the process of their cultural identity construction.

With the issues stated above in mind, I have decided to focus my research on these objectives:

1. To understand how adolescents associate and identify themselves to what they watch on television.
2. To examine how adolescence react to the different values introduced by the TV programmes with respect to building their own cultural identity

Thus, I will begin my endeavor with an elaboration on an important concept which will be pertinent throughout this thesis: cultural identity.

## **1.2 Cultural Identity**

### **1.2.1 Identity: Between similarities and differences**

“We lived in a world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life.”<sup>5</sup>

Trying to define identity is a daunting task as a lot of scholars have different thoughts on this matter. Woodward claimed that it is an ambiguous term which implies both similarity and difference (Woodward, 1997: 7-62). How can it be similar and yet different? It is something that person possesses, which sets them apart from others (Gilroy, 1997; Woodward, 1997), hence making the particular person different, while at the same time creates a feeling of belongingness, when a particular trait is shared with others, thus the similarity. For instance, Malaysian Malays are different from other races in Malaysia such as the Chinese and Indians, based on the religion they practise, Islam and the language they speak, the Malay language. At the same time, they are identified as Malays because of the sameness a group of people possesses that creates a feeling of belongingness, which is religion and language.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Gilroy, 1997: 301

Douglas (in Woodward, 1997: 29) said that the basis of culture is made up of differences because things and people are assigned within a classification system which categorises them as being positioned in a particular group, as exemplified by the Malaysian Malays. Gilroy (1997: 302), meanwhile, opined that the feeling of similarity is fundamental in providing people with an imaginary connection and the spirit of kinship. Gilroy (1997: 303) added that: "Work must be done, institutions built, customs and usages devised, to produce that particularity and the feelings of identity and exclusiveness which bind people together, though these are some of them experienced as though they were either natural and spontaneous or the products of an automatic tradition." In other words, both scholars agreed that a particular identity can be recognised based on its similarity and differences as how it has been classified in the knowledge system. My question is, wouldn't it be essential to look at identities from the similarities and differences perspective, especially with modernisation?

It should be pointed out that the notion of similarities and differences in relation to identity is very much in line with enlightenment thoughts in which the act of categorisation and classification is deemed as a way to be rational and logical in the quest for knowledge. However, with the new wave of thought of post-structuralism and post-modernism, the concept of identity has changed from being uniformed to dynamic and constantly changing. Zygmunt (2004: 50) argued that the traditional concept of identity is going through the process of change because of the current social, economic and politics changes. For example, traditional resources for identity formation such as religion, political movement and kinship (as mentioned by Gilroy, 1997: 310) have fragmented and are no longer straightforward or easily available hence causing people who used to define themselves according to their religion or political beliefs to stop doing so. The growth of fragmentation and uncertainty results in identity becoming more fluid, changeable and negotiable.

Zygmunt's opinion is concurred by Beck (1992). In his book, *Risk Society*, Beck emphasised the breakdown of certainty and stability which is faced by the West as a result of modernisation. According to Beck (1992: 201), new technology, economic and political changes have seen individual lives becoming increasingly unpredictable and subject to changing

circumstances and choices. As a consequence, social ties have weakened and people find that they have to rely on themselves especially in terms of identity formation which in turn sees a great increase of individualised identity.

What would the situation be like for youth and adolescents, then? Growing up in times of modernisation, they are faced with multiple choices as to how they would construct their identity. Polhemus (1998)<sup>6</sup> described the availability of multiple identities which youths can emulate as a 'supermarket' in which they can just pick any style or personality they prefer and mix and match it in an attempt to construct their own identity. Eckert (2004: 14) echoed Polhemus' sentiment when she illustrated the situation youths face in times of technological advancement and economic changes as a "marketplace of identities". Thus, it is safe to say that adolescents nowadays are not bounded by internal factors such as religion or family restrictions when constructing their identities. The diversified possibilities of constructing their identities is what Baacke (1987: 253) described as "surfing between various experiential worlds", resulting in what Elkind (1990) identified as patchwork identities, in which identities are not conformed to a specific uniformed essence but instead are fluid and constantly changing and is a mix and match of an individuals' preferences. As aptly pointed out by Oerter and Dreher (1995: 354), persons with patchwork identities no longer fulfill "the classical criteria of a worked out, integrated identity".

The notion of identity's fluidity and the possibility of constructing one's identity from various sources (a la marketplace as mentioned by Polhemus, (1998)) were also discussed by Hall (1997). Hall (1997: 51) stressed that the formation of identity is a continuous process and should be thought of as a production that will never be complete. However, he stated that there is a history of culture that tend to specify a group of people, which some may relate to cultural identities, but changes brought as a result of modernisation has opened up avenues for people to discover new possibilities on constructing and individualised identity. It should be pointed out that this notion is very much thought of by Western scholars. How far is it true for Asians and especially Malaysians?

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<sup>6</sup> Information on the Supermarket of Style could also be accessed from Polhemus' website: [http://www.tedpolhemus.com/main\\_concept5%20467.html](http://www.tedpolhemus.com/main_concept5%20467.html)

### 1.2.2 What is cultural identity?

UNESCO defines culture as a “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”<sup>7</sup> From the definition above, it could be said that cultural identity constitutes of beliefs and values, faith, customs and traditions and ways of life.

Cultural identity, according to Hall (in Woodward, 1997: 51) can be defined in two ways. Firstly, it connotes a shared, collective culture in which an individual stands among many others who have in common a shared history and ancestry. When looked at the definition this way, it reflects the static and stable frames of reference and meaning, pertaining to historical experience and cultural codes. In a way, it categorises a group of people according to a specific characteristic, which some scholars may think of as quite essentialist.

This concept of identity, suggested by Hall, plays an important role especially for countries which were colonised, like Malaysia, as an effort to by the colonisers to understand the colonised society better “especially when Europeans were seeking to map a part of the world that was relatively new to them” (Millner, 2008: 76). As aptly pointed out by Fanon (1963: 170): “Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain from all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.” Hence, it could be said that the colonised are made to think of themselves and identify themselves in a specific category which is very much essentialist, as a result of colonisation.

The second definition by Hall illustrates cultural identity as being fluid and constantly changing and undergoing transformations. Hall's view is very much similar to Beck's (1992) and Zygmunt's (2004) view on identity: as being more fluid, changeable and negotiable.

Woodward (1997: 29), meanwhile, said that each culture contains its own ways of classifying the world. Although he did not specifically define cultural identity per se, he discussed about culture and identity. He maintained that in order to maintain social order, there should be a

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, 1982 source:  
[http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12762&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12762&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

consensus between members of a group in the way to understand and categorise things. Does this mean that culture of a specific society is stable, static and homogenous or is it fluid and constantly changing? Woodward did not exactly spell this out. However, by reading the chapter that he wrote, he was referring to the idea of similarity and differences in conceptualising identity. Thus, it could be said that he shared the idea that the cultural identity of a specific group is stable and can be classified into neat categories.

Woodward's idea of culture and identity is similar to those of Douglas (1966). Douglas mentioned in his book that culture "[...] provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered" (Douglas, 1966: 38-39). Again, this corresponds to the idea that culture and cultural identity can be looked at based on classificatory systems, which leads to the perception of culture being stagnant.

In which definition does Malaysia fit in? Needless to say, modernisation has certainly brought with it some cultural changes in Malaysia's society. However, a large part of the Malay population in Malaysia still practises their traditional beliefs and values in their everyday life. What Shamsul (1996) said in his article, "Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis" rings true. He argued that the definitions of ethnicities and races in Malaysia actually accommodate changes brought with time and are not limited to a set of signifiers. [...] "what it"<sup>8</sup> means" and "what it is" have always been altered, redefined [...] according to social-historical circumstances [...] (Shamsul , 1996: 480).

Hence, although the idea of identifying a particular cultural identity according to a set of signifiers may seem quite essentialist, the situation in Malaysia is slightly different. The cultural identity of Malay, for instance, can be recognised by a particular set of cultural traditions, beliefs, clothes and language, but it does not limit the identifying markers<sup>9</sup> to a specific limited set of elements and instead acknowledges the changes that come with modernisation. As aptly said by Mee (1998: 229), the cultural identity of the races in Malaysia is not static and makes room for changes but it still maintains its fundamental roots in values and beliefs.

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<sup>8</sup> It here, refers to the term Malay

<sup>9</sup> When discussing about cultural identity, people, among others, often look at history (Lin & Tong, 2009), ancestry (Gilroy, 1997) and clothing (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2009) as identifying markers.

Distinct cultural identities according to ethnicity are important in Malaysia because of the *ketuanan* Melayu or Malay supremacy (Syed Husin, 2008: 182). Malays have special rights in terms of land ownership and also receive special subsidies from the government. Chinese and Indian, meanwhile, have associations and groups which provide special privileges to help them out. Hence, there is a necessity for each race to maintain their own identities in terms of languages, values and practices in order to be identified as belonging in a specific race so as to qualify for the special privileges. Thus, although there might be a hybridity of the various cultural practices by the different races in Malaysia, the distinction between the races is still considered imperative in Malaysia's plural society. The importance of maintaining a distinct cultural identity according to races could be seen in the 1Malaysia concept promoted by Malaysia's Prime Minister which emphasises the importance of maintaining one's cultural values and does not promote a hybridity of culture or places the need to establish a national identity. Instead, the 1Malaysia concept attempts to promote harmony and unity by listing eight core values, which are deemed as important and could be practised by all ethnicities.

### **1.2.3 Media and the construction of identity**

The concept of race and ethnicity plays a fundamental role in determining one's cultural identity. According to Abu Hassan (2004: 86), debates about the relationship between culture pertaining to the construction of identity, in relations to ethnicity and race emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, during that time, the enlightenment period saw the emergence of modern states and academic specialisation and an increase of classifying things and people in a thirst for the quest of knowledge. However, modernisation has seen a change of thought and offers a plethora of new ways to see how cultural identity may be constructed from the aspect of other than those of race and ethnicity per se. How is that so?

Some of the elements of modernisation include technological advancement, changes in economy and diversified media resources (Anderson, 1983; Giddens, 1991; Tomlinson, 1991). As mentioned by several scholars (Baacke, 1987; Beck, 1992; Hall, 1997; Hopkins, 2009; Polehmus, 1998; Spreckels and Kotthoff, 2009; Zygmunt, 2004) modernity plays a big role in changing the



ways identity are constructed as opposed to pre-modern times. Modernity gives individuals more choices in the ways to construct their identity. How are these choices obtained? One of the main ways is through the media. Media such as television has the ability to become a primary source of information for people to help construct their opinions (Baldi and Hasebrink, 2007: 9).

The study by Rubinstein, McMilin and Fisherkeller (2008), whose aim is to understand how cultural identity is constructed through adolescents' engagement with television characters, concluded that the characters taught them how to be funny, strong, and independent (p. 17). Adolescents also used the materials they view on television to relieve stress and cope with the going-on in their lives (p. 17). However, these teens are aware of their cultural boundaries and do not step out of their cultural norms or belief. Thus, although they move forward with modernisation, they are still aware of their local cultures.

Sommer (1998: 188) believed that representation, like the characters people watch on television, are constantly thought about by audiences and understood through communicating within culture. Kumar (2006: 195pp) and Moscovici (1998) opined that television serves as a way to construct and reinforce sense of identity. He reckoned that when one watches news and culture which they can identify with, it reinforces their sense of cultural identity. In short, television can be seen as a platform for people to negotiate their cultural identity.

De B'Berri and Middlebrook (2009: 2) maintained that media present viewers with ways of thinking about and making sense of the world. "Television as with other mass media has the power to represent and thus to articulate a framework within which viewers consider the images that they encounter. This very framework also provides the conditions for examining the ways in which practices of identity are being worked and reworked to become invisible or naturalized." (De B'Berri and Middlebrook, 2009: 2). Similarly, Hill (2007) spoke about how audiences actively make meaning from their engagement with television.

Woodward (1997: 22) opined that the media gives people an opportunity to see how it feels like to be a person, different from their everyday self, through the representations they watch on television. But how accurate are the representations on television? And how do

audiences 'read' the representations they see? What if one is watching a foreign programme which showcases values and beliefs which are detached from local culture?

Interestingly, some scholars argue that media causes the loss of traditional local culture while others argue that transnational networks are able to enrich local culture (Straubhaar, 2008). Straubhaar (2008) opined that many countries seem to be facing the impact of cultural imperialism but there is a need to realize that sometimes, these countries adapt and utilize the information they gained from other cultures to their own cultures, resulting in hybridity (p.12-13). In an example, he said that the availability of foreign programmes<sup>10</sup>, especially those imported from US resulted in audiences to easily learn, adapt and enjoy US visual culture (p. 15). The programmes, he argued, allow audiences to project indigenous value, beliefs, rites and ritual into the shows they watch or the use of it (p. 18). This simply shows that American imports can easily blend into local cultures. As aptly said by Olsen (1996: 6) "Cultures that receive Hollywood products are able to project their own narratives, values, myths and meanings into the American iconic media, making those texts resonate with the same meanings they might have had if they were indigenous."

However, he did not deny that for some countries, the power of nations and national cultural industries continues to be strong despite the programme imports, and that many audiences still identify and share a strong sense of cultural proximity with local culture. This is in line with what Katz and Wedell (1976: 19) suggested in *Broadcasting in the Third World* whereby they stated that television has the potential to become a tool to inculcate national identity. Hopkins (2009: 30), who did a research on the impact of the increase of foreign programme on local television in Turkey, found that Turkish's engagement with the diverse media does not undermine local culture and instead, the citizens seem to look at their culture as dynamic. The swelling number of foreign programmes shown on local television may have contributed to the spread of Western ideology. However, this does not mean audiences are easily influenced by the materials they watch (Hall, 1990; Hinton, 2009), instead, said that some of the ideologies are

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<sup>10</sup> In his research, Straubhaar (2008: 10) found that US programmes are prominently featured as prime time shows in many countries which he pointed out to be probably due to the relatively low cost of US materials.

contested and are actually negotiated within the social practices of one's own culture (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Kotzeva, 2001; Tomlinson, 2004)

Thus, it could be deduced that there are two consequences of an increase in programme imports in local television slots; local culture being undermined by foreign values and beliefs and local culture becomes stronger (Sondergaard, 2003: 99). This notion was affirmed by Woodward (1997: 16-17). He asserted that globalisation, which contributes to the increasing number of foreign programmes broadcasted elsewhere and satellite television transmission, could "lead to the detachment of identity from community and place" or "lead to resistance, which could strengthen and reaffirm some national and local identities" (Woodward, 1997: 16). As aptly suggested by Giddens (1990) and Anderson and Miles (1999), globalisation causes the process of constructing one's identity to be more complicated.

According to Singh (2010: 87) developments in media have exposed people to various new information, some of which could be taken into one's cultural identity construction process. Singh further argued that the new information obtained causes diverse culture to be assimilated to one's local culture, resulting in a homogenised society (p.87). His sentiment was shared by Robins (1991: 28) who believed that globalisation results on the cultural convergence and lifestyles around the world.

Singh's ideas may have some truth in the country he studied, India, but as a researcher, I think it would be best to look at all possibilities, such as hybridisation and glocalisation, before concluding in which situation Malaysia falls into. Undeniably, there is a need to study the relationship between media and cultural identity, especially in developing countries such as Malaysia to better understand the impact of modernisation and globalisation. This is one of the reasons why I think my research is important; because there is a need to study the situation (of the interplay between modernity and cultural identity) in local context before coming up with an intellectual deduction of Malaysia's predicament. However, I find it important to firstly understand the diversity of Malaysia's society and how it places importance on traditions and cultures. This will be discussed next.

### 1.3 Malaysia and its multicultural society



Figure 1.1 Map of Malaysia<sup>11</sup>

Malaysia is situated in Southeast Asia, surrounded by the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. It consists of two lands, separated by the South China Sea: the peninsular Malaysia bordering Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore and Sabah and Sarawak which is situated in the northern part of the island of Borneo bordering Brunei and Indonesia (refer map in the diagramme above). It is sometimes referred to as being part of the Malay Archipelago and is currently inhabited by over 27 million people made up of a multi-racial composition which include Malays (63.1 per cent), Chinese (24.6 per cent), Indians (7.3 per cent) and various indigenous ethnic groups<sup>12</sup> (4.3 per cent) which forms the major population of Sabah and Sarawak and others (0.7 per cent) (Population And Housing Census, Malaysia 2010). The national and official language is *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language), but English is commonly used, which according to Ahmad (2007: 141), is a result of colonisation and globalisation. Other main languages can also be found in Malaysia, including various dialects of Chinese language (Cantonese, Hokkien or Hakka), and Tamil, Hindi and Punjabi amongst the Indian population (Hassan and Basri, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Source: <http://geography.about.com/library/cia/ncomalaysia.htm>

<sup>12</sup> The indigenous ethnic groups include Iban, Kadayan, Dusun, Bidayuh, Murut and Melanau are also known as *Bumiputera*.

### 1.3.1 The idea of racial categorisation in Malaysia

According to Hall (1997: 51), identities are dynamic and are constantly undergoing transformation. Since it is considered as constantly undergoing transformation, an attempt to specifically describe or categorise a race or ethnicity – which I consider as part of one's cultural identity - according to their way of life, values and beliefs may be seen as quite essentialist and be misconstrued as homogenising a group of people without considering their differences and uniqueness. Kahn (1998: 20-21) opined that establishing a set of signifiers for a specific racial category can be seen as a simulacrum<sup>13</sup> as it romantacises the idea of race being referred to a limited set of signifiers such as cuisines and dresses.

However, according to Shamsul (1996: 480), in Malaysia's case, the definitions of ethnicities and race actually accommodate changes brought with time and are not limited to a set of signifiers. "What seemed to be an analytical convenience, in fact "orientalist" in spirit, has developed into a scientific approach thus 'Malay' or 'Malayness' as a social category has been problematised or perceived as something constructed, invented, artificial despite the fact that "what it means" and "what it is" have always been altered, redefined, reconstituted and the boundaries expended according to social-historical circumstances, especially after the introduction of colonial racism and racial category into the realm of authority defined and everyday defined social reality in British Malaya." (Shamsul, 1996: 480) Hence, the term Malay, Chinese and Indian is not static and makes room for changes but it still maintains its fundamental roots in values and beliefs (Mee, 1998: 229).

To better understand the process of racial categorisation in Malaysia, it will be imperative to understand what Shamsul (1996: 480) meant with authority and everyday defined social reality.

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<sup>13</sup> Simulacra is a term coined by Baudrillard (1981) to explain how images or representations which no longer measures itself against something else and cease to be real.

### **1.3.1.1 Authority Defined Social Reality**

Authority defined social reality refers to how the specific races and ethnicities are defined by social powers and those in a dominating position (Shamsul, 1996; Shamsul, 2004; Shamsul, 2005). Shamsul (1996 : 480) also noted that authority defined social categories in Malaysia “has resulted in ‘essentialising’ the Malays (and other races) giving it a set of ideal-typical attributes for the sake of analysis thus encouraging the obviously simplistic perception that Malays as a social group is a homogenous one.” In the article, he generally referred to the Malays being given a set of attributes, but the notion also holds true for other races as the racial definition and categorisation were greatly influenced by the colonisation by the British and post independence.

#### **a. Colonisation**

Malaysia was colonised by the British from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until its’ independence in 1957.<sup>14</sup> Under the British administration, Malaysian society was categorised and classified according to specific races as a method to understand the society better “especially when Europeans were seeking to map a part of the world that was relatively new to them” (Millner, 2008: 76), ensure a better control and in turn, develop stability (Hirschmann, 1987; Mee, 1998). “In the colonial period, people who were once identified with a particular place name or with region – identities that were “characterised by impermanence” – were now subject to a European attempt to impose “bounded, permanent and stable ethnic identity”.” (Milner, 2008: 122) Shamsul (1996: 482) also noted that “social categories such as ‘race’ (both its biological and social component and meanings) and ‘nation’ entered local cosmology and worldview through colonisation hence the slow dismantling of the traditional thought system in due course and its displacement by the Western-based system.”

When the British first came, Malaysia was already populated with people of various ethnicities such as Ceylonese, Hakka, Tamils, Eurasian and Peranakans who came in droves in

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<sup>14</sup> Historian, Prof Zainal Kling claims that Malaysia was never colonised by the British (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQzJTwmN0GU>). Instead, British was said as merely giving ‘advice’ to the local Sultans on how to best manage the country. However, according to Mahathir Mohamad (New Straits Times, 13 September 2011), “though the British were only advisers, they acted as if they were the rulers, instead of the sultans.”

the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Melaka was an important and busy centre for government and trade (Syed Hussin, 2008: 159). However, according to Syed Hussin (2008: 159), at that time, the position of Malays was still dominant as foreigners who came were mostly there for a short time and those who stayed and married locals easily adapted to the local Malay culture. There were also migration from people within the Archipelago such as Javanese, Bugis and Minangkabau, but they basically share similar history and culture with the Malays in Melaka, hence they were easily assimilated. Hence, racial differences were not obvious as those who came from other places were easily assimilated into the dominant Malay culture.

However, during the British reign, foreign migration to Malaysia (back then known as Malaya) especially from India and China and also from the Malay Archipelago, increased dramatically. Migration of people from China and India were mainly influenced by their motivation to search for greener pastures, trying their luck in small businesses such as opening sundry shops and also as contract labourers to work in the mines (mostly from China) and estates (mostly from India). Those who came from China and India are made up of various ethnicities and clans such as Cantonese, Hokkiens, Nanyangs, Ceylonese, Tamils, Telegu and Punjabi. These various ethnicities and clans speak different languages and dialects and have different beliefs and culture, but, they are often grouped together as being Chinese (referring to the clans who came from China), Indian (referring to groups of people from India) and Malays (referring to people who are originally from Malaysia and those who migrated from the Malay Archipelago). Therefore, although some people might argue that the term Chinese and Indians refer to citizens from India and China, it is different in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the term is loosely used to categorise the many different groups who originally came and subsequently decided to stay in Malaysia.

The categorisation of these various clans and ethnicities within the three major groups (refer table below) is actually one of the result of census taking by the British administration which have helped to divide the society along racial-ethnic lines and define the various races in Malaysia by consolidating racial categories such as Malay, Chinese and Indian (Farish, 2009; Shamsul , 1996;; Milner, 2008). The colonial government census began in 1871 (Farish, 2009; Hirschman, 1986; Milner, 2008) with race being one of the key categories. At that time, the

society still identified themselves as being members of a specific clan, group or ethnicity as opposed to members of a particular “race”. This was noted by Hirschman (1986) when he said that the census-taker of 1931 had problems to make a consistent classification of the races as most of the people are themselves quite unsure of which race they belong to within the categories administered by the colonialist.

But over time, the notion of race, which was authoritatively defined, was slowly internalised. People of the supposedly same “racial category” began to appropriate their identity as defined by the colonialist and noted the difference of the different “racial categories”. As noted by Shamsul (1996: 482): “In other words, there was a two-way traffic in the appropriation exercise during the colonial period, not only the colonialists were appropriating what the locals have to offer but the locals too were selecting, appropriating and internalising what the colonialist offered them.” Chakrabarty (2002: 87) concurred and suggested that the categories delivered the message that communities could be enumerated, and that each “race” had a lot of things in common like interests and problems, and might act as a unit politically to further their objectives. And, as aptly said by Farish (2009: 69), “[...] the era of colonial rule helped to solidify and entrench this sense of communal feeling and collective identity.”

1871	1891	1911	1911	1931
<b>‘Malay’ races</b>	<b>‘Malay’ races</b>	<b>‘Malay’ and other allied races</b>	<b>‘Malay’ races</b>	<b>‘Malay’ races</b>
Boyaneses	Aboriginies		Malay	Malays
Bugis	Achinese		Javanese	Javanese
Dyaks	Boyaneses	Achinese	Sakais	Boyaneses
Javanese	Bugis	Amboinese	Banjarese	Achinese
Malays	Dyaks	Balinese	Boyaneses	Bataks
Manilamen	Javanese	Bandong	Mendeling	Minangkabaus
	Jawipekans	Bahjarese	Kerinchis	Korinchins
	Malays	Bantamese	Jambi	Jambis
	Manilamen	Batak	Achinese	Palembang



		Borneo Boyaneese Bugis Bundu Dyaks Dusuns Javanese Jawipekans Kadayans Korinchi Malays Rawanese Sulu Sudanese Tutong	Bugis	Riau-Linggans Banjarese Dutch Borneo Bugis Dayaks Sakais Other Sumatrans Others Also natives from Dutch East Indies
<b>Chinese</b>	<b>Chinese 'Races'</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>Chinese 'Tribes'</b>
	Cantonese Hokkiens Hylams Khehs Nanyangs Teo-Chews	Straits-born China-born	<b>'Tribes'</b> Cantonese Kheh Tie Chiu Kheh Hokkien Hiu Hua Hok Chiu Tie Chiu Hailam Kwong Sai	Hokkien Tiu Chiu Hakka (Kheh) Hok Chhia Cantonese Hailam Hok Chiu Kwongsai

<b>Hindus, Bengalese and other Indian races not specified</b>	<b>Tamils and Other Indian Races</b> Bengalese Burmese Parsees	<b>Indians</b> India-born Straits-born Born elsewhere	<b>Indians by Race</b> Tamil Telugu Punjabi Bengali Malayali Hindustani Afghan Gujerati Maharatta Burmese	<b>Indians by Race</b> Tamils Telegu Malayalam Punjabi United Provinces Burmese Bengal Bombay Bihar Nepal
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Table 1.1: Categories and classification of race according to colonial census taking.

Source: Hirschman (1987), The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia in *Journal of Asian Studies*.

Not only that, the colonialists' strategy in dividing the races according to distribution of population, types of occupation and education has only helped to enhance the racial disparities among Malays, Chinese and Indians and made people who are from different clans or groups but originally came from the same country to develop a sense of kinship, despite the known difference in language, dialect and beliefs.

For instance, in terms of occupation, during the colonised era, the Malays were mostly peasants and some of the privileged ones would be selected to work with the British government. The Chinese were mostly involved in businesses and worked in tin mines while the Indians are labourers and worked in estates and plantations. Their concentrations on specific fields have consequently affected the distribution of population in which Malays lives in rural area while the Chinese populated the urban area. The Indians, who are labourers and estate workers, lived in

the living quarters provided at the estates. There were also specific schools for Malays, Chinese and Indians which unwittingly enhanced the difference within each ethnicity. The segregation and division of occupation, place of living and education only distanced the society and created feelings of animosity.

## **b. Post Independence**

Racial categorisation continued to be authoritatively defined after Malaysia's Independence from the British. During this time, the society felt the need to identify themselves as being Malay, Chinese or Indian because it is related to the special rights<sup>15</sup> provided for the specific races. For instance, in order to be considered Malay, one would have to practise what is considered as a Malay culture, which has been previously determined by the colonialist. A very glaring example is how Malays are authoritatively defined in the Malaysian constitution. Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution states that Malays are defined as: someone who is born to a Malaysian citizen, professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language and adheres to Malay customs. Also, in this era, the vernacular education system further contributes to the racial segregation and categorisation.

### **1.3.1.2 Everyday Defined Social Reality**

Everyday defined social reality, according to Shamsul (1996: 478) refers to how people experience reality in the course of their everyday life. Simply said, it is how the society defines itself. However, it must be pointed out that how society defines its social reality may be heavily influenced by how it has been authoritatively defined. This is because, as pointed out by Shamsul (1996, 2004) and Farish (2009), the categorisation and signified elements which define a race has been internalised and therefore practised as being customary and habitual. Although authoritatively defined social reality may influence everyday defined social reality, this does not

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<sup>15</sup> The Malays are given special rights in acquiring property according to the Malay Reservation Act, Chinese were protected by the Department of Chinese Affairs and Indians are provided with toddy shop especially catered for them.

necessarily mean that both are identical. According to Shamsul (1996: 478) the difference is that "everyday-defined" social reality is experienced and the "authority-defined" social reality is only observed and interpreted." Everyday defined social reality allows room for change as it depends on how one lives his or her everyday life. Hence, it is not static and "essentialised" as it does not specifically categorise a race according to specific characteristics.

### **1.3.2 Who are the people of Malaysia? An overview of the various races and ethnicities**

In this subtopic, I will attempt to provide a basic description of what is considered as Malay, Chinese or Indian. The description is not conclusive and to some extent may be seen as authoritatively defined<sup>16</sup> but it should be able to give a basic understanding of Malay, Chinese and Indian. As it is, it is easy to distinguish the different ethnic groups by their outward appearance (Syed Hussin, 2008: 161). Besides that, according to Syed Husin (2008: 161), these groups also manifest characteristics and cultural norms that are different and easily pronounced.

As mentioned earlier, the Article 160 in the Malaysian Constitution, Malays are defined as someone who is born to a Malaysian citizen, professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language and adheres to Malay customs. Their traditional dresses are called *baju kurung* and *baju melayu* (which are normally worn to official functions, work, school and on festive occasions). In the past, majority of Malays resided in rural areas as they were mostly peasants (Abdul Malik, 1977; Syed Hussin, 2008). However, with modernisation, more Malays have immigrated to the city in search of better job opportunities. They make up the bulk of civil servants in Malaysia (Shamsul, 2003).

Chinese, meanwhile, are mostly involved in businesses and corporate sectors. Nowadays, not all Chinese can converse in Chinese dialects and they prefer to speak in English. Their traditional dresses are called *cheongsam* and *samfoo* but these are hardly worn by the younger generation, except for during weddings or special occasions. Most of them reside in urban areas. The religion they practise varies and this includes Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity and Atheist (Syed Hussin, 2008:161).

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<sup>16</sup> The reason I say that it may be seen as authoritatively defined is because there are the basic characteristics of what is assumed to be Malay, Chinese and Indian.

Indians are mostly involved in the private sectors. They speak Tamil and English and can be quite fluent in the Malay language. A majority of them are Hindu but there are also those who are Buddhist, Christians and Atheist (Syed Hussin, 2008: 161). Their traditional clothes are *sari*, *dhoti* and *lungi* and the ladies would normally sport a pierced nose and wear the *pottu*. Like the Malays, the Indians wear their traditional dress every other day.

Ever since colonisation, there exist marked differences between Malays, Chinese and Indians in language, religion, culture, education and area of residences. However, they do occasionally interact with each other and as noted by Syed Husin (2008: 165), there exist a limited inter-ethnic relation, which may occur at the level of friendship, institution or organisational level.

Aside from the racial categories, Syed Husin (2008: 166) also noted that there appear to be class categories<sup>17</sup> which unwittingly divide the society. Hence, not only are people of different races made aware of their distinguishing differences, people of the same race could also feel the differences based on socio-economic factors. Clearly, Malaysian society is complex and there is a need to create understanding and foster meaningful relationships in order to create a unified society. Malaysia's Prime Minister Dato' Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak tried to create a unified society through his vision of 1Malaysia (pronounced as One Malaysia in English).

### **1.3.3 1Malaysia**

In his speech to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> day of being Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Razak explained the reason he introduced the concept of 1Malaysia, which is to spearhead his vision for Malaysia. He believed that unity is vital for a country with plural society like Malaysia. Likened to a *keluarga besar* (big family), the citizens of Malaysia which consist of people from various races, cultures and beliefs, is said to be an important component in determining the successful future of the country (Mohd Najib Razak, 2009). In his own words, the plural society in Malaysia is an 'asset and competitive advantage that has and will continue to put us head and shoulder above our global competitors.' (Mohd Najib Razak, 2009). Hence, it could

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<sup>17</sup> The class categories consist of upper class, middle class and lower class (See Syed Hussin Ali, 2008)

be said that the concept of 1Malaysia is a vision to create a harmonious Malaysian society, which is important in order for Malaysia to attain a developed country status and to be considered as successful.

According to Mohd Najib, the unique thing about the 1Malaysia concept is that it is not trying to assimilate the various cultures and create a national identity; instead it celebrates the diversity of cultures and considers it as an asset. The concept stresses on the acceptance of other cultures within the Malaysian realm (most prominently the Malays, Chinese, and Indian). Hence, in an effort to create unity within the diversity of cultures, Mohd Najib listed eight core values which should be practised by all the different races in Malaysia, in order “to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been our strength” (source: 1Malaysia Booklet). The eight values which are listed in the 1Malaysia concept are perseverance, acceptance, education, integrity, meritocracy, humility, loyalty and culture of excellence.

Seeing the importance of the 1Malaysia concept makes me wonder how the media, especially the television, being used to promote the concept? It must be pointed out that the concept places importance on both celebrating the diversity of cultures and inculcating common values which could be practised by everyone. Is that possible? As said by Siapera (2010: 58), “Failure to theorise the role of the media as mediators of relationships between and within communities results in a failure to grasp the complex interplay between universal and common values and the specific values particular to certain groups only”. This means, the media is an important tool in ensuring that the diverse cultures are equally represented and at the same time does not neglect the universal and common values which can be practised by everyone. The research I partook will shed some light into this issue. Some important questions that will be answered by this research are: how are the culturally diverse society and the concept of 1Malaysia being represented on television and how audiences make meanings from these representations. Therefore, it is only appropriate if I discuss the broadcasting scene in Malaysia to give some background of one of the most important tool in representation.

## **1.4 The Broadcasting Scene in Malaysia**

### **1.4.1 How it all began .... Radio Televisyen Malaysia**

Mass media in Malaysia has a long, colourful history. The printing press paved its way in Malaysia's media landscape (then known as *Tanah Melayu*) since the 1800s, beginning with British's *Prince of Wales Island Gazette*. Back then, the commercial newspaper was used to disseminate information to a largely elite community, made up by the colonialists, expatriates and a few English speaking individuals.

Since then, numerous publications had emerged with *Jawi Peranakan* being the first *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) weekly in 1876. The paper was modelled after English dailies and mostly featured news about the war, and later, Egyptian and Arabic news content (Lent, 1978).

Broadcasting, meanwhile, began in 1821 when an electric engineer, Al Birch brought the first radio set into the country. He then started the Johor Wireless Club and started broadcasting through a wavelength of 300 meters. (RTM corporate profile history, n.d). In 1930, Sir Earl from the Singapore Port Authority launched a biweekly short-waved radio broadcast. The effort was continued by the Malaysia Wireless Association, which launched its broadcast from Bukit Petaling at a 325 meters wave length. (RTM corporate profile history, n.d)

Then, in 1937, Sir Shenton Thomas launched the British Broadcasting Corporation of Malaya, which soon became part of the British Information Ministry, otherwise also known as the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation (RTM corporate profile history, n.d). Although English was the main language used in broadcasting, there were other services which used native languages, such as Station ZHJ of Penang which had services in four languages (Lent, 1978). In 1940, the British Malaya Broadcasting was made part of the British Information Ministry and was known as the Malayan Broadcasting Authority (Salleh Hassan and Kalmorat Intratat, 2003: 171)

In 1942, Japan invaded Malaya and utilised the broadcasting services which were available then, namely radio channels in Penang, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Seremban, to disseminate Japanese propaganda. It was also during this time that the Japanese

organised radio programmes in such a way that it was able to accommodate to the needs of each ethnic group in Malaya. They cleverly used native languages such as *Bahasa Melayu* to reach to a specific ethnic, ensuring that their propaganda would be better understood (Lent, 1978). According to Lent (1978:604), "Mondays and Thursdays were called Malai Days in which *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) programmes were broadcasted."

The Japanese were defeated in 1943 and British came back into power. Soon after that, British established the Department of Broadcasting in Singapore (RTM corporate profile history, n.d).

It is only about 30 years later that the first television network was established. The network, RTM 1 (an acronym for Radio Televisyen Malaysia), was established with the advice of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and begun with 24 hours of air time weekly. (Tai, 1997). The second network, RTM 2 was consequently established in 1969 and aired programme in several languages which include English, Tamil and Mandarin (Lent, 1978). According to R. Karthigesu (in Tai, 1997: 470), 48.1 per cent of programmes which were mostly imported from United States and Great Britain were broadcasted until RTM began its own local production.

With its headquarters in Federal House, Kuala Lumpur, the local broadcasting scene continued to flourish. Some of its momentous journey, according to Adhikarya (in Tai, 1997: 470) included "the establishment of Malaysia's first earth satellite station in 1970 and the conversion to colour television by late 1970s."

As a government owned television station, RTM, according to MacDaniels (in Tai, 1997: 485) was to promote five important objectives:

1. To explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage, policies and programmes of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the people;
2. To stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirements of the government;
3. To foster national unity in the multi-racial society through the extensive use of *Bahasa Malaysia*;



4. To assist in promoting civic consciousness and in fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture; and
5. To provide suitable elements of education, general information and entertainment.

RTM's television stations are now called TV1 and TV2.

#### **1.4.2 Malaysia's first private TV station, TV3**

When Mahathir Mohamed became Malaysia's Prime Minister in 1981, he began introducing several new policies, one of which was the privatisation policy. This, by far and large, affected the country's economy and also prompted the establishment of Malaysia's very own private television station, TV3. TV3 was established by Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad (STMB), which according to Jasinski and Yarrow (1996: 441), consists of a group of private investors, with the main one being then Malaysia's leading newspaper, *The New Straits Times*. According to Karthigesu (in Tai, 1997: 470), TV3's establishment was driven by the government's goal to decrease the involvement of public sector in the economy and to provide high quality entertainment.

TV3 became very popular with the Malaysian public as it broadcasted programmes which were mostly imported from the United States and Britain. The station was seen as a fresh alternative compared to RTM 1 and RTM 2 which many deemed as the government's mouth piece. Also, programmes which were shown on RTM 1 and RTM 2 were not up to date and less popular. Being classified as a private commercial television station definitely has its perks for TV3 as it was able to showcased a variety of programmes as it was not subjected to a "regimented censorship" (Tai Suet Yee, 1997: 471) like RTM 1 and RTM 2. Hence, members of the public were entertained with box office hits from as far as United States to Japan and popular treats from Britain to Hong Kong.

#### **1.4.3 Metrovision Channel 8 and 8TV**

Almost a decade after the successful establishment of TV3, Malaysian audiences in the Klang Valley were pleasantly treated to a second private television station, Metrovision Channel 8,

which began its transmission in July 1995(Tai Suet Yee, 1997). MetroVision was operated by City Television Sdn Bhd a consortium of several companies which are the Metropolitan Televisyen Sdn Bhd (50 per cent), Kumpulan Utusan Melayu (30 per cent), Diversified System Sdn Bhd (10 per cent) and Medanmas Sdn Bhd (10 per cent) (Business Times, 25 May 1995).

The channel was reported to broadcast programmes which are exciting and entertaining, and are vastly different from those already broadcasted on RTM 1, RTM 2 and TV 3. The television station started going on air with 40 hours worth of programmes per week. The programmes, among others, included news, sitcoms and cartoons. 60 per cent of its contents were imported from abroad and most of its programmes are in English, to cater for the urban viewers (Hartati , 22 June 1995).

However, the excitement of having a second private television station was short lived as Metrovision suspended its transmission in November 1999 due to its financial problems (Zainal Alam, 3 November 1999). The station was finally bought over by Media Prima in 2003 and was rebranded as 8TV. Once bought over by Media Prima, Metrovision Channel 8 was rebranded as 8TV and broadcasted programmes targeted to urban youth and the Chinese vernacular markets. Its tagline is 'We're Different'. (Television Networks, n.d)

#### **1.4.4 NTV7**

NTV7 is Malaysia's third private television station and was officially on air in April 1998. It was the first digital station and showcased programmes suitable for family viewing. With the tagline '*Senang Hati*' (Feel Good), its fresh approach was a welcomed change to the Malaysian audiences, especially urban and English speaking ones (Zainuri, 23 July 2008). However, it was also heavily criticised for being too American as 80 per cent of its contents were imported from the United States (see Zurina , 1998 and Pena Melaka, 1998). In December 2005, NTV 7 which was owned by Encorp Group Sendirian Berhad, was bought over by Media Prima Berhad. However, Media Prima Berhad maintained the station's image as it was when it was operated by Encorp Group Sendirian Berhad.

#### **1.4.5 Channel 9**

Channel 9 was initially set up targeted for young adults aged between 15 and 35 years old (Joe Lee, 13 August 2003) and is heralded as the first formatted TV station dedicated to "the urban young"(NST, 14 November 2003). In an interview, its Managing Director Jamal Hassim said that the channel not only plans to entertain, it also acts as a medium to inculcate good values and nationalism (Hanisah, 1 November 2003).

However, in early 2005 it ceased operation (see Zainal Alam, 13 March 2005) and was later acquired by Media Prima Berhad. Since the takeover, the channel has been rebranded and its current target audiences are "young semi-urban and rural Malays who associate themselves with traditional Malay values" (Television Networks, n.d).

#### **1.4.6 Media Prima Berhad, Malaysia's very own media conglomerate**

The broadcasting industry in Malaysia is dominated by Media Prima Berhad. Likened to the media giant, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation which has interests in many of the leading media entity like Fox Network and Star TV, Media Prima Berhad is Malaysia's very own answer to a media conglomerate. Among others, it owns all of Malaysia's private television station, TV3, NTV 7, 8TV and Channel 9; owns 89.6 per cent equity interest in The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) (NSTP) Berhad ; owns three radio networks, Fly FM, Hot FM and One FM and one of Malaysia's largest publishing groups..

Media Prima's control over Malaysian media is astounding and was not what was envisioned from the privatisation policy. Zaharom (in Shanti Balraj-Ambigapathy, 2000: 161) concurred by saying that "the increasing privatisation of the TV industry has brought about a greater intervention and domination of the mass media."

#### **1.4.7 Astro**

Astro is an acronym for All Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator. Contrary to its 'All Asian' name, Astro actually features a lot of programmes which are imported from United States and Britain. It began its services at the end of 1996, broadcasting via Measat – 1, a

Malaysian owned satellite that was launched in January 1996 and is operated by Malaysia East Asia Satellites (Maesat). Its first transmission featured 22 television channels and eight radio services (Azian, 26 September 1996).

Today, Astro proudly has 81 channels but subscribers can only select the channels they want to subscribe to based on packages which are offered by Astro. Some of the packages include Sports, Fun, News, Learning, Variety and others. Currently, the lowest package is priced at RM37.95 per month.

It is interesting to note that most of the packages are grouped according to the main language spoken in the programme transmitted. For instance, the Dynasty package offers channels which use the Chinese language such as Astro Wah La Toi, Phoenix Chinese Channel, TVB8, TVB Xing He, WaTV and TVBS Asia while the Maharaja package offers programmes in language spoken by the Indians such as Sun TV, Sun Music and Chutti TV. There are also packages which feature *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language) such as the Mustika package and English, Movies package and Variety package. (Packages and Channel Lineup, n.d)

Although transmitted via satellite, the government still exercises some form of control on its broadcasts. According to R. Takeshi (in Tai Suet Yee, 1997: 473), the contents are controlled in two ways:

- i. The satellite dishes are only capable of receiving signals from Maesat satellites.
- ii. All transmissions are delayed for 90 minutes for editing, dubbing and censorship.

#### **1.4.8 Broadcasting and racial unity**

Malaysia is a melting pot of different cultures which include Malay, Chinese, Indian and other aboriginal tribes. Its diversified community is no stranger to conflicts within the different races and ethnicities, one of which was the 13 May Tragedy. In consideration of these conflicts, mass media, especially television, was seen as an effective tool to promote racial unity and disseminate government policies. (Tai, 1997: 485)

#### 1.4.8.1 The 13 May tragedy, *Rukunegara*, and racial unity

When Malaysia (known as Tanah Melayu before independence in 1957) was colonised by the British, they implemented a divide and rule policy that kept the major racial groups politically, socially and economically separated (Tai Suet Yee, 1997: 484). Malays were mostly farmers and lived in villages and some held government posts. The Chinese immigrants came by throngs to work in the tin mines and also set up entrepreneurship businesses while the Indian immigrants were mostly doing hard labour and were brought in by the British from India to help out with the then flourishing rubber estate and plantations. Because of this, the majority of Chinese and a handful of Malays were living an affluent and luxurious lifestyle while others only made pittance and had to live on a meager amount of money.

The different positions which they held in the society and segregation of job scopes further intensify the feeling of resentment towards each other and subsequently led to the tumultuous event of 13 May 1969. Since the bloody incident, the government tried to foster unity, reduce racial tension and economic disparity by introducing the New Economic Policy (NEP) and also the *Rukunegara* (National Principles).

The *Rukunegara* consists of five basic principles which must be upheld by all Malaysians. The aim was to develop a set of principles that would cut across ethnic boundaries and be identified by all Malaysians regardless of racial background (Tai Suet Yee, 1997: 485). The five basic principles are as follows:

- a. *Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan* (Belief in God)
- b. *Kesetiaan kepada Raja dan Negara* (Loyalty to King and Country)
- c. *Keluhuran Perlembagaan* (Supremacy of the constitution)
- d. *Kedaulatan Undang-undang* (The rule of Law)
- e. *Kesopanan dan Kesusilaan* (Good behaviour and morality)

Since the implementation and introduction of the *Rukunegara*, the mass media has been utilised to introduce and promote the principles to the public. Salleh and Kamolrat (2003: 169) said that broadcasting is the driving force in terms of social engineering. According to Lent (1975: 665), in the 70s, the Information Minister had announced that “dramas, music, dances etc, aired

on TV must reflect and enlarge the awareness of the aspiration and development of the nation in terms of unity and democracy, just society, etc as envisaged in the *Rukunegara*."

Television stations were also encouraged to broadcast programmes which portray harmonious race relations, belief in god and loyalty to the nation (Lent 1975: 664). In an effort to promote national unification, efforts to include all racial groups in locally produced programmes could be seen. For instance, RTM increased its production of dramas which include non Malay actors in *Bahasa Malaysia* dramas and also cooking shows with Malay chefs cooking non-Malay cuisines (NST, 2 April 2001). In view of this matter, broadcasting was seen as a tool to develop unity in a multiracial society.

As the national language, *Bahasa Malaysia* was extensively used in television broadcasts especially in Primetime news. However, news in other languages spoken by the other main races was allowed, for instance 8TVs primetime news is broadcasted in Mandarin. Programmes which were broadcasted in languages other than *Bahasa Malaysia* are usually subtitled.

RTM's TV1 and TV2 as government owned mass media play a significant role in ensuring unity in this diversified country. According to Lent (1975: 667) RTM's main purpose is to air government policies and all aspects of its programming are "geared to promote national unity". Umi (2006: 196) concurred by stating that the primary role of RTM was to promote racial unity and "a Malaysian culture aligned to *Rukunegara*".

Malaysia's broadcasting history, according to Umi (2006) has been shaped to curb the ideology brought in when Malaya (or Tanah Melayu) was colonised by the British, Japanese, Communist and Portuguese. As aptly put by Umi (2006: 196): "Radio and television functioned as key weapons in the cultural territorialisation of Malaysia." This unwanted influence has prompted the government to exercise some forms of rules and regulations, which will be discussed in the next part.

#### **1.4.9 Regulations in Malaysia in relations to broadcasting and racial unity**

There are three important events which mark Malaysia's history: 1948's state of emergency, 13 May 1969's racial riots and 1984's Operasi Lalang. These events definitely have its repercussion on Malaysia's broadcasting industry. A number of new regulations were introduced following these memorable events and this include Printing Presses and Publications Act 1987 (previously was the Printing Presses Ordinance 1948), The Sedition Act 1948 and The Internal Security Act 1960 (Act 82) and the Broadcasting Act 1988 (Act 338).

##### 1.4.9.1 Printing Presses and Publications Act 1987

The Printing Presses and Publications Act 1987 was originally known as the Printing Presses Ordinance of 1948 (Zaharom and Mustaffa, 1998). It was a statute implemented during the British reign to suppress anti-governmental propaganda. The act gives power to the Home Affairs Minister to shut down any press which disseminates false news and operates without license. The Minister may do this if he believes that the contents of a publication threaten morality, public order, security, public or national interests, conflict with the law or contain provocative matters. According to Tai (1997: 475), the Act is aimed primarily at print media but theoretically, its provisions apply equally to broadcasting.

##### 1.4.9.2 The Sedition Act 1948

The sedition act was first introduced to curb the upraise of communist in Malaya. The government had declared the state of Emergency as communists were slowly trying to take over the country with violence. The communists were also known to publish their propagandas and spreading them to the public, especially the kampung folks, hence the introduction of this Act. The act states that a person is liable to imprisonment and fine for any act, speech, word, publication or other things that tend to:

- (a) bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against any ruler or against any Government;
- (b) excite inhabitants of any territory to change any laws other than by lawful means;

- (c) bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the administration of justice in the Federation or in any other state;
- (d) raise discontent or disaffection against subjects of His Majesty or any other ruler of any state and its inhabitants;
- (e) promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of population of the Federation. (Sedition Act, 2006)

Although the law is not specifically designed for the broadcasting industry, it must be taken into consideration when transmitting and disseminating any forms of information through the television channels.

#### 1.4.9.3 Internal Security Act (1960)

The Internal Security Act's primary aim is to ensure the country's stability and prevent racial disputes from happening. In chapter III of the act, it was stated that any publication that contains any incitement to violence and "most likely to lead to a breach of the peace, or to promote feelings of hostility between different races or classes of the population; or is prejudicial to the national interest, public order, or security of Malaysia" are prohibited. (Internal Security Act 1960, 2006)

#### 1.4.9.4 The Broadcasting Act 1988

The Broadcasting Act 1988 does not specify or give a guideline on what can or cannot be broadcasted over the television. Instead, it mainly explains the scope of the Information Minister's authority and "lays out the general regulatory framework with respect to licenses""(Tai, 1997: 477). It clearly sketches out the powerful role played by the Information Minister. For instance, Part III, Section 10, Subsection (1) of the Act states that 'It shall be the duty of the licensee to ensure that the broadcasting matter by him complies with the direction given, from time to time, by the Minister.'

As it is, there are no specific rules in relations to programme content. However, according to Tai Suet Yee (1997), there is a "Code of Ethics of Broadcasting", developed within the



discretion of the Information Minister which sets the guidelines of programme contents. According to McDaniel (in Tai, 1997: 477): “these rules [are] meant to supplement and define the Broadcasting provisions. Among other matters, the Code sets standards for dress, hair length, advertising, and sexually suggestive portrayals.”

Clearly, the rules and regulations are implemented to ensure that the well being of each ethnicity are taken care of in order to maintain the harmony between them. Also, it pictures Malaysia's effort in trying to prevent 'cultural territorialisation'. Having said that, there is only so much that the Malaysian government can do with the rules and regulations above, to try and stop cultural territorialisation. Ultimately, the representation on television has to be decoded and interpreted by the individuals themselves. Hence, I find it important to gauge how audiences negotiate television text and construct meanings in order to unearth their process of meaning making. Is television the only text referred to when trying to make sense of things around them? Has the influx of foreign programmes increased the possibility of Malaysian citizens being 'territorialised' by Western influences? Can unity be achieved by utilising television?

It must be pointed out; unity in Malaysia is not inculcated through a promotion of a single national culture, but through the practice of common values, while at the same time maintaining the uniqueness of each race, coined as 1Malaysia. In regards to unity and success of the country, young people are seen as the nation's savior to “contribute to the betterment of society and the nation's development” (Mohd Najib , 2011). He expressed the importance of guiding the young generation of the county so that they can lead the nation onto a higher development platform. Thus, it interests me to gauge young people's view about the Western influences, if there is any, and the representation of cultures on television. However, before we go any further, I feel that it is best if I discuss about adolescents and television.

## **1.5 Young People and Television**

Research and studies pertaining to young people usually revolve around the effects of media or their vulnerability towards media influences. Both Livingstone (2007) and Kapur (1999) suggested that there exist two major schools of thought with regards to studies on effects of television on children: the Frankfurt School tradition and cultural studies approach. The Frankfurt school tradition believes that television can be compared to drugs, a tool which numbs their capability to think and limits children's imagination with colonising narratives (Kapur, 1999: 122). It sees children as passive audiences and assumes that they accept the information disseminated through television without questioning it, thus, poses a big possibility of mimicry of television characters, especially negative ones, such as violence and racism. Meanwhile, the cultural studies perspective projects children as active audiences who are able to resist and negotiate the television text. Thus, they are not easily influenced by the messages they see on television. Instead, they are assumed as being able to agree, resist or partially agree with what they watch or read on the television.

### **1.5.1 The use of television**

Linebarger et al. (2008: 37) tried to identify young children's use of media and how they associate the usage of media to a person's characteristic. Guided by the concept of audience activity in gratifications research, they found that children assumed that lazy kids love to watch television while those who are bored would resort to playing video games. Smart children are associated with books as the respondents in the study by Linebarger et al. (2008: 38) considered books to be the main source of information. Their findings pointed out that children seem to regard books as a source of information and learning tool. This is consistent with prior researches in which van der Voort et al. (1988) and Bohme-Durr (1990) in their studies, also found that books are associated as a medium in which one can learn from. What about television? Other researchers such as Cohen et al. (1988) and Greenberg et al. (1989) found that television is used to have fun and used when one is bored or lonely. Lyle and Hoffman (1972), who interviewed

sixth and tenth graders, and Abelman and Atkin (2000) who surveyed seven to 12 year old Americans, suggested that there are three main reasons why children watch television which are for entertainment, relaxation and to help them feel less lonely.

Young people's engagement with the media can also be related to the seven dimensions of media use and interaction which was identified by Takahashi (2008: 417). Takahashi explored young people's engagement with the media, focusing on Japanese children and attempted to identify the various dimensions related to it. Through the course of his research, he identified seven dimensions of audiences' engagement towards the media which are information seeking, connectivity, world creation, para-social interaction, relaxation, interpretation compliant and resistant viewing and participation (p. 417). He stressed that children use the media in the process of creating and recreating their identity (p. 426). Comparing audiences' engagement with media between Japan and the West, he found that although not glaringly obvious, there exist some social and cultural differences in terms of media use. However, he maintained that findings from his research showed a universalism of media audiences in terms of the dimensions of audiences engagement which he has identified earlier (p. 426). Takahashi's findings indicated a need for a local research on media engagement to be done as there is a possibility of differing ways in which audiences, and in this case, adolescents interact with the media.

Hooghe (2002: 84), meanwhile, suggested research on engagement with the media must also look at the amount of time that is used to watch television, types of programmes and the channels watched. So, how much television do adolescents actually watch? In a research done by Livingstone (2002: 60), it was revealed that television is watched by British children (aged between 6 and 17 years old) every day or nearly every day, for an average of two and a half hours per day. Its importance in their daily lives is evident as it is what they most often talk about with friends. She also noted that TV plays a role in structuring a day and is the media young people would miss most. Aside from that, in a random sample of 2,900 American children, it was revealed that they average 13 hours per week watching TV versus just 1.2 hours engaged in leisure reading (Elias, 1998). In the year 2000, Children Now reported an increase in the number of hours US children spend watching television to about 19 hours per week, or if accumulated,

1,000 hours per year. Brown and Cantor (2000: 2), in a survey conducted with those between 8 and 18, discovered that they spend between 6 and 8 hours daily on media like television, music, magazines, cinema and internet. These studies made me wonder about Malaysian youngsters. How much television do they watch?

According to Bramlett-Solomen and Roeder (2008: 56), television is children's favourite media and they spend more time with television than having a conversation or a face to face interaction with people. Hence, it has a very big potential in influencing the young minds. In their research on appearance of characters according to races in Nickelodeon's advertisements, they found that certain races are depicted stereotypically. African Americans and Asian Americans still hold non-important roles and are not seen as leaders and are usually secondary to Caucasians. Now, how would this stereotyping of different races influence young minds?

### **1.5.2 Television and construction of cultural identity amongst young people**

Rivadeneyra et al. (2007: 262) asserted that lack of representation of various social groups could lead to a negative effect on young viewers as television, according to Rivadeneyra et al., not only teach by what it shows, it also informs people by what it does not show. Through their study on portrayals of Latino youth and their impact on the self-concept of Latino youth, they concluded that ethnic minority youth are more susceptible to a negative effect<sup>18</sup>. This is because, when they are not exposed to a wide variety of attributes connected to their ethnicity (especially from the media like television); it would be easier for them to believe the stereotypical roles shown on television as reality and the truth. This is especially true for young people as they are in a critical stage of self-evaluation and self-definition (Erikson, 1968) and exposure to television may guide them in their identity exploration, as suggested by McMillin and Fisherkeller (2008).

According to McMillin and Fisherkeller (2008: 2), television facilitates the expression of one's identities. They opined that globalisation makes the process of identity construction more complex. With this notion in mind, they conducted a research which aims to understand the

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<sup>18</sup> The negative effect which Rivadeneyra et al. (2007) pointed out is the tendency for Latino youths and also young people of other ethnicity to believe that Latinos are lazy, unreliable and uneducated as they are usually portrayed in television with these attributes.

meaning of television characters in the process of formation of cultural identity of young people in different countries. They found that television was used by the teens “as an extension of their ongoing journeys toward selfhood” (McMillin and Fisherkeller, 2008: 17). However, they maintained that social and cultural background still play a big role in the process of identity construction as it gives them various competencies for them to understand what is going on around them and stop them from emulating television characters which go over the boundaries of their cultural beliefs. Is this also true for Malaysian adolescents?

Similar to Rivadeneyra et al. (2007), Bramlett-Solomen and Roeder (2008) also opined that television could highly influence children’s perception of race. They construed that “children are more likely than adult to believe what they see and hear on television” (Bramlett-Solomen and Roeder, 2008: 1) as they have little life experiences and will tend to regard the stories on television as something which is happening in real life and are real. Their ideas are similar to what was highlighted in the cultivation theory<sup>19</sup> which suggests that constant exposure to certain images and ideologies can persuade young viewers to accept the messages presented on TV as reality and may cause them to formulate beliefs and ideas about race and ethnicity from what they see on TV (Gerbner, 1998; Larson, 2001; Van Evra, 1995). Bramlett-Solomen and Roeder (2008) believed that children are more likely to fall in this predicament as they are in their phase of constructing an identity and are in their formative cognitive development stage. However, their research is quantitative in nature and only looked at the representation of characters on television. Hence, there lacks empirical evidence in terms of what the frequent representation of stereotypical roles might influence young minds which warrant a qualitative study, to be more informed on how children make meanings of what they are exposed to on television.

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<sup>19</sup> According to Gerbner (1994), television is a very influential communication tool. He said that children and adolescents are easily influenced by messages disseminated through television. These messages, he claims, can influence their perception and behavior.

### **1.5.3 Young people and “effects” studies**

As it is, it is quite difficult to determine or pinpoint to a generalised outcome on media effects to children. Is television harmful or beneficial? Strasburger (199: 7-8) noted that “television gives teenagers scripts about how adults are supposed to act; it teaches them about gender roles, conflict resolution, patterns of courtship and sexual gratification, and methods of coping with stress.” Schramm et al. (1961: 61), meanwhile, said “For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions or for the same children under other conditions it may be beneficial. For most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial.”

Admittedly, researches and studies in this area are abundant. For instance, Durant et al.(2006) in his research concluded that watching wrestling programmes on television would cause youths to be violent and aggressive, more prone to initiate a fight, bring weapons to school, use drugs and drink alcohol. His findings concur with those of other researchers (Strasburger, 1997 and Buchanan et al. 2002) on effects of watching violent acts on television. Krcmar and Vieira (2005) said that violent acts on television influence youths and children’s moral ethics. However, they stressed that television is not the only source that adolescents look up to in developing moral values and ethics. They added that relationships between family members also contribute to the process. Collins et al. (2004) and Aubrey et al. (2003), meanwhile, said that television is the factor which encourages teens to be involved in sexual acts.

In terms of academic achievements, Shejwal and Purayidathil (2006) said that watching television has an insignificant and negative correlation towards academic achievement. Youths who watch television are found to be less competent in mathematics and are easily sleepy in school. This is probably the reason why many children associate lazy people with the tendency to watch a lot of television (Linebarger et al., 2008: 45)

Kapur (1999: 122) looked at the possibility of television as being the main reason of children’s loss of innocence. She maintained that children are slowly assuming the identities of adults, for instance, by mimicking their fashion sense. This happens as modernity and capitalism, with the help of television, has transformed the concept of childhood and blurred the boundaries

between adults and children. Seeing children as victims of capitalism, Kapur blamed new technologies as altering family relationship and suggested that it causes children to no longer be so dependent on parents for guidance (p. 129). However, I find that the opinion on children as victims of capitalism to be a little simplistic. If we look at children as active audiences, we know that they have the power to resist messages and are not that easily susceptible to television texts. Nevertheless, her suggestion of parental guidance when watching television should be taken into consideration as we can never predict how children decode the messages. Hence, by placing authority in their programme choices, parents can limit the possibility of children being exposed to unwanted phenomena, characters and others.

However, television also has positive effects. According to Hoffner et al. (2006), television programmes motivate students to go to university and get good jobs. Simply said, youngsters look up to the successful characters they watch on television and try to emulate their achievements.

The effects studies however are sometimes critiqued as being too simplistic as it measures audiences' reactions to media texts. It is also mostly quantitative in nature and used to generalise a population, instead of actually digging deep into the matter at hand. Livingstone (2007) suggested that a simplistic research on direct effects of the media is no longer appropriate and is quite dated. In "Do the media harm children?: reflections on new approaches to an old problem", Livingstone (2007) critiqued on the typical nature of research on media and children which usually revolves around media effects and children's vulnerability to fall for it. Instead, she suggested that "research should seek to identify the range of factors that directly, and indirectly through interactions with each other, combine to explain particular social phenomena" (Livingstone, 2007: 8-9) and that "a more complex question should be formulated: in what way and to what extent do the media contribute, if at all, [...] (that) account for the social phenomenon under consideration" (Livingstone, 2007: 5). Hence, in planning my PhD research, I took Livingstone's advice and try to formulate my research questions which look at the phenomena from a different angle, instead of effects per se. I propose that looking at effects may be too simplistic and does not hold the key in understanding why and how the reactions came about. In

order to gauge how media texts may affect society and in particular young people, it is pivotal for researchers to attain a comprehensive view on their process of meaning making. Hence, my PhD research will look at the process of meaning making in decoding media texts. This has also somewhat set the path of my qualitative research.

## **1.6 Organization of the Research**

This thesis is not an attempt to generalise Malaysian audiences but aims to explore the process of making meanings and understand the process of negotiations young Malaysians go through from watching television in relations to the construction of their cultural identity.

Chapter 2 will touch on the theoretical framework which sets the plane of my research. Here, I will address two important issues revolving around my research which are adolescents' engagement with the media and the construction of cultural identity. With these in mind, I choose to situate my research as being in the centre of modernity. I also put emphasis on theories relating to audiences and construction of meanings because I would like to explore how adolescents construct meaning from the programmes they watch on television and determine if it contributes to the formation of cultural identity. With this regard, I find Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory fits my research. Hall maintained that messages which are distributed may not be decoded the same way by every decoder and that audiences are not passive.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, elaborates the methodologies I used in this research. Altogether, I utilised two methods, both of which were qualitative in nature. Firstly, I conducted a content analysis to find out and understand the televised contents that Malaysian adolescents are exposed to. The content analysis will be looking at occurrences of representation of local and foreign cultures in selected television programmes. The content analysis is a relevant method to be used because in order to unearth and discover the audiences' process of meaning making and how they engage themselves with television representations, I would need to find out what they are watching and what forms of culture are being represented in the programmes that they watch.



The next method utilised was the focus group discussion, held with two different groups of people who are adolescents living in urban and rural towns. Focus group discussions allow me to study the social processes of communication and generate discussion which will enable me to disclose the construction of cultural identity amongst adolescents especially because I am interested in the process of meaning making and not the effect of media on adolescents.

Chapter 4 and 5 are dedicated to the findings from this research from the content analysis and focus group discussions, respectively. In chapter four, I will firstly discuss the contents of Malaysian television programmes, based on a six day analysis of the television guide. This will be followed by an elaboration of the results obtained from a content analysis conducted on *Buletin Utama*, *Seram*, 999, *Remaja* and *In Trend*. The findings have been carefully analysed and are presented in five themes, namely; Distinguishing Portrayals of the Diverse Ethnicities, The Representations of Malays, The Representations of Chinese, Indians and other cultures, Malaysian and the Concept of 1Malaysia and Elements of Westernisation and Cultural Imperialism.

Chapter 5, meanwhile, will see me firstly elaborate my findings based from the discussions held with adolescents living in big, urban towns. This will be followed by the findings from discussions with young people from rural areas. I choose not to merge my findings and create a distinction between the two groups in order to easily chart out the similarities or differences they may possess. My elaborations will be based on five recurring themes which I have identified throughout the discussion. The themes are: adolescents' television watching habit and their relationship with it, adolescents' perception on Malays, adolescents' perception on people of other ethnicity like Chinese and Indians, adolescents' process of formulating thoughts and ideas and, adolescents' definition of themselves.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, is the concluding chapter in which I will interpret the relations between findings from both the content analysis and focus group discussion and relate it to the phase of modernity and the activities revolving around the decoding process. Here, I will emphasise on the contributions of my research to the academia and give suggestions for future possible research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter will focus on the theoretical aspects of my research in order to help set up its direction. Here, I will address two important issues revolving around my research which are adolescents' engagement with the media and the construction of cultural identity. With this in mind, I choose to situate my research as being in the centre of modernity. The concept of modernity is central to developing countries like Malaysia because it brings changes and uncertainty which lead to anxiety. For instance, in Malaysia's effort to be recognised as a developed country, new technologies and approach to communication have been introduced. As a result, the broadcasting industry was modernised, thus seeing Malaysia opening its skies to a variety of television providers including digital satellite television namely Astro. Astro features latest international programmes hence exposing the Malaysian society to modernisation especially from Western cultures, which may in turn, causes anxiety. This research questions how true is this and how will it affect local cultures and traditions?

In order to put things into perspective, I will firstly discuss the concept of modernity and how it is said to affect local cultures, especially those in the third world and developing countries. Then, I will elaborate on the role of mass media in times of modernity, concentrating on the mediation of representation and how it may influence audience in the process of meaning making. Lastly, I will touch on modernity and identity as I am interested to find out the challenges a diversified society may face in negotiating media texts, with the expansion of modernity, and globalisation, in particular. On the whole, I will be evaluating and elaborating on the concept of modernity in relations to the research that I partook.

I will also emphasise on theories relating to audience and construction of meanings because I would like to explore how adolescents construct meanings from the programmes they watch on television and gauge if it contributes to the formation of cultural identity. With this regard, I find Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory fits my research. Hall (1980: 168pp)

maintained that messages which are distributed may not be decoded the same way by every decoder and that audience are not passive. Barthes (in Hall, 2003) highlighted that messages disseminated through the media are made up of signs that are polysemic and can be interpreted differently by the public while Gergen (1999) showed that the encoder/decoder plays an active role when encoding/decoding messages and constructs meaning based on his or her experience and understanding. This is in line with my perspective on the viewer; active and reflexive, as aptly put by Morley (1986): the encoder/decoder plays an active role, filtering messages based on his or her own social class, culture, significant groups and personal experiences.

My discussion on encoding/decoding will encompass activities during the process of meaning making, regardless of pre-exposure, during exposure or after exposure. I will, however, start by discussing the concept of audience and active audience. This will be followed by the various activities which have the potential to influence the process of decoding television texts. These, in my opinion will help me understand better the decoding process and also how audience make meanings out of the texts that they are exposed to.

## **2.1 Modernity**

### **2.1.1 What is modernity?**

Modernity, according to Giddens (1991) is a phenomenon which was first established in post feudal Europe when the European countries were grasping to attain glory through industrialisation and capitalism. It marks the shift from feudalism and enlightenment to industrialisation and plurality of choices. During this time, a lot of people moved to urban areas to look for jobs and take up the challenging shift to modernisation and in turn left behind their hometowns and old routines which may include their beliefs and values. In light of this, Giddens (1991) and Tomlinson (1991) explained that the loss of tradition and declination of patriarchal family were caused by industrialisation and capitalism.

According to Siapera (2010: 5) modernity is a phase in which society began to question the rationality of tradition and spiritual belief and consequently they try to think and construct their belief based on reason and 'knowledge'. In an attempt to keep up with modernisation, many societies feel the need to change and evolve. Hence, people, especially those in the third world countries, are said to apply the new knowledge obtained from their observation and understanding of the Western modernity and emulate the West as it is thought that their<sup>20</sup> knowledge is far more superior than those of the third world countries. Societies in developing countries also sometimes produce this new knowledge by adapting new things into their usual routines in order to develop and change for the better. This is where media plays its importance. Media is the tool which relays information on how the modern West is and gives ideas to the developing world on the concept of modernity. As said by Siapera (2010: 71), in times of modernisation, people rely heavily on media for information, in attempts to build their 'knowledge'. Hence, in phases of modernity, mass media is an important entity in producing and distributing information.

Giddens (1991: 17pp) elaborated on the concept of modernity by comparing it to the pre-modern or traditional phase. According to Giddens, in pre-modern society, people are mostly

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<sup>20</sup> Their here refers to the West

illiterate and although there may be experts or people who are renowned in certain areas, their knowledge is not specialised and are too broad. However, the notion of modernity changes this as people are exposed to the importance of education, which in turn sees many being experts. Thus, there is a need for a specialised expert amongst the many experts, which sees various fields of specialisation being introduced. Since, the expert is considered as knowledgeable, what he or she says is considered as the 'truth' and is followed by many. This, in turn makes regularised control easier and people became bounded with rules and monitoring systems which were abided by global regulations.

The various fields of specialisation also automatically mean that society is exposed to more choices. Giddens (1991: 82pp) maintained that plurality of choices enables individuals to embrace and lead to various lifestyles and change their ideals. It affects decision making, how one sees the future and appearance which in turn affects the construction of identity. Previously, in the pre-modernity phase, the society relies a lot on religion and hierarchy, so much so that their actions were usually predetermined by customs and traditions. But, in modernity, there are a lot of things which one has to negotiate in his or her attempt to construct his or her identity. As aptly put by Giddens (1991: 14) "Modernity is a post-traditional order in which the question, "How shall I live?" has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat – and many other things – as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity."

Tomlinson (1991: 136) opined that the term modernity is ambiguous because although it may be used to describe the present, the "shift to modernity" has taken place throughout history, especially in relations to European history. So, what is modernity? Tomlinson (1991: 59) commented that there are arguments which say in order for modernity to happen; traditions have to be left behind. In a way, culture can be seen as a victim of modernity as it has to vanish in order to make way for new things. But, ultimately, it is human who made the choice to banish culture in order to develop to what is deemed as the better as pertinently said by Tomlinson (1991: 141): "Cultures are 'condemned to modernity' not simply by the 'structural' process of economic development, but by the human process of *self-development*."

Gellner (2006: xxpp) meanwhile expressed that modernisation creates a society which is bounded by a common way of doing things and not by tradition, religion or beliefs. The loss of tradition and special bond that one usually has with his community is replaced with the feeling of togetherness which is inculcated mainly through standardised education and a common way of doing things. How does Malaysia fit into this picture?

In this term, the idea of 1Malaysia could be seen as the government's attempt to create a modernised society. As stated in the 1Malaysia booklet, 1Malaysia is an important concept in order to build a strong, stable and united country which is deemed important in order to achieve the status of a developed country. 1Malaysia emphasises on creating national unity through the articulation of values which can be practised by the diverse and multicultural society in Malaysia. Some of the values include perseverance, a culture of excellence, acceptance, loyalty, education, humility, integrity, and meritocracy. However, Malaysia's concept of modernisation is quite unique as it still tries to persevere local traditions and cultures as stated in the 1Malaysia concept: the purpose is not to build national identity, but unity through the uniqueness of the different cultural identities.

The term modernity is also frequently used to describe the fate of a third world country that is seen as needing to develop to be at par with modern and developed country. Hence, it was suggested by Tomlinson (1991) that one way to ensure a successful embrace of modernity is for the underdeveloped country to emulate the west. But it must be pointed out that some third world countries and Malaysia in particular, does not possess the same values and beliefs as developed countries. For instance, a developed country such as the United States is more individual as opposed to Malaysia's collectivistic culture. Also, religion plays a big role in Malaysia, especially Islam which holds the position as the official religion. Will emulating developed country really be the answer in order to be developed? If so, how will this affect the local culture and traditions?

### 2.1.2 Modernity and culture

In *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The experience of Modernity*, Berman (1988: 232) commented that society in the third world are made to believe that in order to be developed, they must embrace modernity and let go of traditions. This is because, it is considered that the West which is deemed as successful have imposed that in order to be successful and developed, one has to leave behind traditions. How true is it? Tomlinson (1991) in his book *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* mentioned that for some scholars, modernity means a situation when a society, especially the underdeveloped, lives under capitalistic influence and that they are highly influenced by the West. However, to say that means we are not taking into consideration how people are able to make their own decision. As aptly said by Tomlinson (1991:161), culture is never 'fate' but always, ultimately a decision. In this case, individuals decide what to include and not to include in their life so whatever happens to culture in modernity is not fate but is a result of human decision. How does this relate to the notion of the imposition of culture from the West to other underdeveloped countries?

Giddens (1991: 21pp) believed that globalisation plays a big role in the changes of how cultures are practised in times of modernity. He suggested that, new technologies and developments have encouraged people to venture out of their comfort zone and sometimes move to a different state, country or even continent. On one hand, in terms of culture, mobility makes it possible for traditional activities to be practised at a place considered foreign and for other people to get to know the diverse cultures around the world. However, on the other hand, Giddens (1991: 146) pointed out that mobility could also be the reason why a lot of traditions – including rituals – to be left behind. This is probably because when one wishes to practice his/her cultural traditions at a new place, he or she is free to include what he or she wants and leave out what he or she dislikes, as one is not restricted by the rules and regulations pertaining to culture, like how he or she would be when he/she is at his or her place of origin. In my opinion, this is the way for those who are in a diaspora to adapt and cope with a new place. When relating it to modernity, adjusting traditions, beliefs and values to one's personal needs can be seen as a coping and adapting mechanism.

Changes in traditions in times of globalisation, according to Tomlinson (1991) and Gellner (2006) could also lead to a united community, because of an imagined community. How so? In place of the diverse cultural practices, a national 'culture' is envisioned, in order to create unity. This 'imagined community' will enable people of different races to feel like they belong in a foreign place, especially in times of globalisation, in which immigration is rampant.

The creation of a more homogenised society through nationalism is in line with Giddens' (1991: 27pp) opinion. In pre-modern times, societies are culturally diversified, but this, according to Giddens changed in late modernity. Society becomes "a 'we', facing problems and opportunities where there are no 'others'" (Giddens, 1991: 27). He also stated that: "Mediation of information enables us to know each other and also promote a singular way of great life" (p.27). Does unity and the coming together of people as a 'we' and the promotion of a 'singular way of great life' mean modernity causes homogenisation as there is no 'other'? I find it contradicting to the notion that modernity means embracing the ideals of the West, which emphasises on individualisation and fluidity of identity because if we are unique and different, it is impossible to have the notion of no 'other'.

Giddens (1991: 195pp) also expressed the possibility that religion would be a thing of the past with the expansion of modern institutions. How would this affect countries which are on the path of development like Malaysia? In Malaysia, religion is very much related to culture, especially the Malay culture. Islam plays a pivotal role in the construction of a Malay cultural identity. How would modernisation fit into this? Would this mean the Malays, who are constitutionally defined as being Muslim, would turn to secularism and atheism? Although religion involves religious ceremony which may look like it is based on tradition rather than faith, it should not be taken lightly, because for countries like Malaysia, culture is deeply rooted to religion. This brings me to question if Malaysia would fall under the so-said predicament of modernity: traditions left behind to make way for development and modernisation.

With this regard, Tomlinson (1991: 165) said that a cultural practice's survival depends on oneself and that sometimes; culture may face some form of alteration, but still holds the same meaning. Undeniably, some aspects of culture are ingrained in oneself since young while others



are made known gradually through exposure in the media and socialisation. The various choices one has mean that there are a lot of things for one to consider in his attempt to construct his cultural identity, especially in times of modernity. Hence, although one may be exposed to more aspects or elements from the West, in his way to become more developed and modernised, it does not mean that he does not have a choice in determining what to follow and what to leave out.

Tomlinson (1991: 165) also pointed out that the notion of a weakened culture is a result of “the failure of a collective will to generate shared narratives of meaning and orientation”. This is because in order for something to be considered as culture, it has to be agreed by a group of people. But, globalisation and cultural imperialism especially, sometimes could make it difficult for a group of people from the same ethnicity, for instance, to agree on traditions, values and beliefs which can be considered as belonging to their culture. This is because globalisation has distanced (Giddens, 1991: 22) and exposed societies to multiple representations. However, as Tomlinson (1991: 162) stated that the West cannot be fully blamed for changes in traditions because the West cannot possibly predict and determine how their cultural products are accepted by the underdeveloped country. As the cultural products are polysemic, it will be impossible to generalise how a particular society would interpret a particular text. For a third world country like Malaysia, the exposure to different values is sometimes considered as *budaya kuning*<sup>21</sup> and bad (Hashim Bedu et al., 2008). I see this as a reflection of the government's anxiety in seeing how the citizens react to some elements of the ‘West’ which are exposed through television, fearing that the uniqueness of each culture will disintegrate.

Undeniably, there is the notion of essentialism when describing a specific ethnicity or members of a society as possessing similar beliefs and traditions. Why is there a problem in describing a specific ethnicity, like Malay for instance, as having a unique and distinct trait? By not essentialising, the uniqueness of a culture would be difficult to be appreciated. Not only would that, de-essentialising mean everyone is practising something similar and this creates homogeneity. Is homogeneity the epitome of modernisation? Why should unique and distinct

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<sup>21</sup> *Budaya Kuning* or Yellow Culture is a term used when talking about Western cultures and has a bad connotation.

traits of an ethnic be washed off or forgotten? Admittedly, there may be some changes or adaptation of how the cultures are being practised in times of modernity but this does not mean that the fundamental beliefs and values are discounted. This is the reason why I think a research on the construction of cultural identity is of dire importance, to gauge how Malaysians fare in times of modernity.

### **2.1.3 Modernity and mass media**

The development and expansion of modern institutions were directly bound up with the tremendous increase in “the mediation of experience which these communication forms brought in their train,” (Giddens, 1991: 24). This statement by Giddens (1991) expressed how media is increasingly becoming an important tool of mediation and representation. Needless to say, the introduction and development of new technologies in the phase of modernity has boomed the media industry and provided society with vast choices in terms of media usage. Following Baudrillard (1981), the availability of images around us acts as simulacra which enable us to find out and experience cultures which are foreign and situated far away.

What is worrying is that the portrayals may not necessarily depict reality and can sometimes actually deconstruct reality for the viewers (Giddens, 1991: 43). Thompson (1995: 16pp) argued that the representation of cultures through the media can only be seen from the point of views of those who are in control of the media. Thompson also maintained that it is through the production of media messages by those in control that traditions are moved from its original context, resignified and attached to different meanings or ‘remoored’, as they get to select only what is important to them. How then, can a fair representation of the diverse cultures on the media be ensured of? Surely, the inappropriateness of culture, according to the producers’ whim and fancy may take away its true meaning. What happens when it is constantly replayed on television? If it is indeed widely disseminated, would it be a cause of concern, in terms of how stereotypes are conjured? How then, can the feeling of unity be inculcated?

According to Hobsbawm (1983), an invented tradition is the rope that binds people across various ethnicities together. However, Siapera (2010: 20) noted that “invented traditions

must be replayed and disseminated regularly across the nation if they are to take hold". Taking this into account, media can become an important tool for the constant replication of invented traditions so that it can become ingrained in oneself. Invented traditions are traditions that can be practised by all walks of life, regardless of ethnicity and background. My question is: by replaying the invented traditions, does this mean that unique cultural aspects would be less prominent on the media, and in particular, television? Is this also the reason why modernity is almost always related to the loss of traditions? Trying to create unity is of course important, especially to countries that are trying to be developed but should this be done at the expense of not prioritising local cultures?

Representation in the media is said to allow people to imagine things that they are not familiar with, adapt into a community and create unity. For instance, when one immigrates to a different country, one may not be familiar with the local customs and traditions. However, he or she can be better informed through mediation of information from the media, which can help them imagine a common origin and create a feeling of belongingness (Giddens, 1991). The representations are also pivotal in creating unity and understanding amongst societies with diverse cultures. This concept is quite creative because by imagining a community, we can imagine for a community which is diverse but at the same time swelling with nationalistic pride and not necessarily one that is modern but prioritises development over the preservation of culture. Thus, media certainly carries a lot of weight. My question is, what role do the Malaysian media play in ensuring the concept of 1Malaysia which is unity in diversity reaches its objective?

On top of that, there is also the concern of how media messages may influence the construction of thoughts and ideas on self and things around them. Thompson (1995: 33) suggested that media transformed social interaction because the way one constructs his or her thoughts is usually based on symbols or information encountered in the media. Not only that, Thompson also believed that media could influence how one constructs identity. This is more so because nowadays, day to day interactions take place in a media saturated world or as pointed out by Siapera (2010: 7) "all these encounters are more or less mediated that is, not determined, but interactively (or for some dialectically) influenced by the dynamic associated with the media."

As stressed by Giddens (1991), soap operas can suggest the models for construction of identity and “participates directly in processes of the continuous reshaping of day-to-day life” (p. 199). But, he was quick to point out that response to the mediation cannot be assessed purely based on the content of the media text because not everyone will decode meanings the same way. Hence, the role of audience should not be taken lightly. They are active and can reject any meanings of what they see on television or being exposed in the media. As aptly pointed out by Giddens (1991, 188): “All individuals actively, although by no means always consciously, selectively incorporate many elements of mediated experience into their day-to-day conduct. This is never a random or a passive process.” Thus, it can be said, that audience, in this case, are active in their engagement with the media. If so, why is there a notion that modernity would lead to a loss of traditions? If everybody can interpret media messages in their own way, tradition then can still be upheld. But, how do audience make meanings of what they are exposed to? Thus, I find it imperative that an empirical study be conducted in order to understand the phenomena of meaning making, especially in relations to the construction of cultural identity.

#### **2.1.4 Modernity and the construction of identity**

“What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour.” (Giddens, 1991: 70)

How is identity constructed in times of modernity? According to Giddens (1991: 15pp), the increase of surveillance and transformations of institutions have in a way created crises in a society. This is because, although people are undeniably exposed to plurality of choices, like the abundant channels and programmes on television which they can refer to in the process of identity construction, there is the subconscious need to behave, react and possess characteristics of how they are expected to be. Giddens (1991: 58) claimed that this stemmed from the feeling of being watched by others and the need to conform to society. People feel safe when they feel that

they lead life the 'normal' way. What is considered 'normal'? For Giddens (1991: 58), normalcy means conforming to the daily routines which others around us think is 'normal'. Hence, although one may be exposed to various forms of mediation and representation, this form of 'control' would cause anxiety to the society. In this case, traditions such as rituals is said to be able to give people a sense of stability. The practice of rituals can help people fit in. But, it was also said that modernity is often coupled with the loss of tradition.

This can explain why there is the need to 'invent' new traditions in order to keep people calm and stable. People are made to believe that behaving or reacting a certain way is the common denominator that can bring people together, which is similar to the notion of creating a national identity. But, the interesting thing about Malaysia is that the concept of 1Malaysia strives to create unity while acknowledging the importance of each and every culture's traditions, values and beliefs, and not an attempt to create national identity. In the light of this, 1Malaysia can be seen as Malaysia's reflexive project in coming face to face with modernity.

Giddens (1991: 180) said that reaction to modernity is a reflexive project. Although, humans are creatures of habit because modernity gives them the feeling of being secure, according to Giddens (1991) added that modernity and the plurality of choices might just change that notion. The anxiety, in response to modernity, may change people's habit, tradition or values. In this case, although one may be deeply rooted to his or her tradition has people around him or her that are embracing modernity by placing priority on values which may not be familiar, he or she might just conform to the society in order to fit in. So, although the society might be aware of traditional practices such as rituals, one would opt to leave it out in order to be part of the developing society. This generalisation is made especially with regards to the third world and developing countries. How far is this true for Malaysia?

Tomlinson (1991) meanwhile, opined that modernity is said to be influenced by Western thoughts because they are in control of the world market and influences the belief of how a country should be like in order to embrace modernity. This indirectly means that the construction of beliefs and values are influenced by Western thoughts. He said the third world countries have "no autonomy at the level of the social imaginary" (1991: 162) which leads me to believe that third

world countries are seen as helpless and cannot fend for themselves and are shadowed by the power of the West.

Modernity and being surrounded by globalising influences and global transformation ensure that it would be difficult for one to live in solitude and without the influence of others. As said by Giddens (1991: 184), "[...] no one can easily defend a secure 'local life' set off from larger social systems and organisations. Achieving control over change, in respect of lifestyle, demands an engagement with the outer social world rather than a retreat from it." In other words, one's surrounding is said to contribute to his or her construction of identity. The 'power' does not merely consist of physical attributes like colonisation or invasion but instead includes cultural products which may be inscribed with ideologies like film and television programmes which are imported from the West. Herbert Schiller (1969) in *Mass Communication and American Empire* suggested that the United States maintains its power not through army or invasion but through cultural products such as television, radio and film.

This is worrying because mediated experience especially, such as television watching is said to help shape and alter one's identity (Giddens, 1991) because identity does not magically appear on its own but is "something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens, 1991: 52). In Malaysia, the expansion of the media industry has seen an influx of foreign programmes being aired on local television. Does this mean Malaysians are silently being imperialised by the 'West'? Critiques by scholars such as Jeremy Turnstall (2007) on cultural imperialism stated that the United States does not control the flow of media and that media flows are more complex and he thanked the flourishing media industries in Hong Kong, India (Bollywood) and Japan. However, for Malaysia, and especially those of Malay ethnicities, imported programmes from other Asian countries still mean that they are exposed to 'foreign' cultures. How are these representations from watching the programmes negotiated and how do they influence their identity construction process?

In my opinion, the plurality of choices which comes with modernity has exposed a society with various symbols and representations which may contribute to the construction of one's identity. Engagement with these symbols and representations, will surely involve a complex

negotiation process. In particular, I am interested to gauge their engagement with the plurality of choices available on television and how it is relevant in the construction of their cultural identity.

I believe, understanding the consequence modernity has on culture requires one to learn about the process of construction of cultural identity. Giddens (1991: 186) pointed out that the conditions of modernity is said to lead to the creation of new identity. He aptly put it: "A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions." Learning how and if exposures to television representations constructs cultural identity is one way to achieve an understanding of the consequences of modernity to local cultures and traditions. Thus, it is only right if a study on audience reception be conducted. The theory which fits my study in the aspect of audience reception is Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory which will be discussed in the next section.

## **2.2 Encoding and Decoding**

### **2.2.1 Audience**

The term audience, according to McQuail (1997: 2) is abstract and ambiguous. It holds different meanings and refers to one who reads, views or listens to media channels. Hence the term audience is applicable to everyone that is engaged with the media, regardless of the manner in which they are engaged. As an example, someone who watches a television programme broadcasted by a satellite channel and a user of the internet, are both considered audience. This, according to McQuail is problematic because it fails to clearly elaborate the nature of audience, whom, he opined, are “products of social contexts [...] and a response to a particular pattern of media provision” (1997: 2). Thus, how do we clearly define audience?

Audience research is an emerging field and there are a lot of theories and empirical studies which try to describe audience by unveiling the effects of media on audience and how audience use media. Basically, there are two opposing concepts of audience, the active and passive audience. Theories from the perspective of the Marxist ‘Frankfurt School’ pictures audience as passive. Adorno in the *Prologue to Television* (1953: 49pp) argued that television programmes are products of the culture industry and is an instrument used to maintain hegemony, that is by disseminating ideologies in order to condition the masses, maintain status-quo and re-establish and reinforce behaviour which complies with the established orders. As masses or people who watch television are considered as consumers in the culture industry; are docile and contented, they accept the messages imparted without questions and see what is broadcasted as reality, despite it having stereotypical contents. He also claimed in *Television as ideology* (1953: 59pp) that works of art, which include television, do not distinctly communicate their actual content and have ‘hidden messages’ (which can sometimes contradict the explicit message) that docile audience passively accept as natural. He argued that the same contents are repeatedly shown on television and that caused the messages presented to be accepted as reality and the norm by viewers. The illustration painted by Adorno (1953), clearly puts audience in a passive, powerless and vulnerable spot, and assumes that audience are easily manipulated, homogenous, too accepting and docile. McQuail (1997: 22) pointed out that passivity is said to



potentially cause inactive recreation, discrimination and hinders social development and education.

At the other end, is the view that audiences are active, selective, rational and individualistic. There are numerous empirical evidences which point out that viewing television is a complicated experience. Notable findings by David Morley in the *Nationwide Audience* (1980), Ien Ang's research on the readings of *Dallas* (1985) and Katz and Liebes' cross cultural reading of *Dallas* (1990) show vividly the process that one has to go through in order to make sense of the television programme. Katz (Blumler and Katz, 1974) believed that audience are active and are able to reject, use or play with media meanings as they choose in order to be gratified. They are said to 'seek information that will support their beliefs and practices and avoid information that challenges them' (Katz, 1968: 795). Hall, in his encoding/decoding model (1980: 128pp) strongly believed that audience are active and he is concerned with the ways audience decode media texts in regards to different ideological positions, by which cultural order is opposed or accepted.

Fiske (1989: 57), meanwhile, noted that audience could make use of the products of cultural industry, such as television programmes, for their own benefit. He argued that the notion of audience as passive and docile should be reconsidered as he rationalised that audience are able to produce their own meanings and pleasures. He maintained that different people make different meaning of what they watch and that they tend to perceive the programmes according to their culture and 'rewrite' the programmes according to what they think should happen or fit their own perspective and suggested that all texts are polysemic, hence enabling various interpretations.

Since messages in the media could be read in various and numerous different ways, Sonia Livingstone (2007: 5) noted the importance of a researcher to investigate the activities of actual audience in order to find out how audience make sense of what they watch or experience from the media exposure. This section is an attempt to elaborate audience activity with regards to their negotiation with the media. Through this, I aim to find out how messages are decoded meaningfully.

### 2.2.2 The active audience

Arguments about active audience never ceased to end. According to Levy (1983:109), the term active audience “emphasizes the voluntary and selective nature of interaction between audience and mass media”. In discussing about the concept of active audience, my interest lies in the encoding/ decoding model which was developed by Hall (1980). Hall (1980: 171pp) maintained that audience are active in decoding messages but he was concerned with the class struggle faced by audience in decoding messages, particularly in the media. He argued that audiences are able to decode messages and make sense of the messages in three ways: within the dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated or oppositional code.

Hall (1980: 171) further elaborated that in the dominant-hegemonic position, people who accepted the encoded message would believe within the taken-for-granted hegemonic ideology. They are said to accept contents which are encoded as natural and are not aware of the alternative views and see it as being invisible. However, Morley (1980) in his *Nationwide Audience* study found that people are fully aware of alternative opinions, even when they agree with the encoded ideas presented, which are said to be within the hegemonic ideology. Although Morley (1980) started out the study by initially agreeing with Hall's (1980) idea, in which viewers who agree with the encoded messages are sealed off in their own cultural space and are unaware with values and definitions offered by others; he found that the audience are indeed very aware of the alternative views, which television has excluded from its broadcast. Morley (1980) pointed out that there is a preferring mechanism within the viewers in which they make decisions based on what they feel and how they prefer it to be as opposed to the taken-for-granted hegemonic position which sees the ideas as being naturally right. Fiske (1987: 16) also believed that preferred meaning is inherent in every message. Meanwhile Philo (2008: 540) opined that when new information is available, people are exposed to new ideas. With this, the legitimacy of certain positions can be dramatically affected by the context in which they are understood and the information given. So, what happens to the people that Hall (1980) said are living within the

hegemonic ideology? The consequences to when these people get alternative information was not clearly elaborated by Hall.

The negotiated position meanwhile is a mixture of the dominant-hegemonic position and the oppositional elements. Viewers may accept the hegemonic viewpoint but seek particular exceptions in terms of their own belief and behaviour. Hence, the decisions that they make are partly based on their own beliefs, culture and behaviour.

What I find interesting is, culture is said to be an important element in determining the way one decodes a message. For instance, an oppositional reading is said to be caused by people who are exposed to messages which are different from what is considered natural to them and they reject the idea because it is contrary to their belief and values. However, Philo (2008: 537) criticised this as he found that even people of the same culture can produce different readings of the same message. Hence, he suggested that audience, regardless of their similar or different cultural backgrounds, are actually able to understand and be aware of the encoded meaning, but merely decoded it in different ways based on their own preference.

In my point of view, if culture cannot be regarded as fundamental in determining how messages from the media are negotiated, it would be beneficial to focus on audience activity to explain how audience make sense of the encoded messages and decode it. Philo (2008: 541) noted that the encoding/decoding model misses important dimensions of audience activity and underestimates the power of media in shaping taken for granted beliefs.

Murphy (2005: 169), meanwhile, noted that most work following the encoding/decoding model investigate audience reception of connotative meanings as part of the broader project of studying the ritual or symbolic functions of cultural communication, despite Hall's (1980: 133) remark that an audience study on both the denotative and connotative level would represent "the different levels at which ideologies and discourses intersect". Murphy (2005) suggested that in order to find out how audience make sense of what they watch and look at, viewers should be analysed in the context that is relevant to one's research questions. But first, it is important to understand the concept of activity in relations to the moments of reception.

Fiske (1989: 74) noted that an effective way to determine how semiotic differences are produced and circulated sub-culturally is to pay attention to the moments of reception. This means, researchers should look at how audiences interact with the media and the activities that goes on in their process of negotiation because only then can the way meanings are produced sub-culturally be understood. Hence, to understand how audiences make meanings, it is imperative for one to look at the activities surrounding the audience. Following that, I will like to discuss further on the concept of audience activity as elaborated by other scholars, in hopes to illustrate the processes of decoding and audience's attempt to make meaning of the media, especially television.

### **2.2.3 Audience and Activity**

The concept of audience activity is an important notion in the users and gratifications theory. According to Blumler (1979: 202), audience in the users and gratifications approach are said to be active and are able to reject, use or play with media meanings as they choose in order to be gratified. In an effort to elaborate how active the audience are, researchers and scholars has constructed several variables with regards to audience activity which they found to contribute towards the process of meaning making. Admittedly, although both the users and gratifications theory and the encoding/decoding model assume that audience are active and that television watching is a social practice, they do posses some differences.

Following a cultural studies approach, the encoding/ decoding model is more interested in understanding media consumption as a site of cultural struggle while the users and gratification theory generally operates within a liberal pluralist conception of society where individuals are seen as ideally free and unhindered by external powers. However, keeping an open mind, the notion of audience activity which is used as variables and constructs in the users and gratifications theory, in my opinion can also help clarify and illustrate audience activity in the encoding/ decoding model.

## **2.3 The concept of Activity**

Audience activity, opined Levy (1983: 114) is best conceptualised as a range of possible orientations to the communication process. Biocca (1988) in an article has reviewed the different meanings and concepts of audience activity. He concluded that there are five different versions which are selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality, resistance to influence and involvement. Fiske (1989) meanwhile had also highlighted the concept of activity which includes construction of cultural category and orality.

### **2.3.1 Selectivity**

The construction of meanings, noted Livingstone (2000: 178), depends on selectivity in exposure and on interpretation of meanings. Both processes are influenced by various resources in the audience's life. Selectivity, as reviewed by Biocca (1988: 53) is related to the frequency of media usage. An active audience is said to be more discerning, choosy and exercise discrimination when choosing media content that he or she wants to be engaged with. That means, the less he is exposed to the media, the more selective and active he is. Although I slightly disagreed with McQuails (1997: 59) point, in which he said that it is ridiculous to consider media avoidance as a sign of activity, he has rightfully said that very low levels of media use are not necessarily the result of keen discrimination. My argument is that a researcher must look at the reason why the media is avoided. If the reason to why the particular media is avoided is the lack of access to the media, it hardly constitutes as being discerning because it was not a choice the audience has. However, if he chooses not to be exposed, despite knowing what shows are being broadcasted on television for instance, then, it can be said that he is being selective. This, in my opinion, means that he is making a choice to avoid the media, hence, being selective and active. In this day and age, it is easy and not impossible to get hold of information about a show, play or movie from reviews on the internet, magazines, newspaper and various other sources. Hence, avoiding the media because they prefer to do so after knowing the choices available can be construed as being active.

It was also pointed out in Biocca's (1988: 58) review that if one is heavily exposed to the media, he or she is considered an inactive audience as he or she is not in a discerning and selective position. However, in this case, I think that being heavily exposed to the media means audience have to be more selective, in terms of which type of medium to use, and the programmes that they want to be engaged with. Furthermore, exposure to the media would mean a higher need to negotiate the media in the process of meaning making.

Levy (1983: 109) suggested that audience activity might be better conceptualised as a variable construct. He believed that different types of activity may be associated with particular phases of the communication process. As aptly said by Perse and Rubin (1988: 369), people are differentially selective and goal directed at different times. In a cross tabulation study result, Levy (1983: 110) linked selectivity to the pre-exposure phase. Audience are said to choose what to watch based on needs and desires. Fiske (1987: 75) also highlighted the important role of selecting what to watch at home which he related to culture of the home and power. For instance, in a household with only one television set, there will usually be one person who decides what everybody is going to watch. If the viewer had to watch the programme because he was not given an opportunity to decide what he preferred, does that mean he or she is not being active? This phenomenon was described by Levy (1983: 112) as being a passive viewer. However, he explained that in some cases, individuals may be passive in the first stages of communication sequence (as in the case of not being able to choose what to watch on television), but would use the acquired information from their supposedly passive viewing at a much later stage. The fact that they are watching it, despite not being able to choose the channel, shows that they made a conscious choice. In other words, they are being selective and active in their choices.

McQuail (1997: 60) said that selectivity is a weak notion of activity as it sometimes can just be a response to a large media option. When one thinks about it, why did he consider it weak? Wouldn't a large media option means that one has to be more selective? If an array of options is made available, why does one choose that particular option? Does it have to do with one's background or experience? Will it affect one's way they make meaning of signs available around them? My point is, one can still be considered an active audience despite being a

frequent media user or not. It all depends on how one uses the media which is also related to the second concept of activity highlighted by Biocca (1988) in his review, utilitarianism.

### **2.3.2 Utilitarianism**

According to Biocca (1988: 53), theorists use the concept of utilitarianism to emphasise the utility of the process of choice. The rationality of one particular media use is based on an expectation to utilise whatever is obtained in the engagement. For instance, if one expects to be entertained or informed in his or her engagement with the media, he or she can be considered as active. The concept of utility is related to Levy's (1983: 113) explanation on post-exposure activity. He explained that in the post-exposure phase, audiences negotiate with the text with an expectation to utilise the information gained from the interaction. What happens when a viewer consciously choose to be exposed to a form of media without having specific intentions? Is he or she regarded as active or passive? And, what if the interaction process with the media produces an outcome, which is unexpected by the user itself?

With this regard, McQuail (1997) pointed out that direct response, as a result of media negotiation, has been left out by many theorists when discussing audience activity. "Critical reflection on media experience, whether openly expressed in feedback or not, is another example of audience activity" (McQuail, 1997: 61). Direct response also reflects how audience use the information garnered from media exposure. In other words, they utilise the information given and give a response to it and making the choice to utilize the media is in itself an activity. The question now is how is utilitarianism different from intentionality?

### **2.3.3 Intentionality**

Intentionality is a concept of activity which describes an active audience as one who is engaged in active cognitive processing of incoming information and experience. Biocca (1988: 60) in his review said that when describing processing information as being part of audience activity, active audience theorist such as Levy (1983: 112) pointed out that individuals possess

different levels of attention and involvement. In other words, the concept emphasises the more cognitive dimensions of activity in which media usage is said to be driven by one's intention.

Patterns of consumption is said to reflect the audience's personality, motivation and individual processing structure (Biocca, 1988; Rubin 1993). It was understood that if a viewer subscribes to particular television channel or magazine, he or she is construed as an active viewer. By looking at what he or she subscribes to, one can probably guess the likes and dislikes and also as said by Biocca (1988: 69), the viewer's personality. A decoding process could be seen in many studies (Morley, 1980; Livingstone, 2002), whereby audience were asked to describe the nature of their audience consumption such as how long they spend watching television and on what channels they are tuned to. From the information gained, researchers try to relate audience's viewing habit to the process of meaning making.

#### **2.3.4 Resistance to Influence**

At some points of audience's interaction with the media, these active audience are said to be able to be resistant to influence. The concept of activity here, according to McQuail (1997) refers to their ability to set limits on what they want to accept in the process of negotiation. Simply said, "viewers remain in control and unaffected, except as determined by personal choice" (McQuail 1997: 60). According to Biocca (1988: 71), resistance to influence operates as a kind of objective in which audience limits, influences and control the effects of media.

In some ways, the resistance to influence concept suggests that audience are ideally free and unhindered by natural powers – a concept passionately believed by the users and gratifications theory. But, it can also be interpreted as having the competency to resist influences (which are not solely contributed to different cultural values), despite being exposed to what is seemed as a hegemonic ideology through the media. The choice to decode messages entirely depends on the specific audience and since they are active, attributing their willingness to decode the messages to the hegemonic ideology or to oppose to the messages because of the different cultural beliefs and values, as believed by in the encoding/decoding model, may be a little too condescending.



In the encoding/decoding model, Hall (1980: 172) had suggested that one of the ways audience can decode messages is in the opposing stance. He elaborated that this opposing reading of messages is mainly contributed by different cultural background, beliefs and values which are encoded in the messages exposed to the audience. Now, in the specific concept of 'resistance to influence', the audience are envisaged as putting the limit to what they want to accept by themselves, decide what they would believe in and are in control of the effects of the media without specifically attributing cultural differences as the contributing factor. Simply put, audiences are in control of their preferences.

Philo (2008: 537pp) believed that Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding approach should consider the conditions under which people accept or reject an idea. He maintained that knowing a range of alternative view does not automatically mean an audience would reject an idea encoded by the media. Hence, resistance to the media, may be a form of activity which influences one's decoding processes but it is imperative that researchers look at the condition in which the idea is accepted or rejected and not put the blame solely on cultural differences.

### **2.3.5 Involvement**

Involvement refers to an activity in which audience are immersed and engrossed in their media interaction and experience. According to Biocca (1988: 53), it could also be called the affective arousal, in which audience are easily excited and are caught up with the media which Zillman (1980) coincidentally saw relevant to explaining the appeal of entertainment and uses of media for "mood control". Rubin (1993: 102) meanwhile noted that "[...] involvement is a personal experience during message reception that reflects participation, attention and emotion".

One's involvement can be indicated by the attention given during message reception. For instance, some viewers may get caught up in the action of the drama and some may even identify with the television characters. Others are involved in what Levy (1983: 112) labeled as parasocial activity. He related it to audience's attempt to make sense of what they are watching to the extent that sometimes, when they are too caught up in the drama, they can interact with the

programmes by talking back to the character or announcer on television, giving advice or shouting to warn the character of an incoming villain.

Levy (1983: 113) also noted that there seem to be a psychological involvement during exposure to the media. People are somewhat comforted with the presence of media, especially those who live alone or have no one to interact with. Sometimes, television can serve as a background noise, merely switched on to accompany the lonesome individual. Rubin (1993: 99) concurred with Levy's (1983) opinion and added "the extent of audience activeness depends on the social context and potential for interpersonal interaction, including such elements as mobility and loneliness."

My question is, in the cases where television or media serves as 'background noise', should this type of involvement be seen as an activity? Granted, they can listen to the programme but to what extent are they absorbing the information diffused? Firstly, there should be a distinction on how involved an audience is during his or her media exposure. As aptly said by Rubin (1993: 102), one should not assume that an involved viewer is a heavy viewer. He maintained that the amount of time spend on television does not reflect activity. Hence, even though an audience is listening to the television while doing his or her work and is exposed to it most of the time, it does not necessarily indicate activity because the level of involvement may be low.

### **2.3.6 Construction of cultural category**

One of the activities highlighted by Fiske (1989: 65) in process of negotiating meanings is the construction of cultural category. The cultural category could be seen as a tool to think about what audiences are being exposed to. This is especially pertinent in countries which are heavily exposed to foreign programmes, such as third world countries because some contents which they are being exposed to is culturally distinct from their local beliefs and values. By constructing a cultural category, audiences are able to provide their own understanding of the texts with accordance to their beliefs and values. This sometimes leads to a 'rewriting' of the story and trying to fit what they believe in to the story line.

For instance, Katz and Liebes (1990) in their cross cultural study of *Dallas* found that the Arab and Moroccan Jew respondents always imagining happy endings and tell the story as if it were in an inevitable progression which is from sad beginnings to happy endings. The Russian Jews meanwhile see *Dallas* as a capitalist propaganda whose messages serve hegemonic interest of the producers or Americans. These different decodings by audience in Israel on a popular American television show demonstrate how they inserted meanings from their social surroundings to the meanings of the programmes, ensuring a 'fit' between them. As aptly said by Fiske (1989: 540), "Without the ability to be the producers of their own culture, the makers of their own meaning and pleasures, it would be difficult for a local to accept foreign programmes."

Hodge and Tripp (1986: 184) were also concerned with how audiences make meaning of the media out of their social experiences. In their research on school children's readings of the soap opera *Prisoner*, they discovered that the school children love the show because they felt that school life which is with strict rules and teachers is comparable with prison life which is with strict rules and wardens. Relating this to what Fiske (1989: 65pp) asserted, it could be said that constructing cultural category is an activity in the process of meaning making which can help explains how meanings are made by active reading of an audience.

### **2.3.7 Orality**

In *Television Culture*, Fiske (1987: 178) disclosed that reading television text is a process of negotiation between what is already embedded in the audience's belief system and the one proposed by the text itself. In this process of negotiation, the act of talking about the show has somewhat proved to be an important activity, in which audience attempt to make meaning. This was attested by Fiske and Hartley (2003: 117) when they maintained that oral logic is an activity which suggests television meanings are arrived through devices of spoken discourse fused with visual image.

Having conversations while watching television is an activity which helps to shape an understanding of what audience's watch. For instance, in Katz and Liebes cross cultural study of *Dallas* (1990: 91), they found that conversational activities aid in interpretation and evaluation of

the programme. It offers help to group members who need an explanation on why something has happened in a certain way. Undoubtedly, there are competing interpretations, even within people of similar cultural groups, but through conversations while watching the show, audience can easily be influenced to understand it in other people's perspectives. Hence, sometimes, an understanding of a show is an outcome of conversation induced by watching the show.

Besides that, the act of gossiping is also an activity which shows active engagement with the issues portrayed in the programmes watched. By talking about it, it illustrates the audience's desire to read the program in a way that makes them relevant to their lives. According to Fiske (1987), gossips can activate certain meanings based on the programme. As said by Fiske (1987: 106), audience have dialogue and gossip about television and in the process, "they shift and shape its meanings and pleasures".

From these conversations and gossips, audiences are able to arrive to non-television associated meaning, in which they gain information from the conversation and not from what they watch. It promotes cultural diversity and enables them to resist centralisation and the ideological hegemony (Fiske, 1987: 78). Fiske (1987: 234) also highlighted the importance of the non-television associated meaning because audience will only produce meanings and find pleasure in a television programme if the programme allows the expression of their interest. Clearly, the power audience have in producing their own meaning based form what the culture industry has to offer is great.

### **2.3.8 Phases in exposure**

A number of activities happen during different levels of exposure or temporal dimension (Levy, 1983; Perse and Rubin, 1988). The different levels of involvement at different phases of exposure can be used to explain how active audiences are in their media reception and decoding process. Perse and Rubin (1988: 369) maintained that people are differently selective and goal directed at different times and highlighted three phases during activity which can be correlated with activities that I have elaborated at length previously. The phases are before exposure, during exposure and after exposure.

Before being exposed to media, audiences firstly have to make a choice if they want to use the media. Thus, this is the phase which sees audience making selections based on intention and utility. Perse and Rubin (1988: 369) related the pre-exposure phase to cognitive attitudes and behaviour. Activities in the during exposure phase include utilisation, conversation and involvement in which audience's feelings and cognitions can influence how they make sense of what they view. Meanwhile, the activity related to the after exposure phase is involvement, in which interpersonal discussion of the show between members of the audience can influence how audience make sense of the information given.

However, one of the problems of studying audience activity by phases of exposure is the assumption that audience will display roughly the same degree of activity at each of the three points of interaction with the media. As it is, it would be quite difficult to distinguish and determine the levels of activity during different phases. This is because, in some cases, there are audience who are initially passive at the pre-exposure phase (because they have no say in choosing the media) but end up utilising the information and discussing what they have watched in the after exposure phase, hence being active. Not all audiences are totally active throughout the three phases. Different members of audience will display differing types and amounts of activity in different communication settings and at different times in the communication sequence. Hence, what is the element which affects activity?

### **2.3.9 Elements affecting activity**

The process of negotiating meanings in audience reception is an important aspect in cultural studies. Having in mind that not all audiences are equally or absolutely active (Rubin, 1993: 98pp), the meaning negotiating process is being elaborated through thorough explanation on what affect an activity. Rubin in his article, *Audience activity and media use* (1993) opined that there are several aspects which affect activity: (a) Media orientation; (b) Media attitudes; (c) Social and psychological factor. These aspects should be considered when probing the concept of activity in media reception because they could help a researcher think about activities in media reception holistically and from different angles. For example, when trying to look at the activities

that go on in the process of meaning making such as selectivity, involvement or utilitarianism, the concepts which affect activity, could help determine the degree of activeness in the activities.

The concept of media orientation can be understood as media use and is divided into ritualised media orientation and instrumental media orientation. In a ritualised media orientation, audience are said to use the media because they are used to having the media around them. A good example is a housewife who switches on the television while doing her house chores. She may not necessarily watch it, but the sound of television acts as a diversion to occupy her loneliness and time. Simply said, a ritualised media orientation means greater exposure to the medium, instead of a specific content.

An instrumental media orientation, meanwhile, pictures audience as more active because they are assumed to seek media content or messages for informational reasons. Hence, audiences are more selective and choosy with the media they interact with and are fussier with content selection. Rubin (1993: 102) remarked that these audiences have greater affinity with and perceived realism of that content. This, naturally, leads to a stronger outcome because it means a greater involvement, from the audience's perspective, with the encoded messages. In *Moments of television*, Fiske (1989) talked about determination in producing meanings, which could be related to instrumental media orientation. Determination refers to how people have the power to exercise some power over their meanings, pleasures and subjectivities which constitutes of cultural processes and social experience. Somewhat connected to intentionality and selectivity, determination are able to encourage or discourage audience from choosing to be involved with the media and how they intend to make meanings of what had been watched.

The concept of media attitudes refers to audience's attitude towards the medium and its content. The more audience believe in what they are exposed to as reality, the more they are said to be affected by the encoded messages (Rubin, 1993: 102). Perceiving the content as reality would also encourages viewers to use the information in their social interaction such as talking about it to others and practising the information they have gathered into their everyday life.

Social and psychological factors also affect activity. A good example is when one is highly dependent on the media. This usually happens when one does not have anyone to

communicate with, hence he or she will communicate with the television, albeit it being a one way communication. When this happens, audiences are comforted by the idea of being able to 'talk' to the television characters or news announcer and have a superficial relationship with the content. This indirectly affects the motivation to watch, audience's intention and also the selection process, which consequently affects activity and negotiation processes.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

After its Independence in 1957, Malaysia tried to climb its way up to be among the ranks of developed country. The effort became more prominent during the reign of Mahathir Mohamad as the Prime Minister, in which he introduced Vision 2020<sup>22</sup>, a concept which illustrates Malaysia's hope to attain the developed country status by the year 2020. With this vision, Malaysia introduced a lot of new technologies and one which is prominent in the media industry is satellite transmission. Through this, the broadcasting industry flourished and audiences are exposed to diverse information, some of which may not be similar to the local cultures. I see this situation as being a reflection of modernity.

Giddens (1991: 35pp) argued that modernity can cause anxiety to a society, due to the influx of unfamiliar information. Because of modernity, the society also tends to emulate the West as the West is seen as the epitome of modernisation and development. Siapera (2010) and Tomlinson (1991) opined that this causes local culture to be put aside and sometimes reworked to fit into the new, so-called developed society. What is the role of media in this context? Media in this sense is an important tool of mediation and representation and is one of the prominent sources for society to learn about things around them. In an individual reflexivity towards modernity, media is constantly used as a reference to how one should behave and look at the world. Simply said, media is used as a reference to the construction of identity. How true is that?

The opinions by Western scholars seem to put third world and developing countries as being drowned in modernity and in their strive to achieve the status, their traditions, cultures and

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<sup>22</sup> The full concept of the vision can be read at <http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/>.

beliefs would be left behind. I believe it is too simplistic for them to pinpoint to third world countries as being gullible and passive in accepting foreign beliefs and emulating them per se. Thus, in my opinion, understanding the consequences of modernity on culture requires one to learn about the process of construction of cultural identity. Giddens (1991) pointed out that the conditions of modernity is said to lead to the creation of new identity. He (1991: 186) aptly put it: "A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions."

Realising the importance of media in times of modernity, I propose that an effort must be made in order to understand audience's engagement with the media. How is cultural identity related to media consumption and reception? Hence, I find it imperative to unearth the process of meaning making in their negotiation with media texts.

I choose to look at audience as active and able to construct their own meaning of the messages shown on television. Thus, I find the encoding/decoding theory best fits my research. However, instead of merely concentrating on Hall's theory per se, I suggest that in order for an audience study to be comprehensive, activities during the process of meaning making, regardless of pre-exposure, during exposure or after exposure, should be looked at. This will be able to help researchers understand the decoding process and also how audiences make meanings out of the texts that they are exposed to. Some of the activities which were highlighted in the process of negotiating meanings, as highlighted by Biocca (1988) in his review may be related to the users gratifications theory but that notion of activity, in my opinion, can also help clarify and illustrate audience activity in Hall's encoding/ decoding model which is within the cultural studies perspective.

The activities which I have talked about in length are selectivity, utilitarianism, resistance to influence, involvement, intentionality, construction of cultural category, phases in exposure and orality. However, it must be pointed out that when applying these concepts in an empirical research, one must think of dimensions from all points of view and other aspects, such as the one highlighted by Philo (2008) which is the conditions under which people reject or accept ideas, conditions in which alternative information are made available and conditions of ideologies in the



encoded messages; and those highlighted by Rubin (1993), which are media orientation, media attitudes and social and psychological factors.

As Philo (2008: 541- 542) aptly suggested, a reception model should be dynamic and able to elaborate the flow of experience, in the process of meaning making.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

Modernity is a phase in which society aims for in its quest to achieve the developed country status. In this phase, society is exposed to plurality of choices and various forms of representations through the media. Now, Giddens (1991: 180) maintained that society's identity is a reflexive project which receives inputs from the various information they are exposed to, some of which are through the media. The question is, what are they exposed to? Undoubtedly, in its strive for modernity, Malaysia has introduced a lot of policies and new technologies, said to be for the betterment of the country. One of it is the satellite television broadcasts, which enable Malaysians to have access to foreign television channels and multitude of imported programmes. Is this an indication that they would be easily influenced to think and act like the West? Are they subjected to cultural imperialism, due to the influx of foreign television programmes? As it is, Silverstone (1999: 107) noted that media globalisation has formed and reformed culture and is said to be the source of identity.

Thus, it is with great interest that I try to find out if Malaysians are indeed subjected to the notion of cultural imperialism, due to modernity. The first phase of this research, therefore, will encompass a qualitative content analysis in which I will look at occurrences of representations of local and foreign culture in selected television programmes. I hope to be able to find out the pattern of local Malaysian culture featured in the programmes and if there is any indication of 'foreign' values being showcased.

I will firstly elaborate on the relevance of utilising this method in my research. This will be followed by operational definitions of the units on analysis which were derived from three themes I find important in order to give a wholesome picture of Malaysian culture which are, cultural uniqueness, common Malaysian values and Malaysian cultural dimension. Then I will proceed to examine sampling and units of sampling and wrap it up with a short discussion on validity test.

The next phase of my research consists of focus group discussions. I felt that the method is befitting, as I take into account that audience are active and able to construct different meanings to media texts. In particular, focus group discussions will help me look into the construction of cultural identity among Malaysian adolescents which may be influenced by what they watch on TV. With this regard, I see the integration of exposure of local and foreign text means that the construction of their cultural identity will involve a complex and multi-level negotiation process. Audience exposure to foreign programmes also means that they are positioned in a struggle, as aptly pointed out by Hall (1980: 171), in a conscious effort to make meanings from the polysemic texts. Hence, the question is, how do adolescents make sense of the television text in the process of constructing their cultural identity? Do adolescents look up to the programmes aired on television for guidance in creating their cultural identity and establishing their daily norms?

I will start off this sub-chapter on focus group discussion by elaborating on its relevance to my PhD research and its strength. Next, I will discuss the research design which encompasses details of participants and the discussion procedures, Finally, I will elaborate on methods to analyse focus groups discussions.

### **3.1 Content Analysis**

The first phase of my research is a detailed content analysis, which I will define as being qualitative in nature. It is to my believe that a qualitative content analysis is a good method to describe the content of television programmes as opposed to merely counting frequencies of specific occurrences, as it will enable me to find out and understand the televised contents that Malaysian adolescents are exposed to. As noted by Struppert (2006: 11), a qualitative content analysis is advantageous because it is more in-depth and less standardised. According to Kracauer (in Larsen, 1991: 122), breaking up the text in quantifiable units will make it difficult for one to understand a text as a whole because “the atomistic character of the resulting data precludes a relevant examination of the relations.” Although content analysis is usually associated and largely defined with being quantitative in nature, Berelson (1952: 114) noted that it does not mean that a qualitative analysis should be ruled out.

The content analysis will look at occurrences of representation of local and foreign culture in selected television programmes. Among others, the coding sheet (refer Appendix) which I had meticulously prepared will help address elements which are considered as Malaysian local culture and culture – practised by the actor- which is considered foreign or Western. Although the content analysis I planned is qualitative in nature, I followed Berelson's (1952: 133) suggestion to: “state as precisely as possible just what indicators are relevant in the particular categories [...]”. Through this content analysis, I hope to find out the pattern of local Malaysian culture featured in a chosen television programme as opposed to foreign cultures. Local Malaysian culture, in this case, refers to the culture practiced by the three main races in Malaysia which are Malays, Chinese and Indians. The coding sheet will serve as a guide for the coders in order for them to be aware of elements to look out for while doing the detailed analysis and to ensure that the method of analysis is uniformed among the coders so as to avoid discrepancies.

The content analysis is a relevant method to be used because in order to unearth and discover the audiences' process of meaning making and how they engage themselves with television representations, I will need to find out what they are watching and what forms of culture

are being represented in the programmes that they watch. As aptly said by Larsen (1991: 133): “[...] while data sets hold information, they are, first and foremost, texts which must be analysed and interpreted to yield that information.” Hence, the first step is to find out the patterns in which these representations were broadcasted on local television. An operational definition of the units of analysis was determined to ensure that coders clearly understood what to look out for when conducting the content analysis.

### **3.1.1 Operational Definition**

Units of analysis were derived from three themes which I find important in order to give a wholesome picture of Malaysian culture. The three themes are:

- a. Cultural Uniqueness
- b. Common Malaysian Values
- c. Malaysian Cultural Dimension

#### **3.1.1.1 Cultural Uniqueness**

Realising that ethnicity which is portrayed in the media is not always consistent as the representation in itself is a dynamic process (De Bruin, 2001: 42), I choose to derive the units of analysis from the common features which can distinctly differentiate Malays, Chinese and Indians such as language, ethnic appearance and religion. The reason I try to look at the content with regards to the different cultures practiced in Malaysia is to find out the diversity of contents, if there are any, of not only local and foreign culture but amongst the various local cultures as well, in order to elaborate further on the amount of negotiation an adolescent has to go through in making sense of the television programme in an effort to construct their culture identity. This will also help me discover how different races are portrayed in the television programmes, if they are even featured at all. I will also use sexual imagery as a unit of analysis as there is a big difference in what is deemed appalling and morally incorrect as an attempt to mark the

difference of what is considered morally incorrect within the Malaysian culture compared to Westerners (Arif Nizam , 2011; Asma Hanim , 2011).

i. Language

According to Spreckels and Kotthoff (2009: 426), language plays a role in the attribution of ethnic and national identity. Malaysia's national language is *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay Language) and is used in official matters. English, however, is widely spoken and is considered as the peoples' second language, as Malaysia was previously colonized by the British. Both these languages are officially taught in school since one is as young as four years old and is widely used in official functions and day to day activities. However, as Malaysia is a culturally diverse society, other languages such as Tamil, Mandarin, Hokkien, Telegu, Ibanese are also spoken by the different races. In addition, Tamil and Mandarin are also taught in schools.

I have decided that the unit of analysis for Language will be divided into *Bahasa Malaysia*, English, Cantonese and Mandarin and Tamil, considering the fact that Malaysia's major population is made up of Malays, Chinese and Indians.

ii. Ethnic Appearance

Malaysia is made up of people of various cultures and ethnicities with Malays, Chinese and Indians making up the main population. While each of these races has its own traditional costumes, most Malaysians still prefer to dress in - what some would term as influenced by the West – jeans, t-shirts, corporate suits, shorts, dresses, shirts, long pants and etc, reserving the traditional garments for festive or formal occasions.

As proposed by Spreckels and Kotthoff (2009: 431), clothing is also an important resource for indexing or symbolizing cultural identity. Clothing, according to them, is one of the cultural signs that has an effect at first glance and convey meanings in a variety of ways and is said to be able to mark the boundaries of age, gender, status, religion and

many other dimensions (p. 431). Hence, it would be interesting to take note of these important culture elements, so as to find out if these traditional clothes do make an appearance, and if adolescents, besides from learning from their parents inherited traditional costumes, can learn about their culture (and also other cultures) from what they watch on television.

Malays would normally be seen in a *baju kurung*, *kebaya*, *baju kedah*, *baju melayu*, kaftans. More often than not, Malay ladies can be identified by the hijab they sport. However, there are Malays who prefer to dress in jeans and t-shirts, corporate suites and other forms of clothing which are not directly related to their culture. Nevertheless, clothes worn by Malays are usually modest and not revealing.

Chinese's traditional costumes include *Cheongsam*, *Samfoo* while Indian's traditional costume includes *sari*, *Sherwani*, *Lungi*, *Dhoti* and *Kurta-Pajama*. Indian ladies would normally sport a pierced nose and wear the pottu.



Figure 3.1 From left: A Malay lady wearing *baju kurung* and head scarf, an Indian lady wearing *sari*, a Malay man wearing *baju Melayu* and Chinese wearing *sam foo*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ich habe mich bemüht, sämtliche Inhaber der Bildrechte ausfindig zu machen und ihre Zustimmung zur Verwendung der Bilder in dieser Arbeit eingeholt. Sollte dennoch eine Urheberrechtsverletzung bekannt werden, ersuche ich um Meldung bei mir.

Apart from clothing, household decorations can also pinpoint one's ethnicity. Malay houses usually would have decorations with verses taken from the holy Quran while a Chinese house sometimes has Chinese words pasted on its wall.

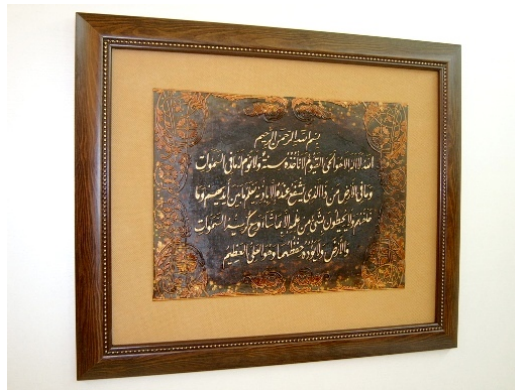


Figure 3.2 An example of decoration used by Malays in their houses.

### iii. Religion

Religion is a prominent marker of one's identity (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2009: 100- 101). In Malaysia, Islam is the official religion. However, its citizens are free to practice any religion as they wish, be it Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism or Paganism.

With regards to the theme of cultural uniqueness based on the three main ethnicities in Malaysia, I will classify this unit of analysis according to the religion usually practised by the three main races. Hence, any image or representation which can be linked to religion such as religious places (mosque or temple) can be used to determine the representation of religion in a television programme.



Thus, the operational definition for Malay, in terms of religion is scenes which contains mosque, acts of praying, celebrating Eid, fasting and women in hijab. Chinese is defined by the images of Temple, joss sticks and incense and celebrating Chinese New Year. Meanwhile, Indians can be recognised from their temple, oil lamp, celebrating Diwali and their religious practices.

iv. Sexual Imagery

Malaysian is still a very traditional society. The definition of a sexually explicit image for Malaysians differs greatly from what societies in the West perceive. As religion is one of the most important basis in the Malaysian culture, the society tends to dress modestly and overall avoid public displays of affection. Pre-marital sex, as condoned by most westerners, is a taboo in this country. In fact, talking or discussing about it, even as a subject in school, is quite an embarrassing thing to do for most Malaysians.

For the purpose of this research, the term sexual imagery is operationally defined as public displays of affection such as kissing and hugging, especially between unmarried couple, conversations with regards to sex and scantily clad women who exposes their cleavage or wear short skirts and clothes which are tight fitting.

3.1.1.2 Common Malaysian Values

Common Malaysian values are values which are assumed by Malaysians as being commonly practised by all ethnicities in Malaysia, regardless of their race, background or creed. In 2010, Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's introduced the 1Malaysia concept in an effort to create unity among Malaysia's citizen which is made up of various ethnicities. According to Najib (2010), the unique thing about the 1Malaysia concept is that it is not trying to assimilate the various cultures and create a national identity; instead it celebrates the diversity of cultures and considers it as an asset. The concept stresses on the acceptance of other culture within the Malaysian realm (most prominently the Malays, Chinese and Indians). Hence, in an effort to create

unity within the diversity of cultures, Najib listed eight core values which should be practised by all the different races in Malaysia, in order “to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been our strength” (source: 1Malaysia Booklet). As aptly said by Ito (1999: 18), “Nationalism has always been a powerful bond to unite people with the same cultural background [...] and standardize national cultures in terms of values [...]” The values as listed in the 1Malaysia concept are:

- a. Perseverance
- b. Acceptance
- c. Education
- d. Integrity
- e. Meritocracy
- f. Humility
- g. Loyalty
- h. Culture of Excellence

However, for the purpose of this research, I will only analyse the television programmes based on perseverance, education and loyalty.

i. Perseverance

Perseverance is defined as strength that a character featured in the television programme has in facing challenges and problems. According to the 1Malaysia booklet (<http://www.1malaysia.com.my/about-1malaysia/1malaysia-booklet>), Malaysians should not easily give up, but instead should be confident and strive in whatever field they wish to take part in.

ii. Education

According to the 1Malaysia booklet, a country will only be developed if its citizens are knowledgeable. In this case, education can be operationalised as

representations of schools or universities, graduation ceremony, people reading and studying or attending classes and images of libraries.

iii. Loyalty

Loyalty is defined in the 1Malaysia booklet as loyalty to the country and readiness to sacrifice for the country. Hence, images of the flag, national monuments, and national leaders like the Kings and Prime Minister, police and army can be used to depict the image of loyalty.

3.1.1.3 Dimension of Culture

Analysing contents based on Hofstede's (2001) dimension of culture is an attempt to dissect contents about culture as seen through the eyes of a non-local. Hofstede (2001), in his model on dimensions of culture listed four dimensions of cultural variability which are:

- a. individualism – collectivism
- b. low – high uncertainty avoidance
- c. low – high power distance
- d. masculinity – femininity

According to Gudykunst (2005: 8), "both ends of dimension exist in all cultures, but one tends to predominate in a culture". Malaysia's scores, according to Hofstede's Dimension (2001) are as follows:

Cultural dimension	Score
individualism – collectivism	26
low – high uncertainty avoidance	36
low – high power distance	104
masculinity – femininity	50

Table 3.1: Malaysia's scores in Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Index

i. Individualism – Collectivism

A relatively low score in individualism – collectivism means Malaysia practises a collectivistic culture. As opposed to an individualistic culture where people priorities on themselves and immediate family only, a collectivistic culture see its people look after each other within a bigger group. Hence, scenes with family, big groups, close relationship with family and friends, scenes depicting sacrifices made for the betterment of a group member, will be categorised under this unit of analysis.

ii. Low – high uncertainty avoidance (UAI)

A high score in UAI shows that the society is highly rule-oriented and places high regards and importance on laws and regulations. Rules and regulations are tools used to control the amount of uncertainty which are embedded in the society. Individuals in a high uncertainty avoidance culture tend to avoid conflict and competition and perhaps that is the reason why consensus is important in a culture such as this.

For the purpose of this research, this unit of analysis is defined by the existence of characters which avoids conflicts and competition and a decision making scene if it involves a group of people (which shows consensus).

iii. Low – high power distance

According to Ting-Toomey (2005:76), countries which have a high score in collectivism are most likely to have a high score in power distance. This can be seen in Malaysia's case, in which the country has high scores for both dimensions. So what are the characteristics of a high power distance culture? According to Ting-Toomey (2005:75), people in large power distance cultures

tend to accept unequal power distributions, asymmetrical relations, and rewards and sanctions based on rank, role, status, age and perhaps even gender identity.

Thus, scenes with shows an obvious difference in power held between management and subordinates, student and teacher, interactions in accordance with titles and ranks and an obvious gap between the rich and poor or ones that depicts an unequal distribution of power will be categorised under this unit of analysis.

iv. Masculinity – femininity

From the score which can be seen in the table above,(50), it could be derived that Malaysia has a very masculine culture. Members of cultures high in masculinity, according to Hofstede (1980: 177) value performance, ambition, material things, power and assertiveness. That means, the society places importance on material things and strives for power. Scenes depicting characters which are determined for material wealth or shows that someone who is wealthy are better off or an assertive character is defined under this unit of analysis.

### 3.1.2 Sampling

A random sample of the top three popular shows among Malay adolescents as listed in the AC Nielsen survey and two programmes targeted for adolescents will be coded. The programmes which have been identified are listed in the table below:

Top programmes among Malay adolescents	Programmes targeted for Adolescents
<i>Buletin Utama</i>	<i>Remaja</i>
<i>Seram</i>	In Trend
999	

Table 3.2: Television programmes which are selected for the content analysis.

### 3.1.3 Programme Synopsis

#### 3.1.3.1 *Buletin Utama* (Main Bulletin)

Duration: 60 minutes

Aired on: TV3

Produced by: TV3

Genre: News

Category: News

*Buletin Utama* is a news programme which is broadcasted in the prime time slot, between 8pm and 9pm. It is divided into several slots which include local news, international news, sports and weather. The programme is presented in *Bahasa Malaysia*. The episodes selected for this research were aired on 14 July 2010, 19 July 2010 and 8 August 2010.

#### 3.1.3.2 *Seram* (Horror)

Duration: 60 minutes

Aired on: TV3

Produced by: JS Pictures Sdn Bhd (Malaysia)

Genre: Horror

Category: Drama series

*Seram* is actually a 1 hour programme slot between 9.30pm and 10.30pm aired every Thursday, which features locally made horror dramas. It is a collection of dramas which mainly feature the Malay society. Some of the stories featured revolve around black magic, sorcery, ghosts and the supernatural. The title of the *Seram* programme

which was analysed for this research is *Roh Kembali* (Return of the Spirit). For the purpose of this research, the episodes selected were episodes 1, 7 and 12.

#### 3.1.3.3 999

Duration: 30 minutes

Aired on: TV3

Produced by: Primeworks Studios, Media Prima (Malaysia)

Genre: Information

Category: Magazine

999 is a crime magazine show which gives detailed reports on crimes which happened in Malaysia. It is broadcasted every Thursday at 9pm on TV3. The show is divided into two segments; special report and an overview of crimes which happened the past week. The special report segment sees the host, Hazlin Hussein, following the police task force for raids and solving a crime. Episodes aired on 20 May 2010, 17 June 2010 and 29 July were selected to be analysed for this research.

#### 3.1.3.4 Remaja (Teens)

Duration: 30 minutes

Aired on: TV3

Produced by: Primeworks Studios, Media Prima (Malaysia)

Genre: Information

Category: Magazine

*Remaja* is a magazine programme which is specially produced for teens. It is aired every Saturday at 1 pm on TV3. This show features a collection of stories related to both urban and rural Malaysian youths. The show is divided into four segments; issues, bulletin, gadget and style, and guest artist. The show is hosted by three teens, Azura,

Dekwan and Ewan. Episodes aired on 5 June, 2010, 3 July 2010 and 24 July 2010 were chosen to be analysed for this research.

#### 3.1.3.5 In-Trend

Duration: 30 minutes

Aired on: TV2

Produced by: RTM

Genre: Information

Category: Magazine

In-Trend is a weekly magazine programme which is targeted for adolescent viewers. The issues showcased mostly revolved around teen's lifestyle. It is broadcasted every Saturday at 3.30pm and is hosted by Ireen and Ean. The segments in this show are divided into *Pengakuan* (Confession), *Jom Santai* (Let's Relax), *Jom Layan* (Let's Do This) and *Jom Tengok* (Let's Watch). For the purpose of this research, the episodes selected to be analysed were aired on 31 July 2010, 18 September 2010 and 9 October 2010.

#### **3.1.4 Unit of Sampling**

Initially, the unit of sampling I intended to use was to analyse the programmes according to scenes or frames, however, when validity tests were conducted, it was discovered that analyzing the programmes within a 10 minutes block was more appropriate. Hence, the unit of sampling is 10 minutes blocks of each series. The time units proved to be easier for coders to analyse television programmes as opposed to sampling according to scenes. Furthermore, my main intention is to look at the patterns and forms of representation of cultures and not to count the frequency of representations.



### 3.1.5 Validity Test

Validity<sup>24</sup> tests were conducted before the content of the series was analysed to ensure that there was no confusion in interpreting the operational definition. Three episodes of a local programme, *Upin & Ipin* were selected to test out the coding sheet. In the validation process, I ensured that the categories were exhaustive<sup>25</sup> and mutually exclusive<sup>26</sup>. This is important to ensure that other researchers would be able to repeat or use my coding schema in the future.

## 3.2 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussion is a qualitative research method which seeks to compile data through group interaction, formed by a group of people who will discuss an issue in the presence of a moderator (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996; Morgan, 1996). Recognised as a tool best used to gain in-depth information on an issue (Byers and Wilcox, 1991: 64), focus group had previously been widely used in marketing research. It is only in the 80s that its popularity as a research methodology in the social science flourished. Southwell, Blake and Torres (2005: 187) accurately defined focus group as: “ [...] an opportunity for researchers to encourage participants to generate opinions, feedback and in-depth thoughts in a group setting and importantly, allow for some spontaneity. According to Morgan (1996) and Lunt and Livingstone (1996) a lot of scholars recommend the usage of focus group as an addendum to a quantitative method such as surveys and experiments but the usage of this method alone is also permissible.

I find this method suitable for my PhD research because it will allow me to explore what the respondents think and feel, which I find important in order to understand how they make sense of the television programmes and how they create meanings in a process of constructing

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<sup>24</sup> “Validity” designates the quality of research results which leads one to accept them as indisputable facts. (Krippendorff, 1980: 155). A measuring instrument is valid if it measures what it is designed to measure.

<sup>25</sup> Exhaustive refers to the ability of a data language to represent all recording units, without exception. (Krippendorff, 1980: 75)

<sup>26</sup> Mutually exclusive refers to the ability of a data language to make clear distinctions among the phenomena to be recorded. (Krippendorff, 1980: 75)

their cultural identity. The concept of active audience and their decoding of polysemic television messages has somewhat directed my study to explore their negotiation process through focus group discussion. According to Lunt and Livingstone (1996: 8), in this context, it is advisable to research the audience as a collective group “who construct meaningful social action partly through the discursive interrogation of texts.” In this regard, I am interested in their socially expressed opinions and discussions to find out how they make sense of television. Also, due to the polysemic nature of television text and the active audience various ways in decoding messages, I find it best to conduct focus group discussion rather than employing a quantitative method because it will help me understand the phenomena in-depth and discover the various ways people make sense of television, regardless of their race, status and background.

Focus group discussions will also allow me to study the social processes of communication and generate discussion which will enable me to discover the construction of cultural identity amongst adolescents especially because I am interested in the process of meaning making and not the effect of media on adolescents. In this context, the guided but spontaneous group interaction will help to facilitate complimentary interactions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 182), in which ideas and experiences are expressed, thus facilitating the effort to discuss what may be sensitive issues. I will now demonstrate the strength of focus group discussion in an effort to justify the usage of this qualitative method in order to answer my research objectives.

### **3.2.1 Strength of Focus Group**

The beauty of conducting a focus group discussion is that it will enable researchers to dissect participants view in-depth and allow the researcher to ask questions which may not be listed in the interview guide in order to understand the situation or discussion better. This allows the researchers to immediately and specifically ask related question instead of being tied up to a rigid questionnaire which would make it impossible to study a matter in depth and only leaves room for speculation. Southwell, Blake and Torres (2005) maintained that the in-depth elicitation can introduce notions that would be utterly left out in many close-ended surveys.

According to Morgan (1996: 137), compared to surveys, focus group is said to be able to produce more in-depth information on the topic at hand, due to its open-ended nature, while a survey limits what respondents can say in comparison to what they can reveal in a group discussion. In a research by Lundy, Ruth and Park (2008) on reality television consumption patterns, the usage of focus group discussion proved to be fruitful in collecting data. At the initial stage of the discussion, the respondents denied watching reality television. However, after the discussion progresses and upon successful probing by the moderator, it was revealed that they actually do watch reality television without noticing that they do so. This would have been hard to be discovered in a questionnaire which only allows for specific answers as without the constant questioning by the moderator and the discussions generated by the group, it would be difficult for the researcher to discover that the respondents do in fact engage themselves with reality television programmes, even when they thought they did not.

Morgan (1996: 139) also elaborated on the benefit of synergy and group effect which is said to be able to probe a matter in detail, through participants' queries to each other and their agreement and disagreement. It allows participants to talk freely and encourage active discussion which consequently provides a platform for marginalized group to be represented. Liebes and Katz (1990) found the group discussion method is useful in their cross cultural study on audience's reception of *Dallas* as the interaction between the participants managed to unearth unique findings within the group and amongst different groups of participants, which would otherwise be difficult to uncover if they were to utilize other methods. The interaction not only managed to expose how they create meanings from *Dallas*, it also enabled Liebes and Katz (1990) to pinpoint how interaction within the group itself contributed to the process of meaning making. This enriching factor is important considering that my research is focused on how adolescents negotiate meanings from television in their construction of cultural identity.

A well moderated focus group can encourage full participation by participants and release their inhibition, thereby exposing their underlying attitudes and opinions (Byers and Wilcox, 1991:66). For example, Durham (2004) in her research on Media, Sexuality and Diaspora Identity utilized the focus group method to create rapport with her respondents and allow a detailed

discussion on a topic which is considered sensitive to be talked about, which would be difficult to do through other methods such as ethnographic participant observations and surveys. Also, it was through focus group discussion that Katz and Liebes (1990) managed to entangle the real thoughts of an American woman who participated in the research, about a television character nicknamed 'JR' in *Dallas*. The said woman was initially reserved in giving her opinions but along the discussion, her real emotions and thoughts were revealed, and this would also be difficult to achieve through a survey or by simply doing an observation. When the respondents' inhibition is released, the discussion will generate rich data which would be useful for the research.

### **3.2.2 Research Design**

#### **3.2.2.1 Participants**

Four focus groups, which were categorised based on socio-economic and age criteria, were formed in September 2010, comprising a total of 20 people. This is in accordance to Morgan's (1996: 144) suggestion, in which four to six focus groups would be sufficient in a research. The justification given was that at one point, the information obtained from the discussions would be saturated and that little new information would emerge. Although scholars like Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1956) noted that a focus group is typically made up of eight to 12 people, I have decided to limit the number of participants to five adolescents per group. It is to my belief that a smaller group would be more manageable and provide a comfortable environment for the adolescents to speak up. Furthermore, Morgan (1996: 146) has noted that smaller groups can generate high level of participation and gives participants more time to discuss views and experiences on topics in which they are involved in.

Durham (2004) also maintained that a small group size will allow for a better data collection. In her research on Media, Sexuality and Diaspora Identity, the small number of participants in her focus group method allowed her to "probe questions and clarifications that could not be easily pursued in a larger group (p. 146)." She also said that rapport with participants was easily achieved given the small number. As Myers (2000: 1) noted:

“In many situations, a small sample size may be more useful in examining a situation in depth from various perspectives, whereas a large sample would be inconsequential. The goal of a study may be to focus on a selected contemporary phenomenon such as child abuse or addiction where in-depth descriptions would be an essential component of the process. In such situations, small qualitative studies can gain a more personal understanding of the phenomenon and the results can potentially contribute valuable knowledge to the community.”

The four groups which I interviewed are made up of two different socio-economic backgrounds, which consist of urban adolescents living in a big city, and adolescents living in a rural, small town. The main purpose of segmentation of the different groups is to allow me to build a comparative dimension into the entire research project and at the same time help me facilitate discussions by making participants more similar to each other, as suggested by Morgan (1996: 143). The breakdowns of the groups are as follows:

- a. Urban adolescents living in big city with moderate and high family income
- b. Rural adolescents living in small town with low family income

The urban adolescents were recruited by word of mouth and groups were formed among those who know each other and who went to the same school. They are based in Petaling Jaya<sup>27</sup> one of Malaysia's biggest cities. The rural adolescents, meanwhile, were recruited from a school in Kuala Kubu Bharu<sup>28</sup>, a small town in Selangor Malaysia. It was important to me that the adolescents are familiar with each other in order for the group dynamics to be easily fostered. This will hopefully encourage them to speak freely and to question each other's opinions and perceptions (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 6).

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<sup>27</sup> Petaling Jaya is populated by 480,000 people. (<http://www.mbpj.gov.my/web/guest/history>)

<sup>28</sup> Kuala Kubu Bharu is populated by 174, 800 people, of which 48 per cent of that number is made up of the Malay ethnicity, 29 per cent Chinese, 14.4 per cent Indian and 9.6 per cent of other ethnicity and nationality (<http://www.mdhs.gov.my/penduduk>).

### 3.2.2.2 The discussion procedure

Before the focus group discussion begins, each participant was asked to give a short introduction about their self. Then, the moderator gave a short explanation about the study's procedures and purpose and invited the participants to ask any questions related to what have been explained. Participants were also told that the sessions would take about 60 to 90 minutes.

The discussions were guided by a thematic interview guide on media use, preferences of content, association of norms and values with content, and views of other cultures. Following Morgan's (1996: 143) suggestion on a "compromise design", I begin my discussion with a fixed set of questions and then proceeded to various other issues, based on the responses from the participants. This, according to Morgan (1996), would give me the advantage to be able to do a comparison across the different groups and at the same time explore each group's emerging ideas at a deeper level.

The focus group discussions were recorded using a MP3 audio recorder which was also complimented by notes taken by the moderator, during the course of discussion. The recordings were then transcribed and coded according to emerging themes and relationships, as suggested by Hatch (2002) and Krueger (1988) which will be discussed in detail in the following sub topic.

### 3.2.2.3 The Thematic Discussion Guide

The questions posed during the focus group discussion are divided into four themes. I believe that this will enable me to answer my research objectives, justly. The themes and related questions are as follows:

#### a. Media Use

- How often do you watch TV?
- Where and whom do you watch it with?

- Are there any kinds of rules you have to follow about watching TV?
- How many television sets do you have in your house? Do you have your own TV set?
- What do you think about TV?
- What kind of programmes do you like to watch? Why?

b. Preferences of content

- What is your favourite TV show? Can you please tell me more about it?
- What makes it your favourite?
- Do you talk about these programmes to your friends/ family?
- What is your favourite TV character? Why?

c. Association of norms and values with content

- What do you think can you learn from watching TV?
- You said that your favourite programme is XXX, what values can you learn from the programme?
- What do you think about having a boyfriend/ girlfriend at your age?

d. Views of cultures.

- Where can you learn about other culture and religion?
- What does it mean to be Malaysian?
- What does it mean to be Malay/ Chinese/ Indian?
- How do you think Malay/ Chinese/ Indian being portrayed on television?
- What would you call yourself in terms of religion?
- What does it feel like to be (religion: i.e.: Muslim, Christian, Hindu)?
- How would you describe Malay? Chinese? Indian?
- What is 1Malaysia? How is it portrayed on television?

### **3.2.3 Methods to analyse focus groups' discussions**

The most natural thing to do when analysing data from a focus group discussion is to do a content analysis, as suggested by Berelson (1956), Byers and Wilcox (1991) and Lunt and Livingstone (1996) which could be done by looking at the data through emerging themes. As correctly noted by Byers and Wilcox (1991: 74), "[...] the researcher is not forced to fit utterances into rigid categories; rather, categories are formed based on the utterances which should yield more germane conclusions." And, Lunt and Livingstone (1996: 18) noted that a systematic coding is advisable to ensure that the process of analysing is methodically done so as to be able to explain possible differences which may occur in the interviews.

Thus, when analyzing the data, I intend to combine the methods suggested by Krueger (1988) and Hatch (2002). Krueger (1988: 134) proposed that researchers carefully consider the words used by participants in the discussion and the context in which they are spoken. More importantly, he suggested researchers to look at the big ideas and find a pattern or emerging themes. Similarly, Hatch (2002: 152pp) proposed that researchers read through the transcription and identify frames of analysis and create suitable themes based on semantic relationships discovered.



### **3.3 Conclusion**

The methodologies I plan to utilise for this research are content analysis and focus group discussion. Both methods are designed to aid me in answering my research objectives.

The main purpose of the content analysis is to describe and elaborate the content of television programmes with regards to the cultural context. In my opinion, in order to understand how adolescents make meaning of the television programmes in constructing their cultural identity, it is important to know the contents of the programme that they are exposed to. With this in mind, a coding sheet, based on three themes, was designed to standardize the coding procedure among the coders. The themes are cultural uniqueness, common Malaysian values and cultural dimensions. Three episodes of three top television programmes as listed by the AC Nielsen Media survey were selected to be analyzed. Aside from that, three episodes of two locally produced programmes, which are claimed to be targeted for adolescents, were also selected. Hence a total of 15 programmes will be analysed. These episodes will be analysed within 10 minute blocks, each.

The focus group discussion, meanwhile, is planned to help me discover how adolescents negotiate and decode the television programmes in the process of constructing their cultural identity. The discussions will be guided by a thematic interview guide on media use, preferences of content, association of norms and values with content, and views of other cultures. A total of 20 adolescents within the ages of 16 and 18 years old with different socio-economic background would be involved in the focus group discussion.

In conclusion, the combination of content analysis and focus group discussion will be able to give me a holistic view on the process of meaning making and help me better understand the situation and phenomenon of television reception among adolescents in Malaysia.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS FROM CONTENT ANALYSIS

#### 4.0 Introduction

This chapter will thoroughly discuss the findings from a detailed content analysis done on five television programmes broadcasted on Malaysia's free to air television channels. A random sample of three episodes from three programmes chosen based on its popularity as listed in the AC Nielsen survey, and three episodes from two programmes, selected as they were specifically made with young people as their target audience, were selected. The programmes which have been identified are as listed in the table below:

Top programmes among Malay adolescents	Programmes targeted for Adolescents
<i>Buletin Utama</i>	<i>Remaja</i>
<i>Seram</i>	In Trend
999	

Table 4.1: Television programmes which are selected for the content analysis.

The content analysis was qualitative in nature. It looked at occurrences of representation of local and foreign culture in selected television programmes which, in turn, assisted me in uncovering the contents of local television programmes. Among others, I addressed elements which are considered as Malaysian local culture and culture which is considered foreign or Western. These elements are practised by the actor or people featured in the programmes.

I believe that a qualitative content analysis is a good method to describe the content of television programmes as opposed to merely counting frequencies of specific occurrences, as it will enable me to find out and understand the televised contents that Malaysian are exposed to and in turn, helped answer my research questions. Is it imperative that I understand the contents of Malaysian television in order to thoroughly investigate young people's engagement with

television in the process of negotiating their cultural identities? Are they really exposed to elements of Westernisation, especially in this modernised era, like what the Malaysian government is concerned about? Therefore, I find it necessary to disclose how people of different ethnicities are portrayed on local television and if they really mimic the Western society. Also, what are the possible aspects people can learn about their culture from the programmes?

Having said that, I do acknowledge Tomlinson's (1991: 34-35) opinion in which that the analysis of [television] text is not sufficient to address the issue of media imperialism. However, I see it as the first step in understanding the extent in which local audience are exposed to foreign cultures or elements of Westernisation especially through locally produced text and if the local texts are actually a form of imperialism. This is an important step to ensure that I am at grasp with what they are watching in order to enable me to properly analyse my findings from the focus group discussion (which will be discussed in the next chapter) and come up to a sound conclusion on adolescent's engagement with television and how it might affect their identity construction process.

This chapter, therefore, will present my findings from the content analysis, in order to unearth the truthfulness of the sweeping generalisation made with regards to media globalisation, and particularly media and cultural imperialism in Malaysia. In the first part of this chapter, I will firstly discuss the contents of Malaysian television programme, based on a six day analysis of the television guide. This will be followed by an elaboration of the results obtained from content analyses conducted on *Buletin Utama*, *Seram*, 999, *Remaja* and *In Trend*. The findings have been carefully analysed and presented in five themes, namely; Distinguishing Portrayal of the Diverse Ethnicities, The Representations of Malays, The Representations of Chinese, Indians and other cultures, Malaysian and the Concept of 1Malaysia and Elements of Westernisation and Cultural Imperialism. The content analysis will enable me to ascertain the forms of culture that are being represented in the programme most watched by the Malaysian audience and if there are any traces or hints of foreign elements in it. This will be followed by a thorough discussion in which I will relate the findings to modernity and globalisation, and expose the fact if programmes in Malaysia are indeed 'invaded' with foreign elements, beliefs and values.

#### **4.1 Malaysian Television Programme Contents**

Malaysia's free-to-air television boasts six channels: TV1, TV2, TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9. TV1 and TV2 are operated by the Malaysian government while TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9 are operated by Malaysia's own media conglomerate, Media Prima. In Malaysia's free-to-air TV, the number of entertainment-based programmes is more than educational based programmes. The TV station which has the highest percentage of educational based programme is RTM1, with 49% and the lowest is 8TV, 11% (Halim, 2007). It is concluded that the TV stations which air a lot of educational content are not able to attract advertisers. This is based on the income generated from advertising by RTM1 which has more educational programmes for the period of January to November 2006, which was only RM51 million compared to 8TV with more entertainment based programmes generated RM203.2 million (Nielsen Research).

Meanwhile, re-branding of local TV stations in Malaysia has seen an increase in the creation of new TV stations with specific target audience. For youths in Malaysia, the TV station with adolescents as its target audience is 8TV (Halim, 2007). These new rebranded stations also offer a lot of programmes which cater to specific races like Malay through RTM1, TV3 and Channel 9 and Chinese through 8TV. However, programmes in languages other than Bahasa Malaysia are usually supplied with subtitles and consequently gained popularity among the Malay viewers.

Those subscribing to Astro (Malaysia's very own satellite television channel) have access to special channels where languages of broadcast are Malay, Chinese and Indian dialects. Subscribers can also watch the programmes broadcasted on channels with English medium in local dialects (especially in the cartoon channels) by merely pressing the remote control as Astro also provides a dubbed version of English language programmes to local Malay, Chinese, and Indian dialects.

The emergent of these television stations and satellite broadcasts also, is said to have displayed an influx of programmes imported from abroad such as Venezuelan telenovelas, American soap operas and sitcoms, Indonesian sinetron and Japanese and Korean television

series. In consideration to that, I feel that it is only befitting if I first conduct a small analysis on the content of free-to-air television in Malaysia, based on a six day television programme guide. Basically, I calculated the total hours used to showcase local programmes compared to foreign programmes.

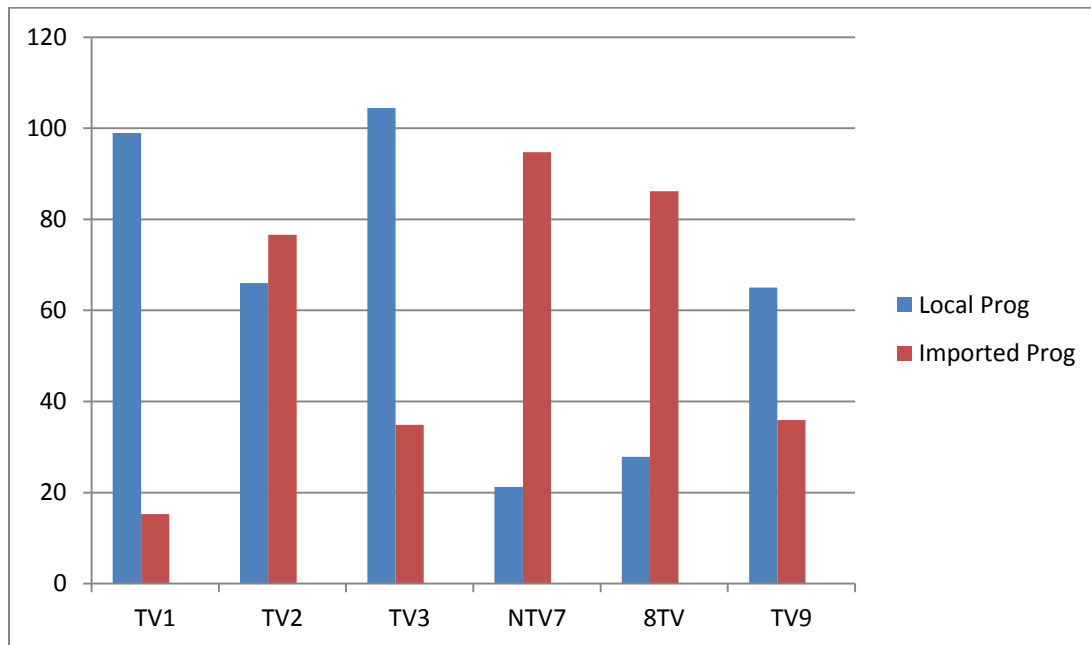


Figure 4.1: A six day analysis of local vs. imported programme (according to hours) on free-to-air television

In a six day analysis of contents of free-to-air television (according to hours), it can be seen that TV2, NTV7 and 8TV allocated more time to broadcast imported programmes than local programmes while TV1, TV3 and TV9 allocated more hours to broadcast local programmes. TV3 broadcasted the most hours for local programmes while NTV7 broadcasted the least hours for local programmes. As for imported programmes, NTV7 topped the list while TV1 broadcasted the least hours for imported programmes. It should be pointed out that the imported programmes did not only come from America but also from other Asian countries such as Indonesia, China and Japan.

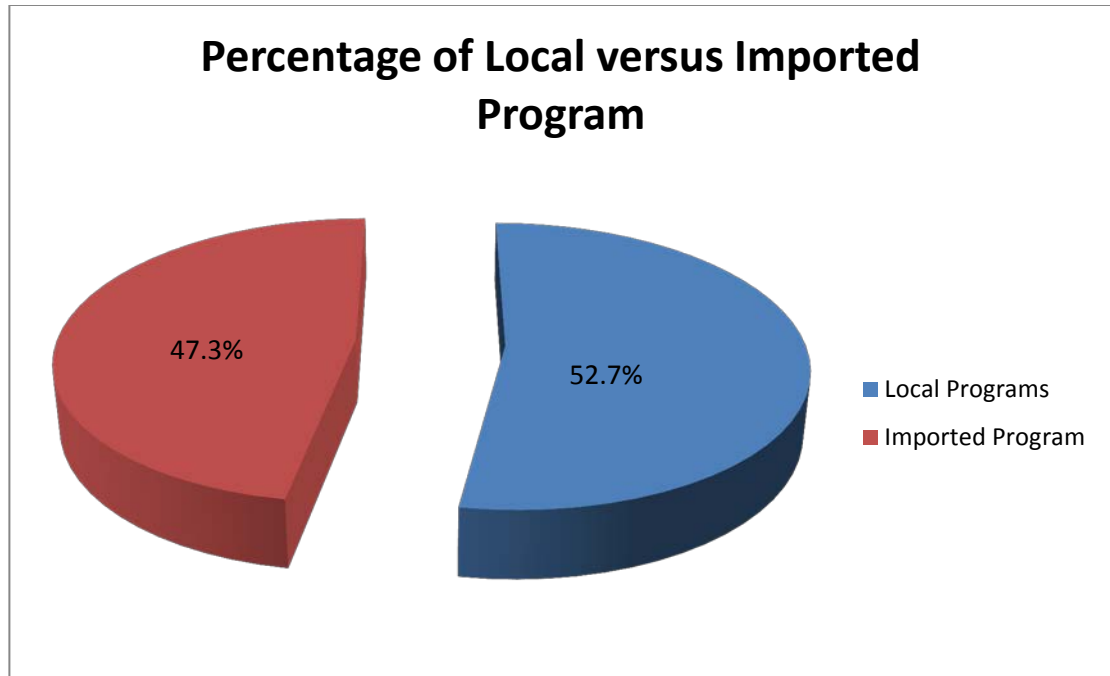


Figure 4.2: Local vs. Imported programme

Overall, based on the six day analysis, it can be concluded that the percentage of hours allocated for local programmes is not that much different than imported programmes. Local programmes still topped the broadcasting hours but only by a mere 5.4 per cent lead. This may be due to the fact that the broadcasting industry in Malaysia has trouble finding programmes to fill the airtime (Shanti, 2000: 162). The trend of importing foreign programme started since television was first introduced in Malaysia. According to Tai (1997: 479) there was initially an equal time ratio of local and foreign programme. However, foreign programme soon made up the majority of programme content. This became especially obvious when private television stations were allowed to broadcast programme. Tai (1997: 479) noted that "when TV3 was first established, it was permitted to broadcast 30 per cent local and 70 per cent imported programme on the basis of its position as a private television station and its dependence on advertising revenue."

What is more, there are currently no laws or legislation which imposed the ratio of foreign content to local content. The government hopes for a 60 per cent local content and 40 per cent foreign content ratio, but this desire, as can be seen from the pie chart above, has yet to be achieved as the number of production houses in Malaysia that are able to produce local

programme is still inadequate. Moreover, importing foreign programmes are less costly than producing a local programme. According to Awang (in Shanti, 2000: 162) the cost of producing a local drama ranges between RM200, 000 and RM350, 000 as compared to the cost of importing a syndicated movie of about RM100, 000.

However, the effort to increase local content became intensified because foreign programme are said to “threaten the traditions and cultures of Asian society” (Yao in Tai, 1997: 487). Not only that, the influx of foreign television programme is said to be able to introduce and innovate culture. As noted by Silverstone (1999: 59), media globalisation has formed and reformed culture and he argued that the topics discussed in the media may be global, but it remained as the resource for culture and establishment of one’s identity. Karthigesu (1998) argued that the foreign programme broadcasted in Malaysia did not enrich the local culture. These programmes, which are mostly imported from the United States and Britain, are deemed as Western and are believed to be ‘immoral’ (Yao in Tai, 1997: 487).

What intrigued me was that, according to a report by TV3, the top television series on Malaysia’s free-to-air television remain to be locally produced programmes. Granted, that this could be due to the fact that Malays make up the majority of population in Malaysia’s society but all the talk about the influence of Western culture seem to indirectly indicate that there may be hints of western or foreign influence in locally produced programmes as well.

Hence, the content analysis on *Seram*, *In Trend*, 999, *Remaja* and *Buletin Utama*, which follows will be analysing the programmes to determine if there is indeed foreign influence and if there is any cause for the Malaysian government to worry about the notion of ‘westernisation’ and ‘cultural imperialism’. The content analysis will also determine how each culture and ethnicity is portrayed in the television programmes.

## **4.2 Distinguishing Portrayal of the Diverse Ethnicities**

Appearance, in pre-modern settings, according to Tomlinson (1991: 99) was mostly standardised in terms of traditional criteria. He maintained that: "Modes of facial adornment or dress, for example, have always been to some degree a means of individualisation; yet the extent to which this was either possible or desired was usually quite limited." (Tomlinson, 1991: 99). What he meant was that the appearances of cultural ethnicities looked different and unique when compared to other cultures, but among the people in the same culture itself, there was not much difference. Hence, the sense of individualisation, amongst people of the same ethnicity is not quite possible, in the phase of pre-modernity.

As mentioned before, the Malaysian society is made up of various ethnicities and each of these ethnicities has their own special traditional attires. Thus, I see it as a way to identify a specific identity. However, note that Tomlinson (1991) stated that this feature was useful in the pre-modern settings. Hence, I see it as an interesting element to look out for, in gauging if modernity has indeed affected some parts of cultural identity, in this case, traditional attires to be regarded as not in 'season'. Its prominence on television can be an indication of its importance in the society. I was also interested to find out the forms of cultural identity indicators that could be identified on the television programmes.

Overall, it could be said that facial adornment or dress does not help in identifying or indicate a specific cultural identity. Except for *Seram*, all the other programmes analysed hardly featured traditional attires. For instance, in 999, cultural identity, could not be detected from clothes people wear except for when a policewoman was shown wearing the *hijab*<sup>29</sup>. There were, however, scenes in which scantily clad women were shown on television, when the police caught prostitutes at the brothels. They were seen wearing short skirts and to some extent, blurred shots of naked women and women in towels were broadcasted. Malaysian society is quite conservative when it comes to dressing and dressing sexily is looked upon as not good. This notion was reiterated through this programme when only the wrong doers are showed as wearing these kinds of clothing. This could also be useful in a cultural identity construction process, whereby the

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<sup>29</sup> *Hijab* is head scarves worn by Muslim women



society is exposed to what they are not, which indirectly suggested to them what they should be like.

It was also difficult to identify specific race through physical appearances and clothes people wear in *Buletin Utama*. This is because, in news, the producer has no control on what informants wear as it happens in real time. However, the news presenters were always smartly dressed in blazer, shirts, tie and suits. There were hardly any traditional clothes featured and even in most established shot<sup>30</sup> taken, people were seen wearing t-shirts, jeans and formal suits. The only prominent one was when the Prime Minister's wife wore *baju kurung*<sup>31</sup> during the launch of National Heroes Day and during the ESQ issue when some people who were interviewed wore *songkok* and *baju melayu*, an indication that they were Malays. Chinese, Indians and other aboriginal tribe were not prominently featured in the news.

In trend, meanwhile, did not specifically touch on races or ethnicities. Appearances like the clothes the hosts wore were according to the week's theme. For example, during the week which discussed on motorsports, the hosts wore leather jackets, jeans and cap and during the Eid celebration episode, the hosts wore *Baju Melayu* and *kebaya*. Otherwise, the hosts would wear t-shirts and jeans. Having said that, the programme has also showcased successful Malays which, in my opinion, could probably give ideas on how Malays are like or dispel notions, assumptions and negative stereotyped on Malays.

As for the criminals and the perpetrators which were constantly featured on 999, the programme does not specifically mention their race or ethnicity, maybe to avoid stereotypes such as Chinese as loan sharks and Indians as gangsters who are very brutal. However, if one were to watch closely, the race of criminals, perpetrators or wrong doers could be detected through the way they talk and language used in the interviews. For instance, even when they talked in the Malay language, the way they pronounced the words and their accents clearly showed the ethnicity they belong to. Chinese for instance, would pepper their words with 'lor', 'ah' or 'lah' at the end of their sentences. Can their accent be considered as an element of cultural identity?

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<sup>30</sup> An establishing shot helps to establish a scene or put it in context (source: <http://www.mediacollege.com/video/shots/establishing.html>)

<sup>31</sup> *Baju Kurung* is a traditional Malay dress

Indians, meanwhile, has a specific way in which they move their head while talking. Aside from that the race and ethnicity could also be deduced from the decorations of the place where the criminal activities were done such as Chinese writings and wall decorations. Thus, although it was not mentioned who were the owners of the massage parlours that doubled as brothels and the gambling place, one can make an intelligent guess that these places were owned by the Chinese based on the language used and how these places were decorated.

The usage of specific language such as Malay language, Mandarin or Tamil, which could be a key indication in identifying a specific culture, was also quite redundant in this analysis. This is because; all the programmes were delivered in the Malay language with a minimal use of English. For instance, in *Buletin Utama*, the language used throughout the news, regardless of the race of the news presenter, reporter or people interviewed, is mostly the Malay language. In *Remaja* there was one instance in which a local Malay dialect could be detected which clearly put the man as someone who came from Borneo, particularly Sabah, but his aboriginal tribe was difficult to identify while In Trend used Malay language peppered with local dialects which made it possible for one to recognise which parts of Malaysia they originated from.

English was occasionally used in all the programmes analysed, more prominently on *Buletin Utama*'s business segment which almost always featured interviews in English, even though the interviewee is a Malay, for example in the interview with a representative from UMW Toyota, TNB's profit announcement and on Malaysian economic situation. There was also an instance in which Mandarin was used in an interview, but it was accompanied by Malay subtitles. Ironically, no subtitles were provided for English interviews and comments even though it is not the language of the three main ethnicities in Malaysia. Another example of English usage is when referring to special terminologies. For example in the In Trend's photography episode, when discussing about shutters, lights and apertures, the terminologies remained in English and were not translated to Malay.

The only other foreign language used is the Indonesian language in 999. However, it should be noted that the Indonesian language is quite similar to the Malay language and could easily be understood by Malaysians.

#### 4.3 Taking the Centre Stage: The Representation of Malays

The portrayal of Malay identity takes centre stage in the television programme analysed compared to the other cultural identities. The television programme which really showcased the Malay culture, beliefs and values is from the drama genre, *Seram*.

As mentioned in the methodology section, the title of the drama from the *Seram* slot which I chose to analyse is *Roh Kembali*. It tells a story of Zaidi, who is involved in a successful business and lives luxuriously. His wife, Zahirah is a homemaker and together, they have a son named Ehsan, who is very clever. They are the model family; happy, kind and well-liked by friends and neighbours. However, secretly, Zaidi's life is not peaceful. Unknown to others, Zaidi's success is partly due to his involvement in an organised crime with Taukeh Boon. Under Taukeh Boon's order, Zaidi killed an innocent woman, Lillian Chan. Now, Lillian's spirit is haunting Zaidi but Zaidi kept mum about it, too afraid that his secret involvement with the organised crime would be exposed.

The main character in this drama is Zaidi, a thriving Malay businessman who is often depicted in formal suits, shirts, ties and slacks. At home, he is often dressed in *kain pelikat*<sup>32</sup> and t-shirt. His character is very caring and is shown through scenes in which he could be seen joking around with his family, bringing his wife medication when she was sick and comforting his child when he had a nightmare in the middle of the night. Overall, he is pictured as someone very humble, nice and kind and one would never be able to associate him with an organised crime from how he has been portrayed. Thus, it makes it possible that he be considered as someone deceitful and conniving since he seemed to portray himself as someone kind and nice but in actual fact is quite ruthless and would do anything to get what he aimed for.

As for religion, the only religion showcased was Islam and this was proven with montage of quranic verses in the beginning and ending of the drama, shots of Zaidi and his wife praying, scenes at Muslim burial grounds, characters reading the Quran and several still shots of mosques. Indirectly, it depicted that Malays in Malaysia are Muslims and do not practice other religion. Interestingly, even Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution states that a Malay is

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<sup>32</sup> Kain pelikat is a piece of cloth worn wrapped around the waist, very much like a pareo. It is usually checkered and worn by Malay men at home.

defined as someone who is born to a Malaysian citizen, professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language and adheres to Malay customs.

Can how the Malays are portrayed in the drama be considered as part of their cultural identity? If we look at the drama, the characters would be considered typical Malay because they professed to be a Muslim, spoke the Malay language and adhered to Malay customs. Other ways in which Malays have been categorised or to some extent stereotyped are as in the way they speak and only fluent in the Malay language, ladies wearing the *hijab* and *baju kurung* while male wear the *songkok*<sup>33</sup>, and all these were depicted in the drama I analysed. I also found that in this drama, Malays are typified as a follower, deceitful and they prioritise family relationship.

In the other programmes analysed, like *In Trend* and *Remaja*, they featured only a short glimpse of the Malay cultural identity. For instance, the only time that the Malay culture was made obvious was during the episode on Ramadhan and Eid celebration. That particular episode highlighted the main festival celebrated by the Malaysian Malays. In a way, it gave an opportunity for other races to understand Malays and the festivals they celebrate and also gave more chances for Malays to be more aware of their own cultural identity. Highlighting a Malay and Muslim celebration is also probably due to the fact that majority of its audience are Malays.

On top of that, audiences were also exposed to how Eid is celebrated. For instance, there was a scene in which the younger people were kissing the hands of the elders and respected person in the family as a sign to ask for forgiveness, which is a tradition for a typical Malay family. Traditional food such as *lemang*, *ketupat* and *rendang* were also shown to the audiences as delicacies served during the Eid celebration. These dishes are well-known Malay dishes and are usually cooked on special occasions. Additionally, in the how-to segment, audiences were taught how to make *lemang*, a delicacy made with glutinous rice and coconut milk. Another aspect of how Malays typically celebrates the Eid festival is the 'open house'<sup>34</sup> culture which was also highlighted in the episode in which the hosts were seen entertaining their friends and families who came visiting. Hence, it could be said that this particular episode emphasised on the Malay

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<sup>33</sup> *Songkok* is a traditional headgear worn by Malay men.

<sup>34</sup> Open house is when somebody invites families and friends to their house to celebrate the Eid, or any religious or traditional celebrations together.

culture and traditions. This will enable viewers, regardless of their ethnicity, to get to know the Malay culture better.

There were also two episodes of *In Trend* which showcased the success of Malays in winning awards and accolades and also how they are making their names in the industry they are involved in, such as in music and air brushing (car beautification). This certainly defies the opinion that Malays are complacent and lazy, as illustrated by the colonial reconstruction of a typical Malay (Farish, 2009: 43). Farish (2009) also noted that Malays were subjected to colonialist stereotype and were seen as a violent race and are unable to cope with modernity and progress. However, from the analysis of *In Trend*, it can be said that this stereotype is outdated as one could see that Malays are actively involved in the modern society and are keeping up with the modern times. Not only that, they were the ones who are featured as sharing information, ideas and giving tips to the audience, which indirectly portrayed them as being generous and not selfish or stingy. But, how far will this help in dispelling the negative stereotypes related to the Malays?

Although they did not spell it out, it was quite obvious that the *Buletin Utama* is produced to cater to the Malay market. This was made clear when I noticed that there were issues related to the Malays and Islam being reported but none that specifically touched the non-Malays. Some examples are news on an emotional and spiritual quotient (ESQ) course which was said to be 'haram'(forbidden) for Muslims to participate in, a special report on Ramadhan, Palestinian's plight and Islamic relief in Gaza, and closing of the news with montages of mosques and quranic verses. Thus, it was quite obvious that the news is catered more towards the Malay and Muslim viewers. Hence, it is not a surprise that the news is not popular amongst other races.

The prominence of the Malays could also be seen in 999. A fast paced programme, 999 highlights criminal cases in Malaysia through re-enactment or news clips and reports. In the programmes analysed, the police who were featured are usually Malays. There was hardly any non-malay represented as police. Why is that so? Are the Malays always the dominant ones and

in power? Can this be seen as an extension of the concept of '*ketuanan melayu*'<sup>35</sup> or Malay supremacy, an outcome of colonialisation<sup>36</sup>?

Unlike the other programmes analysed, there were only a few scenes in *Remaja* that could probably give a small glimpse of what certain ethnicity is like, such as in the episode on girls who ran away. One of the fathers interviewed was wearing *kain pelikat* which is the household staple clothe of choice for most Malay men. Referring to the same episode, showing only Malays who ran away can also give the wrong impression to viewers and build a certain negative stereotype about people of the same ethnicity.

Concentrating on highlighting Malay traits in the drama compared to other ethnicities is a way for Malays to learn about their cultural traits, which is an important aspect in identity construction, especially, cultural identity. By watching a programme which focuses on Malay traits, the Malays not only learn more about their culture but they will also be exposed to what makes them special and different from people of other ethnicity. Having said that, it is equally important for the Malays to be exposed to other cultures such as Chinese and Indian cultures. As aptly said by Douglas (in Woodward, 1997: 29), the basis of culture is made up of differences because people cannot be helped but be categorised into different classification systems which stems to distinguish them from people of other cultures. Thus, through difference, they can learn and distinguish themselves as Malays.

#### **4.4 Representations of Chinese, Indian and other cultures.**

The main players and actors of the programmes analysed were monopolised by the Malays. There were hardly any memorable representations of Chinese, Indians, and other ethnicities, even in the local news. At times, people of other ethnicities are interviewed in *Buletin*

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<sup>35</sup> *Ketuanan Melayu* stemmed from the belief that Malays are the rightful citizens of Malaysia. This is because it was believed that the other ethnicities such as Malays and Indians came, not too long ago, as immigrants and were granted citizenship during Malaysia's independence based on a contract which their representative signed, agreeing to the special rights of the Malays.

<sup>36</sup> According to Fenton (2003), at the point of independence, many Malays were worried if they are not able to be financially stable and have a strong foothold in the economy, as the Chinese and Indians were. Hence, Malays were given 'special rights' as a way to protect Malay interests.

*Utama*, *In Trend* and *Remaja*, and featured on 999 but it is quite minimal when compared to the representation of Malays. How then, are the Malays can get to know the Chinese, Indian and people of other cultures? This is a cause of concern because understanding is important in creating a united front, especially in Malaysia's ambition to be recognised as a developed country.

One obvious portrayal of a specific cultural ethnicity, to me, is on the Chinese, but it was reflected in a negative light. The Chinese people are seen as being bossy and involved in illegal businesses, such was the case in *Seram* and 999. In *Seram*, Taukeh Boon is the head of an illegal gang and he was pictured as someone very successful and influential. The relationship between Zaidi and Taukeh Boon somehow portrayed that the Chinese are still the ones who dominate and are in control of businesses. He was the one who ordered Zaidi to kill Lillian and I cannot help but to associate this to how the Chinese seem to be domineering when it comes to their relationship with the Malays.

These racially stereotypical roles dated back from the colonial times when the British ruled Malaya and employed the divide and conquer tactic (Mahathir, 2010: 15-16). They had indeed, in the olden times, segregated jobs, in which Malays were peasants and merely followers and were deemed as lazy folks by the British. The Chinese on the other hand, were encouraged to be involved in business and the Indians worked in the estate or do hard labour. This stereotype was hardly featured in the programmes analysed in this research. However, what I found a bit different is the fact that Malays were also shown to be involved in businesses in the drama. This can be considered as an indirect way in encouraging Malays to be involved in businesses in order to be as successful as the Chinese.

Overall, the portrayal of other ethnicities is minimal compared to those of Malays. How will this be projected in one's process of meaning making, especially in relations to the construction of cultural identity?

#### **4.5 Malaysian and the concept of 1Malaysia**

Unity, according to Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak is an important aspect in ensuring that a country embraces modernisation and development. He, however, took particular interest in Malaysia's diversified community and thus created the concept of 1Malaysia, to simulate the oneness in diversity. A celebration of the diversified cultures, the concept of 1Malaysia tries to inculcate common values which could and had been practiced by the various cultures since a long time ago. My question is that, whether the uniqueness of cultures will be over shadowed in the effort to create unity. This was voiced out by Gellner (2006: 85pp) in which he mentioned that modernisation creates a society which is bounded by a common way of doing things and not by traditions, religions or beliefs. He believed that modernity and nationalism go hand in hand and that when a country tries to inculcate the feelings of nationalism, the introduction of common way of doing things can affect the preservation of traditions, cultures and beliefs.

In this case, it must be pointed out that the common values promoted in the concept of 1Malaysia are neutral and do not mimic any form of Westernisation per se. However, in my opinion, it still fits within the context of modernity because if the government does not successfully integrate cultural values alongside the common values, then traditions will obviously be side lined. Hence, it is of my interest to see how the concept of 1Malaysia was portrayed on television programmes.

It was discovered that each In Trend episode analysed (including the Eid celebration episode) showed excerpts of Malaysia's main landmarks such as Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) and locally produced cars such as Proton and Perodua. This could be related to the 1Malaysia's initiative, in which the government plans to instil the feelings of loyalty and unity. In relation to that, each episode also demonstrated elements of education which coincidentally is also part of the 1Malaysia concept. For example, in the photography episode, audience were taught the right ways to choose a camera and the differences between compact and single lens reflex (SLR) cameras, while in the motorsports episode, they were exposed to the different styles of cars modification.



I also find that this programme, except for the episode on Eid celebration, neutral as it did not specifically touch on race, culture or beliefs. Instead, it concentrated more on trying to educate the viewers and possessed more 1Malaysia values and concepts as opposed to specific cultural identity traits.

The main 'actors' of the programme 999 are the Royal Malaysian Police and perpetrators. The police are usually portrayed as very trustworthy, quick on the move and are always successful in solving criminal cases. This indirectly instils confidence of Malaysian citizens, especially when they are shown the scenes on how the Malaysian police tried to protect citizens' safety by combating crimes. Is this a way for the government, through the media channels, to try inculcate the feelings of loyalty towards the country, which is one of the concepts in 1Malaysia? In relations to this, shots of the Malaysian flags were also constantly infused in scenes or footages from the show, probably as a way to encourage a spirit of patriotism and loyalty.

As for *Remaja*, the programme was infused with a lot of educational elements where they frequently gave tips to viewers. In the episode analysed, they gave tips on how to avoid having problems while using facebook. They also discussed batik making at length including the processes involved and the usage of new technology in doing batik designs. On top of that, they tried to educate viewers on how certain gadgets were made and how to do water rafting. Through this, it was quite obvious to see that the programme places importance on education and tries to promote learning. There was a segment in which local universities were showed as participating in Shell's eco marathon which can be seen as an exposure to youths on the opportunities that they have when they enter university and to how life in the university is like. Showcasing interesting aspects such as these can encourage young people to work hard to enter university and accomplish the same performance, if not better.

Also, the programme tried to insert the role the government plays to help society. Some of the ways which were shown are when the government is portrayed as the agency one should approach for when seeking help, especially in problems which involved another country like in the report of a teenager who eloped to Indonesia by *Remaja*. In addition, in another episode about

the internet, *Remaja* tried to explain some government acts, rules and laws which protect users from the dangers of the World Wide Web. From my observation, it can be seen that *Remaja* tried to educate youths and make a heavy topic easily understood. They also tried to teach young adolescents a lesson, by showing cases which the youngsters are likely to be a part of, so that they will not fall into the same situation.

The Malaysian flag is featured on every *Remaja* episode analysed. Mostly, it was strategically used as the background during interviews. I cannot help but wonder why was it used in that manner? In a way, it could be seen as an initiative to inculcate the feelings of loyalty towards the country, a core value listed in the 1Malaysia concept. Overall, there was no obvious indication of ethnic or cultural identity in *Remaja* and everything seemed to be neutral or not culturally specific. It could be said that the show concentrated more on building the 1Malaysia concept as it closely tailored the programme to fit in to some of the concepts like education, loyalty and perseverance.

Meanwhile, in the three *Buletin Utama* episodes analysed, findings indicated that the news prioritised the nation's leaders, especially the Prime Minister. It was quite obvious that the Prime Minister's opinion is regarded as important in issues related to the country. For example, in the news on 14 July, he was featured and interviewed for three different issues. This simply showed that the Prime Minister is regarded as an authoritative figure which is an indication of a high power distance index and an example of inculcating loyalty in Malaysians. Political issues took the main stage as the one hour news featured politics for about 10 minutes. The Prime Minister's wife, Agong and other political leaders were also featured in all three episodes analysed.

It can also be concluded that the Royal Malaysian Police task is an invaluable government agency which is very trustworthy and dependable. The news, without fail, would show criminal cases which the police had successfully solved and also the ones that are under investigation. This could lead audiences to feel safe, since the police were seen as doing their job and protecting the wellbeing of the citizens. If looked at closely, the news which featured police and criminal cases almost always has shots of the Malaysian flag. Why is that so? Intentional or

unintentionally, the usage of shots of the Malaysian flag together with news on police, inseminated the idea of a masculine society, patriotism, loyalty and pride of being a Malaysian.

In addition, one of the news on local sports featured Malaysian young athletes who underwent rigorous training in an effort to prepare themselves for the World Youth Olympics Games 2010 in Singapore, an indication of their perseverance, a 1Malaysia core value.

Through this analysis, I found that the concept of 1Malaysia is prevalent in the television programmes analysed, with loyalty and education as the most common values being showcased. However, it is noted that this only applies to programmes where genre are news and magazine and not in dramas. In this case, the drama *Seram* concentrated more on showcasing specific cultural values rather than the 1Malaysia values.

#### **4.6 Elements of Westernisation and Cultural Imperialism**

One of the concerns that was pointed out on countries which try to attain the developed country status is the emulation of the Western values in place of the local's cultural traditions. The emulation of Western values is seen as a stepping stone for countries that wish to be modern and developed, especially for third world countries like Malaysia (Tomlinson, 1991: 154). Hence, I paid particular interest in the values shown on television programmes which may be deemed as Western and also looked out for values which can be compared to Hofstede's dimension of culture (1980, 2001), which can assist me in determining if the values of Westernisation and Cultural Imperialism are ingrained in local television programmes.

My first obvious finding was that the programmes did not showcase values which might be looked at as Western. For instance, the values showed in *Seram* clearly concurred with the Hofstede's (1980) dimension of culture. An obvious aspect in the drama is that man is always the leader. This not only applied to Zaidi but also to other characters. For instance, there were scenes in which men were seen giving orders or asking their wives to do chores and wives obey instantly.. Whatever men say are not to be questioned and are to be followed. Men are also the breadwinner and support the wife financially as there are scenes in which men gave women

pocket money and pay her meals. What does this say about Malay men? Does it in any way reflect those living in the West?

If we look at it through Hofstede's dimension of culture (1980: 176), the examples above clearly point out that Malays are more masculine than feminine. This is parallel with Hofstede's (1980) findings in which Malaysia had a score of 50. It is said that members of cultures high in masculinity, value performance, ambition, things, power and assertiveness (Hofstede, 1980: 176pp). That means, the society places importance on material things and strives for power. This can be seen from the drama in which Zaidi obviously finds material wealth and power important to the extent that he got himself involved with organised crime and murder in order to achieve it.

However, on the other hand, the drama showed that family plays an important role in their lives. This could be seen from the way Zaidi treated his son and wife and how the relationship was portrayed. Zaidi was seen as caring and loving. Thus, it could be derived that the community is very collectivistic in nature. This is because the drama seemed to show a lot of scenes featuring families for instance family having meals and conversations together and also joking among themselves. Not only that, the characters were shown to be friendly towards their neighbours and people around them to the extent that they often go out of their way to help these people. This correlates to the score which Malaysia obtained in Hofstede's dimension of culture (2001: 70) which is individualism-collectivism and carries a low score of 26. A relatively low score in individualism – collectivism means Malaysia practises a collectivistic culture. As opposed to an individualistic culture in which one places priorities on themselves and immediate family only, a collectivistic culture sees its people looking after each other within a bigger group.

Collectivism was also found in almost all the programmes analysed. For example, one of the *Remaja* episodes analysed, discussed about girls who ran away from homes to elope with their boyfriends. Through this episode, one could see how family ties are important for Malaysians. One father tried his best to bring back his teenage daughter, who ran to Indonesia to get married but is now left by her husband and unable to go home because she has insufficient funds, to return to Malaysia. His plight and perseverance which was earlier highlighted in the local news received response from viewers and, a Malay based association agreed to help bring the

teenager back. This is the perfect example of how the society is very collective in nature, as pointed out by Hofstede's (2001: 70) dimension of culture. On the other hand, it could also give a negative impression and strengthen the stereotypes towards the Malay as being too emotional, gullible and irrational.

In Trend, had an episode which showcased the close knit relationship Malays have and the important role family play in the daily lives of a Malay which is in line with Hofstede's (1980) dimension of culture which stated that the Malaysian society is collective in nature. The Ramadhan and Eid celebration episode was recorded during the month of Ramadhan, in which it was compulsory for all Muslims to fast from dawn to dusk. The programme showed scenes of breaking fast in which family and friends sat together and enjoyed their meal, followed by the Maghrib prayers.

As for *Buletin Utama*, some of the cases which were featured in the daily news were baby smuggling syndicate, child abuse, road bullies, and illegal massage parlours. I noticed that the choice of news which were featured, were cases which involved family relationships and highlighted what is considered as taboo in the society. For instance, the child abuse case was about irresponsible parents who took advantage of their young toddler. From the way the news was slanted, it was obvious how dysfunctional the family is, and one could notice that this seemed to be out of the ordinary, which indirectly portrayed the Malaysian society as placing importance in family relationships.

The police's success in convicting suspects and solving crimes, in 999 meanwhile, illustrated the masculine nature of the society and the power distance index, as pointed out by Hofstede's (2001: 70) dimension of culture. As described by Ting-Toomey (2005:75), people in large power distance cultures tended to accept asymmetrical relations based role and status which was exemplified by the police's success in convicting criminals. The display of power of the police and its status compared to wrong doers and convicted felonies clearly illustrated how masculine the Malaysian society is.

Other instances which indicated there were hardly any form of Western values is when local traditions takes centre stage in a programme. For instance, *Remaja* highlighted a Malaysian

traditional art form, *Batik*. One of the industry's giants, Noor Arfa Batik, was interviewed and viewers were shown the exotic art of batik making. This simply showed that being proud of one's roots and bringing traditional art to the forefront can be profitable and is a good form of investment. Seeing that the show targeted the younger generation, it is possible that what it is trying to do is to introduce young people to a traditional art form (which has now been expanded as a lucrative business opportunity) and on top of that encourages them to be involved in traditional industries. The only jarring thing that I noticed was the people who were involved in Batik making, as shown in this programme, are Malays. Undeniably, it is an ancient Malay art form, hence, the act of publicising it on television could also encourage youths of other races to be involved in this traditional art form. It is also a perfect example of how modernity and development can be achieved without compromising local traditions and cultures.

In terms of foreigners or features of non-Malaysian in the programmes analysed, the most prominent would be during the sports news in *Buletin Utama*, in which reported on the English Premier League as the centre of attention. However, this could hardly be interpreted as a sign of Westernisation because Malaysian sports news were also highlighted in this segment.

#### **4.7 Discussion**

According to Jeremy Turnstall (1977) globalisation is not an equal process as it champions the United States, especially in spreading their ideologies and beliefs. In the 1970s, the media landscape was indeed dominated by the United States because it was here that media forms were first industrialised. With the United States' domination in the media industry, people became more agitated and concerned about the cultural impact of the so-called one way flow of cultural product (from United States to other countries) and how this would spread their ideologies and create hegemony. Malaysia is not spared from this fear but with recent development, as noted by Turnstall (2007)<sup>37</sup>, the fear may be unfounded.

Looking at the six day analysis of television programmes, it was identified that local programmes still topped the broadcasting hours, but, with merely a 5.4 per cent lead. However, it

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<sup>37</sup> Turnstall (2007) noted that the changes in United States dominance in the media industry and pointed out that Asian countries like India (Bollywood), Japan and Korea are slowly seeping into the world market.

should be noted that not all imported programmes are from the United States but are mostly Indonesian and Chinese series imported from Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. This is in line with what Hesmondhalgh (2007: 220pp) termed the geo-cultural markets in which programmes from other countries (aside from United States) are well received because people share the same cultural affiliations. In this case, Indonesian and Chinese series are imported, not only because of the similar language<sup>38</sup>, but also due to the similar cultural beliefs and values.

Aside from that, most prime time programme on Malaysian television is still dominated by local programmes and the most popular programme still remain a Malaysian produced programme. As argued by Uwe Hasebrink and Anja Herzog (in Hafez, 2007: 59), satellite television is still not met with much response which means that people still prefer to watch local programmes on local television channels. Hence, when looking at programme imports per se, it is nonsensical to say that Malaysians are subject to Americanisation or Westernisation because the most watched programmes are produced by Malaysians and programmes are not only imported from America but from other neighbouring countries like Indonesia, China, Philippines and Thailand as well. However, it should be pointed out that although Malaysia may share its borders with Thailand and Indonesia, the cultures practised are not entirely similar. Hence, I find it imperative for audience's process of meaning making to be researched because their negotiation process with television text still remains to be complex and multi-levelled.

My decision to do so seemed apt as Hafez (2007) commented that satellite television may be able to offer a lot of foreign or American programmes but the number of people who actually watch it is still uncertain. As said by Hafez (2007: 62): "The world market for satellite television has been growing, since the 1990s and has often been interpreted as a sign of globalisation of the media. In many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, however, people tend to want satellite dishes not in order to receive Western programmes but to watch new satellite channels based in their own country or the extended language area. Regular consumption of European and US programmes remains limited to small elites in most countries." Hence, the concern that satellite television in Malaysia would bring in more 'Western'

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<sup>38</sup> Indonesian language is very similar to the Malay language. Chinese in Malaysia also speak Mandarin and Hokkien, language used in Chinese serials.

programmes with beliefs and values which are detached from local values cannot be concluded based merely from content analysis per se as it is quite impossible to determine who watches what on television. Also, it should be noted that if audience do indeed watch the 'Western' programmes, they may not be that easily influenced as messages are polysemic and can be read in multiple ways. (Hall, 1980: 169)

What about the content of the programme itself? The content analysis which I conducted on *Seram*, *Buletin Utama*, *Remaja*, 999 and *In Trend* show no signs of an attempt to emulate Western or American values and in fact seem to reiterate Hofstede's scores (2001: 70) in his research on Malaysia's culture dimension and also stereotypes on local cultural identities. The only thing that is a little 'Western' is the usage of corporate suits and ties and jeans and t-shirts. But, logically this cannot be pinpointed as an effect of cultural or media imperialism because the characters in the drama *Seram* for instance, still wore traditional suits like *baju kurung* and *baju melayu* and they still spoke in Malay language. In fact, there was presence of traditional attires, like *batik* and *kain pelikat*, in all the programmes analysed, albeit not so prominent.

*Seram*, in fact, can be considered as being very Malay in nature because of the presence of black magic and *bomoh* (witch doctors) which is very synonym with Malay culture. Other programmes like *In Trend* and *Remaja* also managed to show a glimpse of what the Malay culture is like, through special episodes like the Eid celebration or special segments which highlighted an aspect of the Malay culture and traditions. However, there were no prominent examples of culture of other ethnicities, which made me wonder, how this will affect the Malay's understanding of the other races in Malaysia and also of their own culture as similarity and difference is an important aspect in identity construction (Woodward, 1997: 9pp).

Aside from that, it was quite obvious that the television programmes echoed Malaysia's Prime Minister's 1Malaysia core values such as perseverance and loyalty. Ironically however, the 1Malaysia concept aims to celebrate the diversity of cultures by not creating a national identity. But, the programme analysed did not seem to reflect that intention as the programme either concentrate on showcasing specific cultural identity for example in like *Seram* and in the other



programmes which highlighted only 1Malaysia values. Wouldn't concentrating on the 1Malaysia core value per se, creates a national identity?

Thus, it can be said that the programmes analysed were not at all affected by the influx of foreign programmes in the Malaysian broadcasting scene. The programmes did not try to compete for viewers by emulating or mimicking foreign drama or programmes but instead emphasises on the 1Malaysia values and also showcased a typical Malay story (in the case of *Seram*) and bits and pieces of the Malay culture. As said by Hafez (2007: 84) the influx of cultural products from United States or the West does not necessarily mean that it automatically suppresses indigenous cultures and that people are easily influenced and readily accept what they watch without questioning it. In this case, a reinforcement of own cultural values, instead of following foreign cultures, could be detected. For instance, the drama showcases a lot of Islamic values which is synonym to Malays.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

Modernity is said to lead to an emulation of Western values, an act which is seen as logical, in an attempt to reach the developed status. Giddens (1991: 146) said that traditions and culture will eventually be left out to make way for modernity. How true is this for Malaysia? Cultural imperialism is a cause of concern for third world countries like Malaysia as the government not only has to work on creating unity within the people of different races and ethnicities but also tries to preserve local traditions which are viewed as being threatened with the influx of American and Western elements through the media. But is the fear reasonable? Fred Fejes (in Tomlinson, 1991: 35-36) aptly said: "While a great deal of the concern over media imperialism is motivated by the fear of the cultural consequences of the transnational media – of the threat that such media poses to the integrity and the development of viable national cultures in Third World societies – it is the one area where, [...], little progress has been achieved in understanding specifically the cultural impact of transnational media on Third World societies." The apprehension on effects of media globalisation and the need to understand cultural impact of

transnational media on Third World societies has prompted me to conduct a small study on programme contents on Malaysian free-to-air television.

It was found that the difference of hours allocated between local and imported programmes was only 5.4 per cent. The difference may look alarming and be a cause of concern especially on the effect of cultural imperialism through the globalisation of the media but rest assured that the bulk of imported programmes are from other Asian countries which have similar language, culture and beliefs.

As for the content analysis which was conducted on local programmes, no evidence of Western culture could be traced. Instead, the drama portrayed a typical Malay life and the other programmes seemed to reiterate Hofstede's findings in his research on Malaysia's cultural dimension. The Malay drama, in particular, showcased a lot of Malay traits, beliefs and values which could be seen as a platform for one to learn more about the culture. But, on the other hand, it could also lead to the construction of stereotypes.

It was also gathered, through this content analysis, that the television programmes echoed the 1Malaysia values such as perseverance and loyalty and did not contain Western or American elements. Not only that, there are even imported programmes brought in from Asian countries with some similar culture and beliefs. However, this does not indicate that their negotiation with television text is any simpler. One has to take into account the fact that Malaysia is made up of a culturally diverse society. Importing programmes from India which will attract Indian viewers and importing from Hong Kong and Taiwan which will attract Chinese viewers mean that there is a possibility that society will be fragmented. How then can unity be achieved? Hence, my study on Malay viewers who incidentally prefer to watch Malay television shows can shed some light into this matter. How does watching mostly Malay shows affect their notion of cultural identity? How do they see themselves as being Malay compared to other ethnicities? What do they know about others?

This chapter serves as a basic groundwork for the next step in my research: uncovering how young people engage themselves with the media and create meanings in the process of their cultural identity construction. It opened up ideas and helped me formulate questions in order

to find out how culture is interpreted and how adolescent make meanings from television text. In addition, it would help a researcher to better understand and make sense of the effect of modernisation and media globalisation on Malaysian society.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

#### 5.0 Introduction

Developments in electronic and satellite communication technology is said to have drew the world together into a united media community. Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media* (1964), talked about the notion of global village in which the world will be clumped into one homogenous community. Although there were criticisms on McLuhan's idea<sup>39</sup>, one cannot deny that the notion of global village could become true, especially in this phase of modernity, in which globalisation is at its prominence. The notion of 'global village' however, is not as exciting to some countries which are proud of their own distinctive and colourful culture, such as Malaysia.

In its race to create a modernise country, Malaysia has opened up its skies to satellite television services which in turn sees an influx of foreign programmes. Malaysian audience, therefore, are exposed to both local and Western cultures through their engagement with the media, especially television. In some sense, it can be seen as a threat to local traditions, beliefs and values and very much in line with what Giddens (1991) and Gellner (2006) believed would happen when a country faces modernity. How true is this? Following the content analysis I did in Chapter Four, which found that the concept of 1Malaysia to be prevalent in local Malay news and magazine programmes, and Malay identity in dramas. I was interested to gauge young people's perception of their cultural identity, with particular interest on the Malay culture. Were they able to find out more about their cultural tradition from television, given the elements that they are exposed to on television? Do they think the television portrays reality and is the truth? My interest in this matter on the whole involves the process of meaning making and how audience engage with television representation.

This chapter, therefore, would thoroughly discuss my findings from the focus group discussion held with adolescents aged between 16 and 19 in urban and rural towns. The focus group discussion not only allowed me to explore what the respondents think and feel which I find

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<sup>39</sup> McLuhan was criticised for overlooking the disparity in access to technology.

important in order to understand how they make sense of the television programmes but it also helped me understand how they create meanings in a process of constructing their cultural identity. The concept of active audience and their decoding of polysemic television messages have somewhat directed my study to explore the negotiation process through focus group discussion.

The first part of this chapter will see me elaborating on my findings based from the discussions held with adolescents living in big, urban towns. This will be followed by the findings from the discussions with young people from rural areas. I choose not to merge my findings and create a distinction between the two groups in order to easily chart out the similarities or differences they may possess. My elaborations will be based on five recurring themes which I have identified throughout the discussion. The themes are:

- a. Adolescents' television watching habit and their relationship with it.
- b. Adolescents' perception on Malays.
- c. Adolescents' perception on people of other ethnicity like Chinese and Indians.
- d. Adolescents' process of formulating thoughts and ideas.
- e. Adolescents' definition of themselves.

The discussion which follows my elaboration of the five themes mentioned will help answer my research objectives which are to examine their reaction to the different values shown on television and also unearth and further understand their decoding process in order to make meanings of the elements they are exposed to on television.

## **5.1 The Urban Experience**

### **5.1.1 Relationship with television**

Living in an urban area with easy internet access, these young respondents admit preferring the internet over television. They use the internet for about three hours every day to catch up on Facebook status, play online games and chat with their friends. They reveal that they will spend more time surfing the net if they can, but their parents set specific time for internet usage. The fact that their parents allocate specific times for internet usage explains why they end up spending more time watching television. Who do they watch television with? They hardly watch television alone and most of the time with family members. I guess this also contributes to the reason why they have more television time compared to internet surfing because when watching television, their parents could easily control and determine what these teens are watching. Hence, when they watched the television together, parents find it unnecessary to impose time limits on its usage. During these times, they will usually watch a programme which is selected by their parents such as Korean dramas, Indonesian sinetrons, documentaries, comedies and news.

As they live in an environment which heavily exposes them to telecommunication devices, they prove to be quite professional in multi tasking. They can use the internet while watching television or send text messages with their eyes still fixed on the television screen, effortlessly. There are also times when they do their school work with the television blaring and this makes me wonder of their concentration level when watching television.

There are times however, that they get to watch television alone, in the evenings when their parents are still at work. And, sometimes, they watch television in the middle of the night without their parents' knowledge, especially if it is their favourite show. There was an instance in which a respondent watched television from 10.30 p.m to dawn just to catch her favourite show, the Nanny. Upon further discussion, I found out that they are very well versed with the television schedule and know when their favourite programmes would be aired and what time would the programmes be repeated. Hence, it is not a surprise when they remarked that they sometimes set their alarm clocks to wake them up for the late night shows.

During the instances in which they get to select the programmes to watch on television, they insisted that they select their shows based on the director and actor. It should be pointed out that everybody in this discussion has access to Astro's unlimited channels which means their parents do not only subscribe to the basic package but to other packages as well. Hence, they are more exposed to more choices in terms of television programmes. However, among all the choices available, I found them inclining towards comedies as the discussion were constantly peppered with examples from the Nanny and *Adnan Sempit*, both of which are comedies. They also prefer to watch Malay dramas and shows. Besides that, I found that females are more excited when talking about television characters or shows.

I found that these young people are more discerning in their programme choices. When they have the freedom to select what to watch, they place particular importance on genre, director and producer of the programmes.

Moderator : Why? What makes you interested to watch a particular show?

Izza : You mean like actors?

Sofia : Asyraf Muslim<sup>40</sup>.

Moderator : Well, (do you like a programme because of the) actors? Or story line?

Izza : Everything counts....the director...yea...the director. Some directors are really good...Rashid Sibir...I have never missed any of his dramas. I love the producer...Azizah Ahmad...I like shows produced by Metrowealth..funny...very funny.

(Group 1, October 2010)

Note that in the conversation above, Izza was able to name her favourite director and producer. Does being exposed to various information from the media increase her media literacy? I propose that the plurality of choices has indeed made her an active audience who is aware of her surroundings. How will this contribute to the process of meaning making? In order to find out,

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<sup>40</sup> Asyraf Muslim is a Malaysian actor.

I ponder on their responses and try to establish a connection to their perception of their (Malay) cultural identity, based on what they watched on television.

### 5.1.2 Perception on Malays: *Melayu Hebat!*<sup>41</sup>

Although the respondents were all Malays, they were very critical when giving their opinions on people of their own race. Some were sarcastic and overall, they had only negative things to say about Malays. Their perceptions on Malays include racist, impolite and lazy.

Moderator : What do you think of Malays?

Izza : *Melayu hebat!* (Malays are great). (Followed by sarcastic laughter.)

Sofia : Malays are divided into two. One, too pious and religious and looks down on those who are not, impatient, easily gets angry, racist.

Aizat : There are Malays who are lazy.

Moderator : Polite Malays?

Nana : Very hard to find.

(Group 1, October 2010)

One cannot help but wonder why do they set such a low standard and have negative outlooks on Malays? Are they being modest by looking down on people of their own race and not saying anything good about Malays? Why do they identify Malays as being of such behaviour and characteristics? I was surprised with Nana's response that polite Malays are very hard to find, because the Malay race is synonym with a particular characteristic, *berbudi bahasa* (politeness) (Hussain, 1977: 101). Upon further probing, I deduced that these perceptions are stemmed from the portrayals of Malays which they interpreted from watching local television.

When questioned about their thoughts on representation of Malays on television, the respondents seemed to be put off by the characters in Malay dramas and films. They felt that the characters' behaviour is over the top and bitchy. They also criticised the clothes worn and labelled them as sexy and thought that there was a lot of public display of affection, which was

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<sup>41</sup> *Melayu hebat* can be translated to Malays are great.



purposely done to show off. To them, the portrayal of Malays on television, are seen as an incorrect interpretation of what Malays are really like. The characters are exaggerated and seem to be either one of the two extreme ends. For instance, the characters are either portrayed as being really rich and of the higher status whereby they own big posh cars or they are poor and live in slumps or small villages. In addition, the characters are either too pious or too ignorant about Islam and *gedik*<sup>42</sup>. An important characteristic of Malays, despite their status or beliefs and values is that they are always envious of others and get jealous easily.

- Moderator : What about their (Malays) behaviour on television?
- Nana : Very bitchy!
- Izza : Ahah. Too bitchy. And sexier.
- Sofia : The clothing right?
- Izza : It is like there are no boundaries between man and women. They like to hug. It is like they want to let the whole world know that they are in a relationship.
- Sofia : Last time, I think the characters were more elegant and classy. But now they just don't care. Maybe it is because they have to act. But still, we (teenagers) are inquisitive and would like to know all this, right?
- Moderator : So, what else (do you think) about Malays?
- Izza : A lot about love, juvenile delinquency
- Moderator : All this... how is it portrayed on television?
- Sofia : (The people are dressed) Sexy...and sometimes very bitchy.
- Moderator : But, aren't there also people who wears the hijab?
- Sofia : Yea...but not that many.
- Nana : Ha...sometimes they show these people (those wearing hijab) becoming worse. For instance, first they wear it (hijab) and then they get raped, and then they decided not to wear it and became a bad character.

(Group 1, October 2010)

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<sup>42</sup> *Gedik* is a colloquial term used to describe someone who is frivolous

The discussion on portrayals of Malays on television went on for some time. They thought that the Malay characters are sometimes exaggerated. An example which they referred to was a film, *Budak Kelantan*, which was broadcasted on Astro. They said that the values which were shown were horrendous and that the film had no motive at all.

Moderator : .. the way they (Malays in television) dress up... their behaviour... how is it?

Nana : Language. Because nowadays they mix (the languages by using local dialects and standard Malay and also English). You know, like *Budak Kelantan*. Have you watched it? It is so bad...the moral. *Rempit!* That story had no motive!.

Aizat : I think *Adnan Sempit* is OK.

Izza : It is like this.... it (the portrayal of characters) is worse (than how it actually is).

Sofia : Maybe they want to show their talent in acting (the despicable characters) but it could give the wrong impression to people who watch it. They would go...hey..what is this all about? (Furthermore).. teenagers are easily influenced.

(Group 1, October 2010)

At one point, the respondents were also animatedly talking about Malay television series, *Adnan Sempit* and *Epilog Syurga Cinta*. In *Adnan Sempit*, the main character is a *Mat Rempit*<sup>43</sup>, who works as a despatch rider. I questioned them the ethnicity of *Mat Rempit*, whether they think he is a Malay. I also provoked them by asking if believed what they see on television screen is really happening in real life. The answers were varied. Some said that in real life, *Mat Rempit* is not as aggressive as shown on television. Their reactions were a bit of a surprise, given the fact that people who are *Mat Rempit* were often highlighted on the television news and in the newspaper as being a nuisance.<sup>(44)(45)</sup>. This shows that other sources of information may not influence their process of decoding television text heavily. They were indeed active and selective

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<sup>43</sup> Mat Rempit is a term used to describe youths who are obsessed with motorcycles and likes to be involved in illegal motorcycle races.

<sup>44</sup>When Mat Rempit is not a Mat Rempit, accessed from <http://www.asiaone.com/Motoring/News/Story/A1Story20090422-136739.html> on 31 October 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Several other stories on Mat Rempit which were published in a Malaysian daily, the Malay Mail can be viewed at <http://www.mmail.com.my/taxonomy/term/85> (accessed on 31 october 2011)

in choosing what they want to watch, but having done so does not ensure that they will not decode television text in a dominant-hegemonic position or accept things as how they are shown on television.

From the discussion, it seemed that their understanding of what Malays are, are correlated to what was shown on television. For instance, the negative outlook that they seemed to have on Malays were reiterated when they heavily criticised television shows for featuring Malay characters in the same light. Ironically however, during the discussion, they denied that the portrayals on television reflect reality but it proved otherwise when they only had negative things to say about Malays in real life. Thus, what they said they believed were Malay's characteristics are associated to negative values which is the opposite of what they think Malays should be like. For instance, in the discussions, they mentioned that on television Malays were bitchy, envious and seen as backstabbers which are not much different from their thoughts on Malay in real life where they are envious, impatient, racist and impolite. But, when they mentioned that the characters on television do not reflect reality, this indirectly pointed out to what they think Malay's identity should be like such as polite, loyal and knows his or her boundaries and adheres to Islamic values.

It is interesting to note the way they form their opinion, particularly in their perception of Malay identity in real life. What they construct in their head and heart seems to contradict what they say verbally on Malay identity and what was portrayed on television. By saying that Malays' characteristics and behaviour are unlike those shown on television (oppositional decoding), they are, in other words, suggesting that it (the identities) should be like what is being shown on television. So, what they believe Malays should be and what they think Malays really are and how it is portrayed on television are poles apart. This could be related to Anderson's (2006) imagined community in which people perceived themselves as part of a particular group assembled through symbols and rituals. In this regard, the adolescents already have a specific set of traits which they imagined belong to the Malay identity – polite and loyal. But, in their 'reality', Malays are envious, impatient and impolite, which are pretty much how they interpret the Malay characters as being portrayed on television. This reminds me of what Fiske (1987: 178) said

about reading television text is a process of negotiation between what is already embedded in the audience's belief system and the one proposed by the text itself. Now, how do they read television texts when it involves people of different culture and ethnicity? How would the different or similar readings affect their construction of cultural identity?

### **5.1.3 Perception on people of other ethnicities: Chinese are never poor.**

The adolescents' engagement with television text, in relations to people of their own ethnicity seemed to be contradicting. In an attempt to be conclusive in my findings, I feel that dissecting their thoughts only on Malay cultural identity per se is inadequate. Naturally, I was also interested to find out what the respondents know about the cultures of other ethnicities such as Chinese and Indians because knowing the differences is a way for one to construct his or her identity (Woodward, 1997: 7-62).

When speaking about Chinese, it was interesting to note that the first thing that came into their mind was Kung Fu. However, they were quick to say that the thing that they remembered most from watching Kung Fu films on television was just the fighting scenes. It should be pointed out, that Kung Fu films which are broadcasted on local television are imported from Hong Kong or China and are not locally produced. What about locally produced shows? As previously mentioned in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the top programmes watched by Malay adolescents are local Malay based television shows. Thus, it was important for me to find out how they see Chinese being portrayed on these shows. According to the respondents in locally produced programmes, Chinese are often portrayed as *Along* (illegal money lender) and are violent, especially when they collect their debts from the debtors. Another distinctive attribute of Chinese is that they are always pictured as rich and are never poor.

Moderator : Ok, when you watch television, how are they (Chinese) portrayed?

Izza : Usually, they are *Along*...always involved in fights and violent.

Lili : And then, very rich...never poor.

(Group 1, October 2010)

Their opinions on television portrayals of Chinese, and what they think of Chinese in reality are somewhat different. In real life, they felt that Chinese are thrifty and place priority on family. Hence they are not necessarily rich and do not lead an extravagant nor a lavish lifestyle as what they interpreted as seen on television.

Their thoughts on Indians, meanwhile, based on what they are exposed to on television are rather limited. This is probably due to the fact that they hardly watch any Indian shows and that Indians are hardly represented on local Malay shows, as pointed out by the content analysis I conducted. However, through the limited exposure that they have of Indians on television, they unanimously agreed that Indians are always portrayed as aggressive and brutal, drunkard and as estate workers.

Moderator : What about Indian?

Lili : Ha..fight! Drunkard.

Aizat : Works in estate.

(Group 1, October 2010)

Although their exposure to Indians through television is limited, they seem to have a lot of opinions on Indians in real life. They opined that Indians are hot headed and talk without thinking of the consequences. Indians are also considered aggressive and do not care for other people's feelings especially of those with different ethnicity but ironically, insist that others respect them and consider their feelings when talking or working with them. In short, Indians, through their eyes, were seen as a threat and a very aggressive and violent group of people. This notion somehow correlates to how they decoded the cultural identity of an Indian through television texts.

Through this discussion, I could see that the decoding process is indeed polysemic in nature and what Hall (1980) pointed out in ways one can decode messages and make meanings rings true. In the examples above, we could see that the group of young people decode

meanings, both oppositionally and hegemonically. For instance, their thoughts on how Chinese are being portrayed on television and how Chinese are in real life are contradictory. In this scenario, one could say that they decoded the television text oppositionally and that their exposure to the things highlighted on Chinese does not affect their construction of thoughts on the identity of people of this ethnicity. So, how do they create meanings in their daily lives?

Studying their background, I found that the adolescents in this group go to a school with a lot of Malays and Chinese as opposed to Indians. Their group of friends are also mostly made up of Malays and Chinese but with Malays as being the majority. This could explain the way they look at the respective cultures. For instance, their perspective on Indians mirrored how Indians are portrayed on television. This, in my opinion, is because of their lack of exposure to Indians in real life; hence they gather their information about Indian cultural identity from television, which may not be necessarily true. As for Chinese cultural identity, their opinions on them in real life contradict what is shown on television, as they interact with Chinese friends in school and hence do not believe the stereotypical roles shown on television. I believe, their construction of cultural category, pertaining to Chinese, has a lot to do with their exposure and socialisation with people from that ethnicity, hence, enabling them to identify the discrepancy in stereotypical roles held by Chinese in local programmes.

#### **5.1.4 Process of formulating thoughts and ideas: My friend told me to...**

The process of formulating one's thoughts and decisions is important in the construction of cultural identity. Thus, I find it imperative to know what their trusted source of information is. From the discussions, it was quite obvious that they listen to their friends and sisters. Parents are certainly not the ones they go to if they have any problems or are unsure about some things.

Moderator : When did you guys learn about how to get a baby?

Izza : Oh no... definitely not from school?

Sofia : From school?

Nana : From friend.. I knew it from my friend. She told me... she said I have to know because if not other people can trick me.

Sofia : I asked my mother. Then she told me that I have to get married first.

Izza : My sisters.

(Group 1, October 2010)

Note that Nana could be seen as relying a lot on her friend because her friend was looking out for her and giving her beneficial information so that she would not be fooled or conned by other people. Sofia meanwhile, cannot get the answer she was hoping for from her mother. The contrasting reaction by the person they asked questions and hopes to get answers from probably contributes to the reason why when they are faced with problems, they would rather solve it themselves with the help from their friends. They insisted that they could not rely on their parents to help solve the problems as the problems itself sometimes came from the parents. Friends' opinions and thoughts count more and are considered more reliable and trusted as they themselves admitted that teens are easily influenced by friends. A further example of influences of people around them into their thoughts processes can be seen as follows.

Moderator : Do you make your own decisions, or....?

Izza : Sometimes on my own... I will think about it.

Moderator : Parents?

Nana : Most of the times parents are the ones who caused the problem, so obviously I would not go to them.

(Group 1, October 2010)

Influences of others in the process of constructing meaning could also be seen when, in the discussion, the respondents remarked that on television, audience can see people of different ethnicity and even Malays who are living in different states being friends. People in reality, according to the respondent, unconsciously segregate themselves, first according to different

racess, followed by the different places where they originated from. As aptly said by Nana in the discussion: "Not everybody realises that the Malays in different parts of Malaysia speak a different dialect or have their very own special delicacies, what more is there to know about the culture of other ethnicities." How did Nana come up with the opinion about this matter? Apparently, she found out about this "reality" of people unconsciously segregating themselves from her cousins who are studying in university. Thus, we could see that for young people, other people's opinion matters when making up their minds. This is related to audience activity, which I thoroughly discussed in chapter 2, orality and phases in exposure.

From the above, it could be said that the process of orality and phases in exposure contributes to the process of making meanings from television texts. But, it must be pointed out that they do not simply concur to the opinions of any Tom, Dick or Harry, Instead, priority is placed on their friend's opinion. Thus, it could be said that interaction with friends plays a big role in the construction of meanings. In the process of negotiation, the act of talking about the show is indeed an important activity.

#### **5.1.5 Definition of self: I am Malaysian!**

Growing up in times of modernisation, adolescents are faced with multiple choices as to how they would construct their identity. Polhemus (1998)<sup>46</sup> described the availability of multiple identities which youths can emulate as a 'supermarket' in which they can just pick any style or personality they prefer and mix and match it in an attempt to construct their own identity. In this case, I am looking at how they make meanings from the programmes that they watch and see if it contributes to the process of identity construction. With so many sources of information, it would be advantageous to relate how they define themselves to the elements that they are exposed to from watching television.

Going back to their background, the respondents live in big cities but revealed that their parents originally came from different parts of Malaysia like Kelantan, Penang, and Perak. However, they can hardly understand the local Malay dialects in the respective states and also

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<sup>46</sup> Information on the Supermarket of Style could also be accessed from Polhemus' website: [http://www.tedpolhemus.com/main\\_concept5%20467.html](http://www.tedpolhemus.com/main_concept5%20467.html)



admitted to not being familiar with the local delicacies except for some famous ones which are available where they lived such as *laksa*, *nasi kerabu*, and *nasi dagang*.

Moderator : Are you all from here (the town, Subang)? Like your parents, is this their home town?

Nana : Kelantan

Izza : Penang

Aizat : Perak

Moderator : So you can speak (the) Kelantan (Malay dialect), Terengganu (Malay dialect)...if people talk, would you understand?

Nana : I cannot really understand.

Moderator : Can you speak Terengganu (Malay dialect)? Can? What about traditional food in Terengganu?

Nana : Yea...I eat those. Keropok lekor, nasi kerabu, nasi dagang

Izza : Laksa Penang, nasi kandar

Nana : Akok

Moderator : Do you know the local sweets and desserts in the respective places?

Sofia : The boat thing? Eh...wait, is it called kuih sampan?

Izza : Just say kuih semprit..I am not sure.....

Moderator : No, what I meant is something like Akok.. You know, local 'kuih'.

Aizat : Do you know? (looks around at the other respondents)

Izza : Eat budu lah...I wonder if it tastes nice.

Nana : Budu is yummy..

(Group 1, October 2010)

From the dialogue above, it can be seen that they are unsure and not familiar with local delicacies and the various Malay dialects. This could be related to the issue of reliant and trust in getting information from their parents, hence, the lack of exposure to traditions, beliefs, and

values on the Malay culture from the elders. Thus, it could be said that they depend on their own peers as well as television for their source of information. However, understandably, their peers are of the same age group and have the same limited exposure on Malay culture, as they themselves are, as exemplified by the Sofia who had to verify the name of the '*kuih sampan*' with her friends. Therefore, it could be deduced that television and other forms of media play a big role in disseminating information regarding their Malay cultural identity. The importance of media in disseminating information, in phases of modernity, as said by Siapera (2010) and Giddens (1991) can be seen in these adolescents' dependence on television for information. Also, the suggestion by Giddens (1991) in which he said traditions are slowly being left behind rings true in this matter. For these urban adolescents, the lack of information on their culture from television as I found in the content analysis conducted and socialisation with their peers made it difficult for them to learn about their cultural identity, hence seeing culture not being practised or valued by them.

Not being well versed and familiar with their respective cultural identity is probably why they chose to associate themselves as being Malaysians rather than identifying themselves as Malays. They are proud to be Malaysian because of the *muhibbah*, multiracial and multicultural society. They feel special to be a part of this country as they believe that Malaysia is very peaceful. One respondent commented that even though there are a lot of criminal cases like theft and rape, the country is still safe. As for racial disparity and tensions between races, the matter, in their eyes, is easily resolved and not prolonged.

Moderator : Ok..like I ask u guys, who are you? Malaysian, Malay or...?

Izza : Malay la

Aizat : Malaysian la

Nana : Malaysian. I am very *yakin* (sure)

Moderator : How does it feel to be Malaysian?

Izza : Proud! Special.

Moderator : Why special?

Izza : Because..*muhibbah*. A lot of races and we all mix around.

Nana : Furthermore, Malaysia is peaceful. Even though there are a lot of thefts or rapes, Malaysia is still peaceful.

Sofia : Yea...even though there are racist...fights...all is resolved.

(Group 1, October 2010)

Are there any relations to the line of thoughts mentioned above with what they watch on television? In the content analysis I conducted and elaborated in Chapter 4, it was found that the television shows analysed highlighted the concept of 1Malaysia. I see the way these adolescents define themselves seem to mirror the values and beliefs which were highlighted by the popular television shows. For instance, in the discussion above, they were very sure about how safe the country is. This reflected their 'trust' and reliance on information from television, as in chapter four, I have pointed out that local television programmes showcase police as always successful in solving criminal cases or are working hard in ensuring the safety of Malaysian citizens. However, it must be reminded that I am not trying to generalise the young people population of Malaysia but this finding is indeed very valuable as it explains how adolescents' interact with television and people around them contribute to their process of making sense of the world around them.

## 5.2 The Rural Experience

### 5.2.1 Television watching habit

In the small town of Kuala Kubu Bharu<sup>47</sup>, I had the opportunity to spend some time with 8 Malay adolescents. In the era of Facebook, YouTube and downloadable programmes from the internet, it is quite surprising to find these adolescents not bothered to stay connected on the World Wide Web. Understandably, unlike many adolescents who live in the city and have the luxury of the internet, these adolescents hardly use the World Wide Web as access is not available from home<sup>48</sup>. The only way they can stay connected is by going to cyber cafe, but the small town has only two cyber cafes, and spending time in it is considered a luxury for school going teenagers. Another option is to use their mobile phones but the services are deemed as expensive and only a handful of adolescents own their own mobile telephone, in this small town. Hence, television is their answer to entertainment. On average, they watch the television for about four hours every day. Other than that, boys would also play soccer in the afternoon or ride motorbikes with friends to pass their time and this takes about one to one and a half hour, a few days in a week.

Normally, each household owns only one television set at home, thus, they would watch it with their family and are not given the choice of programmes to watch as their parents or older siblings would be holding the remote control. However, this does not deter them from sleeping late at night to catch reruns of their favourite programmes, sometimes, sneaking out of their bedroom and tuning the volume down, so as not to wake anybody up because they are aware that their parents would be furious for watching television in the middle of the night during a school week.

Programmes which are usually watched with family members differ according to how old the adolescent is. The older adolescents (aged 17 and 18) will usually watch the evening news

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<sup>47</sup> The respondents I interacted with were from a small town in Kuala Kubu Bharu, Selangor, Malaysia. The village is populated by 174, 800 people, of which 48 per cent of that number is made up of the Malay ethnicity, 29 per cent Chinese, 14.4 per cent Indian and 9.6 per cent of other ethnicity and nationality (<http://www.mdhs.gov.my/penduduk>).

<sup>48</sup> In Malaysia, the percentage of households with access to television is 95.2 per cent as opposed 28.2 per cent with access to personal computer (Communications and Multimedia Selected Facts and Figures Q3, 2007)

with their family as they felt it is important to be kept abreast with current affairs, to help them with the national exam; Malaysian Education Certificate (equivalent to O-Levels) and Higher Education Certificate (equivalent to A-Level). If they were left to their own devices, they prefer to watch foreign movies or television series, especially those imported from the United States and Korea.

The younger adolescents however, do not like to watch the evening news, preferring to do their homework or household chores during the news.

Amina:           The news is like an alarm for me. When the news starts, I know it is time to take my shower or start doing my homework.

Alia:             I know that it is important to watch the news but I think it is boring and would rather do something else while the rest of my family watch it.

(Group 2, September 2010)

From the above, I find that there were two obvious activities which reflected the activeness of these young people: intentionality and selectivity. In intentionality, it was obvious that they had specific intentions as to why they watch the news; as in the case of these who watch the news to keep up with the going-ons of the world in preparations of their examination. Also, even though they had a relatively limited exposure to the media, they still remained selective in choosing what to watch, stating their preferences. Almost all the houses subscribe to Astro, but they confided that they mostly watch TV3, a local free to air television channel<sup>49</sup>. Although Astro offers more channels, not everyone could afford to subscribe to the packages offered, resulting in only getting the basic package. Furthermore, the adolescents have expressed that they find the satellite broadcast to be repetitive.

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<sup>49</sup> According to Karthigesu (in Tai , 1997: 470), TV3's establishment was driven by the government's goal to decrease the involvement of public sector in the economy and to provide high quality entertainment. TV3 became very popular with the Malaysian public as it broadcasted programmes which were mostly imported from the United States and Britain. The station was seen as a fresh alternative compared to RTM 1 and RTM 2 which many deemed as the government's mouth piece. Also, programmes which were shown on RTM 1 and RTM 2 were not up to date and less popular.

The feeling that Astro broadcasts the same show stems from the fact that Gerbner et al. (2002: 44) has highlighted in which many different types of programmes share similar important features of storytelling. Hence, as maintained by Hopkins (2009) the more people watch television, the less choices they actually have in terms of the programmes.

### 5.2.2 Perception on Malays

Some adolescents, especially the 16 year olds, could really relate to the characters shown on the television programmes. Some characters on television are felt to represent themselves. They feel closely related and could empathise with what the character is going through. Often, they see the characters as telling the story of their lives, although, in reality, not everything about the character is similar to them. For example, Sofia said that she loves watching *Cinta Kirana*<sup>50</sup>, an Indonesian television show, because of the main character's happy-go-lucky attitude is felt to be similar to hers. However, that was as far as the resemblance goes, because in the television series, Kirana had to go through hardships to support her family while Sofia leads a relatively easy life. The intimacy she felt towards the character is related to what Straubhaar (2008) and Philo and Miller (2001) acknowledged happening in countries, whose media industry is mostly dominated by the United States. However, in this case, Sofia was not empathising with a character from the West, but of one from the neighbouring country, Indonesia. Straubhaar (2008: 25) noted that "to some extent, people in audience come to identify with that they are shown." Is this an indication of a form of cultural imperialism as well, albeit from a country just across the Malacca Straits? In my opinion, she could have felt that way because of the cultural affiliation Malays have with Indonesian. As explained in Chapter 1, some Malays from Malaysia were actually migrants from different parts of Indonesia. Hence, in this case, empathising with the character from an Indonesian series is similar to identifying with a Malay character.

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<sup>50</sup> The story is about Sita and Rama who used to be in a relationship. They met again when they were older and decided to match make their grandchildren, Kirana and Galang instead. Tragedy started when Rama and Galang were involved in the accident. Rama didn't survive while Galang's body was never found. Kirana then, had to take charge of the family and be the breadwinner.  
([http://www.mdentertainment.net/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.general&section=tv\\_show&subsection=archives&id=17&startrow=31](http://www.mdentertainment.net/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.general&section=tv_show&subsection=archives&id=17&startrow=31))

But, at the same time, there are those who had mixed feelings when talking about Malay characters on television. First, they were all gung ho about praising the Malay characters as disciplined, polite, nice and pious. But when I asked if it mimics reality, they started to point out the negative characters and relate it to 'their' reality.

Moderator : How are Malays portrayed in dramas?

Azlan : Polite. There's a distinct Malayness like they read the Quran.

Moderator : What do you mean by distinct Malayness?

Azlan : How they dress...their discipline.

Julia : *Baju kurung* and *baju melayu*.

Moderator : What about their characters? How is it portrayed?

Mai : Sometimes they start out as someone bad but ended up being nice. Or maybe they are sexy but then they get to know someone and they change to become a better person. They wear hijab.

[...]

Moderator : But usually, are Malays shown in a positive or negative light?

Sofia : They are honest.

Azlan : (They are portrayed in) A lot (of ways). But mostly negative. There are some positive ones though.

Sofia : Malays are portrayed as envious and jealous if others are more fortunate, successful in life, richer or in any way better than they are. It must be true because if not, the scriptwriter wouldn't have written it that way.

(Group 2, September 2010)

They also find that Malays are usually portrayed as docile, passive and accepting on television.

Julia : Like in *Ular Emas*. People were treating him (one of the character in the series) badly, but he didn't do anything about it. He just kept quiet...like he had no feelings. I don't like it.

Azlan : They just keep quiet even though they know they are being used by other people!

(Group 2, September 2010)

The conversation above clearly indicates that these teen interpreted the characters in various ways. They acknowledged that there are both positive and negative portrayals of the Malays. Some of the characteristics of Malay as how they see it are disciplined, Islamic, envious, docile and passive. More importantly, they believed that television depicts reality as the scripts are written based on real life experience.

The 18 year olds, meanwhile, clearly prefer watching foreign programmes than locally produced programmes. They like to watch American television shows like CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, Licence to Grill, National Geographic and films. They seem to think that the American culture is superior and that the technology is more advanced. Philo and Miller (2001) had noticed the phenomena of being partial towards American programmes, due to the USA being a world-wide market leader in film distribution since the 1920s.

They also like to watch Korean television shows as they love to observe the fashionable outfits worn by the characters and marvel at the Korean's no-nonsense attitude.

Zulfa : I love that the Koreans are soft, gentle, polite and yet they don't tolerate nonsense, stand up for their right and are not as dramatic as what I usually see in Malay dramas.

Amy : Koreans' display of emotion is how I feel real Malays are like.

Farah : I think the story in Korean and Indonesian dramas are similar to Malay lives and culture.



Zizi : When Koreans act, it looks so natural. In Malay dramas, even if it was a scene on the deathbed, the actor/actress would be heavily made up, thick fake eyelashes and lipstick. It is so unreal!

(Group 3, September 2010)

As for Indonesian dramas and programmes, they felt that the script was cleverly written, and the twists of plots are interesting to watch.

Amy : Indonesian series actually made me think and are different from Malay dramas which are always so predictable. I can correctly guess the ending within 5 minutes of watching it. But Indonesian produced programmes are different. The twist of plots always left me guessing on what is going to happen in the next episode.

(Group 3, September 2010)

From their responses, I deduced that they do not think too highly of local programmes and highly regard foreign programmes. In the course of my research, somebody commented that Malay drama nowadays are so 'westernised'. Everything, she said, from clothing to cars and lifestyles are similar to what one could see in an American programme.

Farah : I think it is absurd that most Malay dramas revolve around wealthy families, with fancy cars when not everyone can afford that lifestyle. Shouldn't they show something more realistic?"

(Group 2, September 2010)

But, if one were to look at it from the another perspective, one will wonder if the programme producers are producing these programmes to fulfil the needs the older adolescents who prefer to watch foreign programmes.

Not only that, the 18 year-olds disagree with the way Malays are portrayed on television and think that it is different than how it is in everyday life. In fact, they seemed quite upset with the

representation and felt that Malays deserved a better form of personification. Malays, they said, are portrayed in a bad manner.

Moderator : What can you say about Malays cultural identity as it is shown on television?

Zulfa : Positive or negative?

Moderator : It doesn't matter.

Farah : I don't think there's any (feature on Malay culture) on Astro.

Remy : A lot negative.

Zizi : I think, I see that most characters in Malay dramas are always envious of others. They cannot accept it if other people are better off than them. For example, if they see someone richer than them, they will try their best to take over the property and money. Otherwise, they would devise a plan to make sure that the other person suffers damages, whether emotionally or materialistically.

Azlan : ( They are) Conservative, right?

Zulfa : Yea, conservative.

(Group 3, September 2010)

Their being upset is not unfounded as after all, audience may perceive what they see differently and tend to articulate different meanings in their pursuit of understanding and construction of identity. According to Mitchell (2002), vision and visual images appears to be natural and transparent but in actual fact are symbolic constructions "like language to be leaner, a system of codes that interposes an ideological veil between us and the real world."(p. 170-171) Images on television, may seem like merely a source of visual pleasure but it holds a deeper meaning. Certainly, the representations can be read in multiple ways, as the message is polysemic and the way one decode the messages depends on among other things, experience and social background. In this case, the 18 year-olds I talked to appear to have a different opinion than the 16 year olds, and are able to differentiate and notice the fallacies which appear in the way television represent people of their own culture background. I cannot help but wonder what

caused the different outlooks. Upon scrutinisation, I propose that it could be caused by their different preferences over television show. As noted in the discussion above, the 18 year olds cited foreign and mostly Western television shows as their favourite while the 16 year olds preferred Malay dramas. Now, their exposure to foreign elements have not made them, gullible to follow or emulate 'Western' characteristics and identity, but instead made them more aware of things around them and more Malay. I see this as an example of them being selective and active in choosing the elements to be recognised as their cultural identity.

Taking this into account, I also wondered how they see Chinese and Indians being represented on television, as they are not really exposed to people of other ethnicity in their village. How do they make meanings of other ethnicities' cultural identity? And how do they relate it to reality?

### **5.2.3 Perception on People of Other Ethnicities: Koreans are not Chinese**

As mentioned earlier, the respondents in this discussion live in a small village, where the main population is made up of Malays. They are mostly friends with Malays as Chinese and Indians tend to live amongst themselves. Given the fact that they are hardly exposed to Chinese and Indian culture in real life, it was interesting to see how they make sense of the portrayal of Chinese and Indians on television. Do their exposures to these cultures encourage them to construct a specific stereotype of the different ethnicities?

Firstly, what intrigued me was the fact that they consider Chinese and Koreans as similar. When I started the discussion of Chinese, the first thing that popped out was that they like watching Chinese shows. However, upon further probing, I found out that the Chinese shows that they were referring to were actually Korean dramas.

Moderator : Let's say we want to learn about Chinese culture, do you think we can do that by watching television?

Farah : Yes...yes you can find out more. I always watch Korean dramas!

Zizi : Koreans are not Chinese.

Farah : There are little bits of Chinese like the fighting parts?

Amy : Aren't Korean like Chinese anyways?

(Group 2, September 2010)

However, when I asked how Chinese are portrayed in locally produced programme, the first thing that came into their minds is that they are rich in traditions. However, their answers are a little vague as they cannot elaborate on what they meant by traditions. Aside from that, they seem to think that Chinese characters on television are always negatively portrayed. For instance, they are pictured as being involved in illegal money lending business and also selling DVDs.

Moderator : How are Chinese portrayed on television?

Alisa : Chinese...have a lot of traditions.

Moderator : Traditions? Are there any Chinese in Malay dramas?

Julia : Yea

Moderator : What characters do they usually play?

Julia : Bad people.

Azlan : Yea....like Along, sell DVD

Mai : There's also Malays who marry Chinese.

Azlan : Like Talentime. There's Malay, Chinese and Indian (in the story), right?

Julia : If a Chinese acts in a Malay drama, in a village setting, he or she will be the fish monger or fruit seller. It is always something connected to business.

(Group 2, September 2010)

One of the interviewee felt that Chinese has a similar culture to the Malays because she had watched some Chinese men going to a popular Malay actor's funeral but was left confused when she sees that the Chinese students in her school only befriend Chinese and only talk to the Malays when necessary. This clearly indicated that she was not sure of what to make out of the

Chinese and what are their cultural identity like as what they watch on television seem to be contrary to what they observe in real life. However, as indicated in the interview, their observation on television seem to be a reference point of what they think is 'real' and that the Chinese in their school were not behaving according to what is portrayed on television. This could be due to the fact that they are not close to people of other ethnicity.

Azlan : I am not really close to the Chinese in my school. They usually hang out with people of their own ethnicity.

Julia : Yea...Chinese always with Chinese. Indians are always with Indians.

(Group 2, September 2010)

Indians, meanwhile, were considered as a lower class citizen. They were seen as low paid worker such as working in the estate or doing hard labour. They are also considered ruthless and vicious as usually, thugs and local 'mafias' are played by actors of Indian ethnicity.

Moderator : Are there Indians in Malay dramas?

Mai : Yes

Azlan : They are gangsters!

Julia : There's also Indians as police in *Gerak Khas*.<sup>51</sup>

Moderator : What about in villages. How are Indians portrayed?

Azlan : As thugs. Or crazy person.

Alisa : Thiefs.

Julia : Drain cleaner.

(Group 2, September 2010)

Did they consider the criteria above – gangster, low class worker and criminals – as associated with Indians? Some could not express what they think of Indians while others think of Indians as pictured above. Again, I see that their lack of interaction with Indians lead them to

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<sup>51</sup> *Gerak Khas* is a local police drama.

create a cultural category based on television programmes they watched, which in turn only serve to strengthen the racially stereotypical roles which dated back from the colonial times when the British ruled Malaya and employed the divide and conquer tactic (Mahathir, 2010: 15-16). They had indeed, in the olden times, segregated jobs, in which Malays were peasants and were deemed as lazy folks by the British, Chinese encouraged to be involved in business and the Indians worked in the estate or do hard labour. These portrayals seem to still be dominating in the televised shows, as interpreted by the adolescents I interacted with. Though this happened a long time ago, and changes had obviously took place, the racial division still plays in their minds and this is what they think as happening in reality, based on what they watch on television. As noted by de B'beri and Middlebrook (2009: 26), "television as with other mass media, has the power to represent and thus articulate a framework within which viewers consider the images they encounter. This very framework also provides the conditions for examining the ways in which practices of identity are being worked and reworked to become "invisible" or naturalised." Hence, the stereotypical roles by different racial ethnicities are considered natural by these adolescents.

These meanings which they assumed as being attached, to what is considered a specific ethnicity's culture identity, can also be likened to what Gonzales (2003: 299) remarked as an "appended subject". "[...] the appendage also characterises many of those material practices, objects, and signs that are said to construct forms of social and cultural identification. Signs grafted onto human subject such as clothing or names, projections of others based upon historical circumstances, location, and language enunciate both defining elements of that subject and part of an external, changing narrative into which that subject is drawn, voluntarily or involuntarily, as participant." The stereotypical characters have been continuously showcased on television that even though the reality is otherwise, the connection which they make in relations to an ethnicity and its identity has been drilled into their minds. It is so natural that it is 'appended' to what is recognised Malay, Chinese or Indian identity. For a teenager, whose world is only consumed by school work and television, it is not impossible to interpret the world they see on the big screen as reality.

#### 5.2.4 Formulation of thoughts

The respondents, especially the 16 year olds, admitted that television programmes serve as guidance and reference in their everyday lives. Sometimes, decisions were made based on what they feel a certain television characters would do or based on what the characters, whom they felt had gone similar situation, solved the problem. They also said that they learn how to react through television programmes and important values such as politeness and the consequences to doing bad things.

Moderator : What do you get from watching television?

Azlan : I learn to respect my parents.

Sofia : Sometimes, when I have a personal problem, I try to think of how my favourite television character would solve it.

Mai : Yea....Like if they have similar problems or faced the same situation. Like....how do they deal with it?

(Group 2, September 2010)

Thus, it could be said that in some ways, despite not agreeing with how Malays were portrayed on television, they do, at times look up to the television characters. Not only that, they also admitted to use television as a reference of style, be it fashion or in how they communicate with other people. Clearly, television gives a big impact to the adolescents living in rural areas. Some things which they like to follow are hijab styles and certain slangs in conversations. During the course of discussion about their particular interest in fashion shown on television and about following the latest trends, one respondent suddenly asked a valuable question: Do we follow the trends on television or does the trend on television actually follow what we are wearing? It may seem like the chicken or egg question, as in who the trendsetter and the follower is. But, this question enabled me to unravel how they construct their reality, and in turn, identity. Did they really use television as a point of reference, or are there activities during, before or after watching television that help them construct their reality? To understand this better, I probed further into

their television watching habits, for instance who do they watch television with and discuss what they watched with and the answers have yielded some fascinating results.

Firstly, they more often than not, discuss television programmes with their friends and families. I could sense that television takes a centre stage in their lives because, when they miss a favourite programme, they will make a point to ask their friends who had watched it to tell them about it.

Moderator : Do you often talk about the programmes you watched?

Everyone : Yes

Moderator : Care to explain further?

Julia : Well...for instance, if I watch Senario on Saturday, I will ask my friends if they watched it. If they don't, I will tell them the story from beginning to the end.

Azlan : As for me, my friends and I would talk about interesting programmes and discuss it.

(Group 2, September 2010)

The act of discussing the programmes, or re-telling or listening to the stories through the eyes of the story teller means that the things they heard are peppered with how the story teller interprets the show. Hence, they will, indirectly be exposed to ideas and beliefs which may be different from theirs. This form of socialisation not only helps them make sense of the world, it also sometimes influences the construction of their beliefs and values and in turn, identity. This could also be seen through their interaction with family members when talking about television programmes. Just by talking about it, their opinion or interest can be compromised. For instance, a few respondents unknowingly admitted to following their father's and sisters' likes and dislikes. The situation is more obvious when they are not too well versed or have little information about the programme or what the programme featured.

Moderator : Do you talk about these programmes with your family as well?



Sofia : Usually I will discuss about football with my father. We (My sisters and I) follow our father. If he likes Chelsea (an English football club), we will like it as well. I guess, we tend to follow what he likes.

Moderator : What about entertainment? Do you talk to people about it?

Mai : Yes. I talk to my twin about it. Usually we would discuss or I introduce a new song, which she will immediately like. But if it is politics, I just listen (to) what my father says about it.

(Group 2, September 2010)

Note that Sofia said that she likes Chelsea because her father likes it; she admitted to not knowing much about football and her interest in football is influenced by her father. This is an indicator of orality and phases of exposure as important activity which helps in the process of constructing meaning. Being exposed to football matches on television initially brought no significance to Sofia but the act of discussing about it with her father sparked her interest to know more about Chelsea. Seeing how orality and phases in exposure is an important activity related to the process of meaning making, I wonder how this plays a part in their cultural identity construction process. Hence, I thought that it is important to find out how they define themselves and what they think of themselves in order to better understand how the various activities could affect their decoding process and in turn the construction of meaning.

#### **5.2.5 Definition of self: *Mike orang Perak*.<sup>52</sup>**

I find that the respondents relate themselves to the state in which their parents originated from. Although they are currently living in Kuala Kubu Bharu, their parents came from Kedah, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and other parts of Malaysia. At first, one respondent said that she was Malaysian, but this was followed by an explanation of where her parents were from.

Moderator : If I were to ask you who are you, what would your answer be?

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<sup>52</sup> This translates to I am from Perak.

Zulfa : I am from Selangor. Malaysian but my mother is from Kedah and my father came from Negeri Sembilan.

Remy : I am Malaysian and Malay. Malay would say this: '*mike orang Perak*'

(Group 3, September 2010)

In this instance, it could be said that they see themselves as people of different geographical sects, divided by the place where their parents came from. They clearly do not identify themselves as Malaysian, not that they are not patriotic, but they take pride in their '*kampung*'<sup>53</sup>. However, most of them fall short in terms of the dialect that people in their *kampung* use. Some of them are embarrassed of their inability to speak fluently in the respective dialect but this act of humility showed that they still look up to the dialect.

Moderator : What about the local dialects?

Zizi : If somebody speaks to me in the Javanese dialect, I do not know how to answer. I can mostly understand what they are saying but I cannot reply. My mother speaks the dialect fluently but she did not teach us (her children).

(Group 3, September 2010)

Note that Zizi blames her mother for her inability to speak the Javanese dialect. This indicates that in her mind, parents play a pivotal role in inculcating cultural values.

Overall, I find the adolescents in rural areas identifying themselves as Malays rather than Malaysian. In my opinion, this is the result from negotiating what they watch on television with inputs from their interaction with elders, who seem to influence their thought formulation. Their engagement with television is also somewhat influenced by their phases of exposure and orality, in which their parents or someone older helped them make sense of the information they gained. In this sense, them recognising themselves as Malay from various parts of Malaysia can be attributed to both from engagement with television and interaction with people around them,

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<sup>53</sup> Kampung in English is village. It is also constantly referred to the place where one comes from.

especially their parents. Thus, socialisation or orality is an important activity in the process of meaning making from television text.

### **5.3 Discussion**

Interaction between viewers and media is a complex relationship. As said by Straubhaar (2008), culture is constantly undergoing transformation and audience “senses of identification can increase as forms of media bring them new and compelling cultural forms to identify with”. How is that so? Firstly, in order to understand how audience can undergo ‘transformation’, it is important to know how they decode the meanings of media texts. In this case, the media text I chose to study is television. So, how do audience, in particular, adolescents make sense of television, in relations to the construction of their cultural identity? How do they decode the meanings and fit them into their everyday lives?

The adolescents who were involved in this discussion came from two distinct backgrounds; firstly, the rural and from the lower income group and secondly, the urban and higher income group. From the focus group discussion conducted, it was discovered that these two groups’ access to media is poles apart. The group who lives in urban areas are more privileged and they are exposed to various kinds of media such as television with access to various channels and packages on the satellite television, internet which is available everyday at home and mobile telephone. Those in rural area, meanwhile, only have television and if they are lucky, the satellite television basic package. Their family’s income does not allow them the luxury of owning their own mobile telephone, nor a computer at home, hence being inaccessible to the World Wide Web. Does this affect the way they engage with television or how they interpret things which they encounter in the media?

Morley (1980) in his research found that readings of television differ according to different social location, background and status. He wrote that: “It is always a question of how social position, as it is articulated through particular discourses, produces specific kinds of readings or decodings” (Morley, 1983: 113). In short, he maintained that people produce their own readings of media texts and make different sense of what is shown and said on television. My findings

seem to concur with Morley's thoughts. In this case, different social position does at times produce different readings of television.

Firstly, I noticed that adolescents living in urban areas are more selective in their choices of media usage. They insisted that they chose what to watch based on the director and actor. As I have pointed out in Chapter 2, I think being heavily exposed to the media means audience are more active and will result in a higher need to negotiate the media in the process of meaning making. In this case, we can even see from the way they select what to watch that they are more aware of the various media choices. More importantly, television is still a significant media despite the fact that they have easy access to internet and mobile telephone.

Admittedly, there are times when both the urban and rural adolescents had no choice but to watch what their parents' or older sibling's choice of programmes, similar to what Levy (1983: 112) described as being a passive viewer. However, he explained that in some cases, individuals may be passive in the first stages of communication sequence (as in the case of not being able to choose what to watch on television), but will use the acquired information from their supposedly passive viewing at a much later stage. The fact that they are watching it, despite not being able to choose the channel, shows that they made a conscious choice. In other words, they are being selective and active in their choices.

I also noticed that readings of the television text, pertaining to adolescents living in rural areas, differ according to age. When they are younger, they are more susceptible to believe what they watch on television as real and also find certain stories to be similar to what they are going through. Older adolescents were very critical of television programmes and insisted that it does not represent their daily lives and that the Malay cultural identity portrayed in the programmes greatly differs than reality.

I propose that the different readings are caused by their selectivity and also exposure to media. When scrutinised at the matter in hand, it was found that the older adolescents acquired a taste of foreign television programmes as opposed to the younger ones who seemed to prefer locally produce Malay drama or Indonesian sinetron. The exposure to the 'outside world' through foreign programmes has probably opened their eyes to what is happening around them and

helped them become more media savvy and in turn critical of the local media products. On the other hand, the younger adolescents who favour local programmes proved to be quite sheltered from the outside world and not aware of other options, hence falling gullible to media texts and are not so media literate. This has resulted in a different overview in how they view their own cultural identity as being portrayed.

As for adolescents in urban areas, their views on Malays in real life seem to be quite negative. They also did not agree with how Malays are portrayed on television, saying that it did not represent reality as it is always negatively portrayed. Ironically, although they insisted that the representation of Malays on television is false; their perception on Malay reflects what they are exposed to on television. Their decodings of television texts reiterated the values and beliefs on Malays which they watch on television. Hence, although these adolescents may have more choices in terms of which media to use and have access to more information through the various media channels, they do sometimes decode texts in a dominant hegemonic position. It is quite bewildering to me, as one would thought that exposure to media resources would make them more critical of what is being exposed. However, going back to the concept of audience activity in decoding texts, I discovered that sometimes television serves as 'background noise' to other activities such as surfing the net. So, although they said that they spend sizeable amount of time watching television, their level of involvement may be low. As aptly said by Rubin (199: 102), one shouldn't assume that an involved viewer is a heavy viewer. He maintained that the amount of time spend on television does not reflect activity.

If their level of involvement with television is low, how do they come up with ideas or opinions on the representations of diversified cultures on television? This is where the power of interaction comes to play. For instance, in the urban group, their opinions on characteristics of Chinese in real life and how they are represented on television differs. But, their opinion on Indians reflected what they are exposed to on television. As for those in rural areas, they certainly lack understanding of the diverse cultures, especially when they assumed that Chinese and Koreans are the same. How can this phenomenon best be explained? What transpired during

their process of making meaning? Socialisation with friends and people of different cultures play an important role.

The urban group goes to school with a lot of Chinese and have friends and classmates who are Chinese descendents but hardly knew any Indians. This explains why when commenting about Chinese characteristics, beliefs and values, they could tell the difference and identify the stereotypes which Chinese are being accustomed to. As for Indians, because the group lacks interaction with people of that race, they conclusion that they can come up about Indians in real life reflects what they usually watch on television.

Furthermore, in the discussion they admitted to rely more on their friends and believe the information obtained from them than family. Hence, it can be said that interaction or socialisation with friends, especially about television programmes which they had watched, somewhat influenced their process of making meanings and in turn, the construction of their cultural identity. Therefore, some information may not be correct and can be merely assumption because they are informed by people of their age or their peers. This act, known as orality, simply means that by talking about the television show, they can activate certain meanings (Fiske, 1987). As said by Fiske (1987: 106), audience have dialogue and gossip about television and in the process, “they shift and shape its meanings and pleasures”.

From these conversations and gossips, audiences are able to arrive to non-television associated meaning, in which they gain information from the conversation and not from what they watch. It promotes cultural diversity and enables them to resist centralisation and the ideological hegemony (Fiske, 1987: 78), which is exemplified when the urban groups resisted the stereotypical roles Chinese played in local television programmes.

The same goes to adolescents living in rural areas. The stereotypes shown on television about people of other cultures were reiterated and were pointed as portraying the diverse culture's characteristics in real life. In this sense, television is seen as their reference point to get to know people of other ethnicity because in real life, the Chinese and Indians whom they know mostly confine their socialisation to people of their own race. As opined by Hill (2005: 57-78), television programmes construct “reality” and how viewers interpret these representations. What

is seen is considered as real, even though it may be far from the truth. This is especially the case when adolescents have no other options to get information and do not know the 'real' culture, beliefs and values of people of other ethnicities. Also, their reliance on television for information could be seen from the way they use it as a fashion guide and also style to converse. In the sense, the utilitarian and intentional aspect of activity is prominent among the rural viewers.

So far, I have identified several activities which are prominent in the process of engagement with television. These include intentionality, selectivity, utilitarianism and orality and these activities are considered as influencing the process of making meanings of television texts. How then, do these activities help audience make sense of who they are; their identity?

In terms of identity, the urban group identifies themselves as being Malaysian but the rural group sees themselves as Malays from *kampong*. If we look back at the findings from content analysis, we can see that local programmes showcased a lot of 1Malaysia values as opposed to specific cultural identities. And, the urban group's self identification mirrors the values which are constantly shown on television. In my opinion, their seemingly dominant hegemonic reading do not stem from merely television watching, but also through the act of orality, selectivity and utilitarianism. How is that so? Well, from the discussion, it was quite obvious that their process of formulating thoughts and ideas greatly depend on their interaction with friends. Hence, it made them more gullible to accept television's messages, however, pending friend's opinions. What about the rural group?

Identifying themselves as being Malays from a specific area in Malaysia also shows how the act of orality influences the process of meaning making. However, in their case, they tend to rely more on their family members like fathers and sisters as the source of information. So, it is not a wonder that their thoughts mimic their parents, hence identifying themselves as someone from their parent's original birth state as opposed to where they themselves were born. Despite admitting to now knowing local cuisines and delicacies, a strong family tie as well as not being heavily exposed to various media have kept them grounded and maintaining a sense of identification with being Malay.

Siapera (2010: 176) aptly said it when she wrote: “[...] reception of cultural products does not only denote a position vis-a-vis a certain representation or regime of representation, it also *engages* and *articulates* an identity through bridging texts or representations with the contexts of their reception”. In this matter, one’s activity during, before and after engaging with the media which is directly related to one’s background regardless of social, political or cultural can be seen as articulating how one ‘read’ or decode media representations.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The relationship between adolescents and television is complex. In an effort to understand the seemingly complex relationship, I proposed that their decoding process should be related to activities during, before and after their engagement with television. It is important to understand the process of meaning making, which involves some activities such as selectivity, orality and intentionality, because it directly influence how audience make sense of television.

The adolescents I had the chance to meet in Kuala Kubu Bharu and Subang, clearly have various opinions on how Malays and other ethnicities are portrayed on television and how they should be portrayed. Their readings of television text cannot be confined or categorised according to their social status as I found that at some instances, the way they interpret television texts are similar. However, the way they identified themselves are certainly distinct. The urban group identified more with a nationalistic identity, which is as Malaysians, while the rural group identified themselves through their cultural identity, which is as Malays. These thoughts stemmed not solely from television but from their socialisation and interaction with parents and friends.

Access to media also does not affect how one interprets media messages, as proven by the findings above. As said by Rubin (1993: 102) just because one has the privilege of access to various media does not indicate that he or she is a heavy user and vice versa. This is because, access to media does not pinpoint to the level of one’s involvement with the media. If, the level of involvement is low, messages disseminated from the media may not be significant to the user.



Thus, selectivity and intentionality are important aspects which one should look at in order for a comprehensive understanding of media reception to be achieved.

Perhaps, Spitulnik's (1993) opinion on the power of mass media should be looked at. She stressed on how mass media play a role as "vehicles of culture" (p.294) as they "provide audience with ways of seeing and interpreting the world, ways that ultimately shape their very existence and participation within a given society" (p.294). However, mass media alone cannot be pinpointed as the sole "vehicle of culture" as a lot of other constructs may also influence adolescents in the process of negotiating their cultural identity. Indeed, media like television may play a big role, especially to those who have no other source of entertainment and depend on television as a source of information, but other factors related to audience activity and their engagement with the media such as intentionality, utilitarianism, selectivity and orality should be closely looked at when discussing the construction of cultural identity through engagement with the media.

Finally, the importance of understanding one's own culture and other ethnicities should not be taken lightly. The ability for people from different cultural backgrounds to tolerate each other is imperative in building a successful multicultural society.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **6.0 Introduction**

This PhD thesis illustrates how meanings from television are negotiated and used in adolescents' construction of cultural identity. This thesis is not an attempt to generalise Malaysian audience but aims to explore the process of making meanings and understand the process of negotiations young Malaysians go through from watching television in relations to the construction of their cultural identity.

I started out, in Chapter One, with giving a general idea of this study by putting it into perspective. Here, I tried to lay the groundwork of my research and give justification on the reasons I find this research important. To shed some light into this matter, I firstly discussed the concept of cultural identity and elaborated on the multicultural society in Malaysia with the purpose of giving some general understandings to those who are not familiar with Malaysia and its society's background. I illustrated Malaysia as being a country populated by people from diverse cultures and the three main races which live here are Malays, Chinese and Indians. These three races have different cultural practices, traditions and beliefs. Although some may argue that to compartmentalise these races into specific cultural categories may be essentialist, I argue that the opinions and discussions by Shamsul Akmar (1996) and Mee (1998) clearly justified the need to refer to Malays, Chinese and Indians according to their cultural identity.

Because of the diverse cultures, the Malaysian government saw the need for unity to be established, especially when the country strives to attain a developed country status. Taking into account Syed Hussin's (2008: 171) opinion which suggested that stability and unity could be inculcated with effective use of mass communication, I find it important to study how media, especially television can play a role in promoting unity. My concern is that, with modernity which led to the influx of foreign programmes in the local media scene; not only do Malaysians have to negotiate television texts which portray the different cultures in Malaysia, they are also exposed to various foreign elements or what is deemed as Western cultures through satellite broadcasts.

Hence, there is a dire need to understand how they negotiate the television texts in the process of making meanings and how it is translated in the process of creating their cultural identities.

In order to better understand the scenario and delve deeper into the subject, I chose to describe the Malaysian broadcasting industry and carry out literature reviews on adolescents and media. Here, I revealed that the broadcasting industry is an important tool used to inculcate unity, especially after the 13 May 1969 tragedy. Back then, it was used to inculcate the ideas of *Rukunegara* through television and radio programmes. Also, there were rules and legislations which broadcasters had to abide to, and these rules are mainly there to make sure that shows and programmes do not offend the various cultures and jeopardise unity. Malaysia's current Prime Minister, Najib Razak, in his effort to inculcate unity introduced the concept of 1Malaysia. This made me wonder how this is being translated on television and how adolescents are 'reading' it. In addition, I elaborated at length on the television stations on Malaysia's free-to-air television, to give readers a gist of what the broadcasting situation is like and the types of programmes which are broadcasted on the respective television stations.

The literature reviews conducted on cultural identity and adolescents and media, enabled me to formulate my research questions which look at the process of reading television texts and making meanings of television texts from a different angle, instead of effects per se. I proposed that looking at effects may be too simplistic and does not hold the key in understanding why and how the reactions came about. In order to gauge how media texts may affect society and in particular young people, it is pivotal for researchers to attain a comprehensive view on their process of meaning making. By considering the matters above, I was able to figure out the intricacies of my research and identify the matters that I need to thoroughly consider before undertaking the study.

Chapter Two focuses on the theoretical aspects of this research. Here, I explained the reason why I chose to situate my research on the phase of modernity and used the encoding and decoding theory to address the important issues in my research: adolescents' engagement with the media and their process of negotiating meanings.

In particular, I saw the development of Malaysia's broadcasting industry as a reflection of modernity because its expansion comes hand in hand with the introduction of new technologies in Malaysia, after the introduction of Vision 2020, a concept which illustrates Malaysia's hope to attain the developed country status by the year 2020. Giddens (1991: 35pp) argued that modernity can cause anxiety to a society, due to the influx of unfamiliar information. Because of modernity, the society also tends to emulate the West as the West is seen as the epitome of modernisation and development. Siaper (2010) and Tomlinson (1991) opined that this causes local culture to be put aside and sometimes reworked to fit into the new, so-called developed society. What is the role of media in this context? In this context, the media play its role as an important tool of mediation and representation. It is one of the prominent sources for society to learn about things around them. In an individual reflexivity towards modernity, media is constantly used as a reference to how one should behave and look at the world. Simply said, media is used as a reference to the construction of identity.

Because of that, I chose to emphasise on theories relating to audience and construction of meanings. This is because I would like to explore how adolescents construct meaning from the programmes they watch on television and gauge if it contributes to the formation of cultural identity. My discussion on encoding/decoding stressed on the integration of activities during the process of meaning making, which is constantly used in effects studies regardless of pre-exposure, during exposure or after exposure, in a cultural studies approach. Some of the activities which were highlighted in the process of negotiating meanings are selectivity, utilitarianism, resistance to influence, involvement, intentionality, construction of cultural category, phases in exposure and orality. These activities described how adolescents negotiate television text in the process of constructing meanings.

Chapter Three discussed the methodologies I utilised in my research; content analysis and focus group discussion. I elaborated on their strengths and the reasons they are suitable in helping me answer my research questions. First, I elaborated on content analysis, which I chose to be done qualitatively on three popular Malay television programmes (*Buletin Utama*, *Seram* and *999*) and two other programmes produced with adolescents as their target audience (In

Trend and *Remaja*). I believed that a qualitative content analysis is a good method to describe the content of television programmes as opposed to merely counting frequencies of specific occurrences, as it will enable me to find out and understand the televised contents that Malaysian adolescents are exposed to. Units of analysis were derived from three themes which I find important in order to give a wholesome picture of Malaysian culture. The themes are Cultural Uniqueness, Common Malaysian Values and Malaysian Cultural Dimension. I analysed the programmes in 10 minutes blocks as I found studying the programmes by scenes quite arduous.

As for the focus group discussion, I talked at length about its research design and ways I analysed the data obtained. The concept of active audience and their decoding of polysemic television messages had somewhat directed my study to explore their negotiation process through focus group discussion. I found this method suitable for my PhD research because it allowed me to explore what the respondents think and feel, which I found important in order to understand how they make sense of the television programmes and how they create meanings in a process of constructing their cultural identity. Overall, there were two categories of group which I talked to – urban adolescents living in big city with moderate and high family income and rural adolescents living in small town with low family income. The discussions were based on a thematic discussion guide which included themes such as media use, preferences of content, association of norms and values with content and views of cultures. When analysing the data, I combined the methods suggested by Krueger (1988) and Hatch (2002) in which they suggested that researchers read the transcription thoroughly and identify emerging themes which can be used to help unearth or study the matter at hand.

Chapter Four and Five both discussed the findings from this research from the content analysis and focus group discussions, respectively. The findings from content analysis conducted was carefully analysed and presented in five themes, namely; Distinguishing Portrayal of the Diverse Ethnicities, The Representations of Malays, The Representations of Chinese, Indians and other cultures, Malaysian and the Concept of 1Malaysia and Elements of Westernisation and Cultural Imperialism. These five themes were further identified and elaborated during the focus group discussion. In my analysis of the focus group discussion transcript scripts, I identified five

emerging themes which are important for this research. The themes are: adolescents' television watching habit and their relationship with it, adolescents' perception on Malays, adolescents' perception on people of other ethnicity like Chinese and Indians, adolescents' process of formulating thoughts and ideas and, adolescents' definition of themselves.

This final chapter will conclude my research. In particular, I will specifically address the research questions which I listed down in Chapter One, which is to:

3. Understand how adolescents associate and identify themselves to what they watch on television.
4. Examine how adolescents react to the different values introduced by the TV programme with respect to building their own cultural identity.

This will be followed by an elaboration on how my research has contributed to the society, the limitations faced, and suggestions for future research.

## **6.1 Answering the Research Questions**

### **6.1.1 Examining the preference of Malaysian adolescents' television viewing**

Earlier, in Chapter One and Two, I brought up the Malaysian government's concern about young people being influenced with Western values and cultures which are seen as threatening local cultures. How eminent are the showcase of foreign culture, beliefs and values in local television programmes? In an attempt to unearth the said values, I conducted a qualitative content analysis on five local television programmes. These programmes were chosen based on their popularity among Malay viewers as well as the ones which are targeted for adolescents.

Firstly, I looked at the number of hours allocated for local and foreign programmes and found that Malaysian free-to-air television do showcase more foreign programmes. However, these foreign programmes are not merely from United States, but from other Asian countries as well. There is an indication of programme imports from other countries or from peripheries to

other peripheries and not merely from the centre to other peripheries. These imports from Asian countries are possible due to the common cultural, linguistic and historical connections (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 220pp).

Another interesting point is that, the most watched programmes among the Malays are Malay programmes; the local news, the Malay drama series namely *Seram*, and 999. It should be noted that, this does not mean that foreign values could not seep into local programmes. Furthermore, as I have pointed out, there is also the need to create an understanding between the diverse ethnicity in Malaysia in order to establish unity and peace. So, the content analysis not only looked at foreign cultures, but also scrutinises the cultures practised by the various races in Malaysia.

However, through the content analysis, no obvious elements of Westernisation could be detected. In fact, through the analysis, I found that the values introduced seem to reiterate Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimension values such as masculinity, collectivism and high uncertainty avoidance. The Malay drama *Seram* showcased a lot of typical Malay traditions, beliefs and values, while the other programmes analysed (999, *Buletin Utama*, *Remaja* and *In Trend*) had a lot of Malaysia values in them. Another finding that I made was other ethnicities like Chinese and Indians were hardly featured in local programmes and in the instances that they were, they are often portrayed stereotypically. For instance, Chinese are portrayed as being successful in businesses or as moneylenders and Indians as thugs and labourers. How are the portrayals of these values reflected in adolescents' cultural identity construction process? This matter will be explained, next.

### **6.1.2 Understanding how adolescents associate and identify themselves to what they watch on television**

As I have mentioned in the previous chapters, modernity is said to be a phase where people are exposed to a plurality of choices, which in turn causes tradition to slowly dissipate. In my study, I found that the plurality of choices in forms of media such as internet, television and access to various shows on satellite television for the young people in urban areas, does create

the spirit of patriotism and nationalism, as suggested by Gellner (2006: xx) to occur in the phase of modernity. In my opinion, this could be explained by referring to the concept of difference and sameness and self and other, in identity construction. The young people I talked to in urban area said that they like to watch American sitcoms and television shows which are broadcasted over satellite television. This, enabled them to look at the foreign programme as the 'other', because of the difference in culture and values with the foreign country showcased, hence inculcating the notion of 'self' as being Malaysian, and not Malay due to the comparison of 'self' representing Malaysia and not representing own ethnicity.

The ones in rural areas meanwhile are not as exposed to other medias as the ones in the urban area because in rural areas access to the internet and full access to satellite television are considered quite expensive and a luxury. The notion of technological determinism, in which technology is seen as an important element in the development of social structure, seems to be lacking in rural areas. Instead, here, one can see an example of the digital divide in which there is a disparity of access to technology due to low income. How has this affected their notions of self? To explain this, I think it would be useful if I remind the readers that my study tries to gauge how cultural identity is constructed based on television watching experience. How would poor access to technology or in other words, lack of modernity, is related to my study?

In this regard, I look at the possibility of activities around them, helping them to make sense of the programme content. Access to various source of information in this sense can affect the process of meaning making through at least two activities namely phases in exposure and selectivity. How so? Going back to the adolescents in the rural areas, they identified themselves from the ethnic background, as Malays coming from different states of Malaysia. In my opinion this is related to the lack of choices and selection which affect their selectivity and hence also phases in exposure because of the lack of other information sources. The lack of information sources means that these adolescents rely a lot on television. Also, this indicated that they are not made aware of the differences they have with the West or foreigner, which lead them to not consider them as the 'other'. Instead, they identified themselves as Malays, which means that they see the other ethnicities such as Chinese and Indians as the 'other'.



It must be pointed out, however, that there are different ways in reading television texts within the two groups in rural areas, which I talked to. As noted, the amount of exposure between the two groups is similar, in which both has limited access to the satellite transmission and scarce usage of the internet. Despite of not having a lot of choices, they are still capable of being selective in what they want to watch. For instance, one group stated that they rather do other things than watching the news on television while the other group watches the news to gain more current information. Also, one group liked to watch local Malay dramas while the other group preferred to watch foreign programmes (if given a choice), which are quite similar to what the urban adolescents like. Their different preferences and selection had indeed produced a contrary reading on how they view Malays as being portrayed on television compared to what they think is reality. The group which prefers to watch foreign programmes opined that the portrayal of Malays on television does not depict reality while in the other group, some respondents admitted to identify and empathise with what the characters are going through. However, what is intriguing is that despite the different ways in which they decoded television texts, they still acknowledged and identified themselves as being Malays.

This, in my opinion is largely attributed to their interaction with people around them. Parents and elders are very influential in the young people from rural areas' decision making and thought formation and the same goes when they try to decode television text. Input from parents can alter the way they make meanings and how they view themselves. In this case, they consider and take into account the information which comes from their parents and elders. Thus, parents are able to pass down information on cultural traditions, beliefs and values and also control what the adolescents watch and give their views on what is considered right or wrong in the programmes, which are easily accepted by these adolescents, as something trustworthy and true. Thus, having received inputs from elders who are aware of cultural traditions, it is easier for these adolescents living in the rural area to identify themselves as being Malay, despite the television programmes portraying a lot of 1Malaysia values.

The consideration on what elders think was also detected when they were probed about their perception on how Chinese and Indians are portrayed on television and if it depicts reality.

The respondents believed in the stereotypes showcased about other cultures on television as they are not exposed to the other ethnicities in their daily lives. Their source of trusted information, their elders, have limited interaction with the other races, which in turn, would disable them (elders) to unravel the real truth about the stereotypes shown on television. Hence, the rural adolescents' main source of information about other culture would be from television or lessons in school, which I believe made them assume that what was shown on television about other cultures as the truth and depicts reality.

Another valuable finding is that, although a group in the rural area and in the urban area decode television texts pertaining to Malay cultural identity, similarly, both identified themselves in contrasting ways. I think that the similarity in which they view Malay on television as not depicting reality and an exaggeration, have got to do with their programme choices or selectivity. Both groups mentioned that they like watching Western television shows and compared the Malay programmes that they watched to the Western or foreign programmes they watched. Thus, when they see Malays being portrayed as bitchy, driving big cars, attend expensive colleges, dress sexily and being affectionate to each other, they see it depicting the foreign programmes they watch, hence not reality. But, the way they define 'self' is contrary as the young people in urban areas see themselves as Malaysian while the ones in rural areas identify themselves as Malays. How can this be explained? Two things came into my mind that is different in their process of meaning making are the activities, phases in exposure and orality. The urbanites are exposed to more sources of information and as I have mentioned above, this made them see foreigners as others and being Malaysian as self as opposed to the teens from rural areas. In orality, I could see that because of their interaction with parents and elders, teens in rural areas are more in touch with their Malay cultural identity as opposed to the ones in urban areas who do not seem to rely on their parents for information and have more faith in their friends. Trusting friends, who may have limited knowledge about Malay traditions, beliefs and values could lead the urbanites into losing touch with their Malay cultural identity.

Their reliance on friends' opinions and influences of friends in making meaning of television text were obvious in their perception of Chinese and Indians being portrayed on

television. The adolescents in urban areas insisted that the portrayals of Chinese on television did not depict reality, but those of Indians were. Further investigation found that the reason they did not trust the portrayal of Chinese was because they have many Chinese friends, and no Indian friends led them to believe the stereotypes depicted reality. This simply shows that the process of interaction or orality within the different phases of exposure and the construction of cultural category play an important part in their engagement with television.

Having said that, in my process of understanding how adolescents associate and identify themselves to what they watch on television, I found that the activities which revolve around their meaning making plays a part. Although studies of activities in the process of meaning making has been quantitative and used to measure effects of watching television. My qualitative approach has provided an additional insight, in which, the activities can be used to explain the inputs or element which assisted these adolescents in their process of engagement with television text.

## **6.2 Limitations and Suggestions for future research**

This research does not aim to generalise the Malaysian population, but instead is an attempt to empirically test out my ideas in integrating the elements used as measurements from audience effects studies in a cultural studies approach. Hence, the number of respondents involved in this study is quite small and is not representative of the Malaysian population. Having done the research and proven that the integration of activities used in quantitative media effects studies in a cultural studies approach is possible, I suggest for a research which could represent the population be conducted. In other words, more respondents could be included so that a conclusive study on Malaysian young people can be achieved. On top of this, the research concentrates only on the Malays and does not take into account Chinese and Indian's engagement with television in their attempt to construct cultural identity. Hence, it would be good to include other races in future research so that a comparison in the ways they decode messages and activities that surround their process of meaning making could be conducted. Why is this beneficial?

In my opinion, discovering the activities which are important in one's attempt to make meaning of television, especially in relations to the construction of cultural identity, can help to address the issue of fostering unity among society which are made up of diverse cultures. For instance, in my research, I found orality and phases in exposure to play a particular role in audience's processes of making meaning of the television text. In particular, interaction with family members, for young people in rural area, and with friends, for those in urban areas, gave input to their formation of thoughts, ideas and beliefs. Thus, it is implied that the social agents such as family and friends are important in the process of engagement with television and meaning making. Knowing this, the government can address the issue of inculcating unity and understanding of the various races' cultures through television by making sure that the urbanites are more media literate and those in rural areas to be more exposed to other sources of information rather than only relying on parents in making sense of television. Only then, can perception on stereotypes be diminished and a better understanding of other cultures created.

Aside from that, although I perused the Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory as the basis for my theoretical framework, I concentrated more on the decoding aspect, because of the aim of my research, which is to study audience's engagement with television. In order to understand the programmes that adolescents watch, I conducted a qualitative content analysis. Another option, which future researchers can do, is to interview programme producers and inquire what the programme's objective was and the messages it was trying to convey. This way, one can identify what were the encoded messages, and compare it to the decoded messages. However, in my opinion, by doing as suggested, one can only identify the ways audience' decode television text, within the three stance which Hall (1980) has indicated; dominant hegemonic, opposition or negotiated, and would not be able to successfully study the activities within the audience' engagement, which I have done.

Another interesting way to approach my study is to use the symbolic interactionism theoretical framework as the basis of the research. As indicated from my findings, orality or interaction with others in particular, is an important activity one goes through in the process of making meanings of television text and this reflected what Blumer (1986) outlined about symbolic

interactionism. Blumer (1986: 12) maintained that the meaning of anything and everything has to be learned and transmitted through a social process and that “symbolic interaction is a vast process in which people are forming, sustaining and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give meanings to objects.” Hence, a future researcher can look into this perspective, to thoroughly focus on how interaction is able to give meanings to television texts.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

This study builds on and contributes to work in audience reception and meaning making. Although studies in audience reception has examined the effects of watching television (Aubrey et al., 2003; Collins et al., 2004; Durant et al., 2006; Schram et al., 1961; Strasburger, 1995) how television texts are decoded cross culturally (Katz and Liebes, 1990; Radway, 1984) and looked at it from the active audience perspective, there has not been a study which tries to integrate the activities which has been identified by media effects scholar who are coincidentally very pro quantitative with a cultural studies approach of audience's decoding process of television text. I propose that audience's activities depict some of the struggles individual face in their engagement with television and can be used to explain how they interpret television texts.

I found that the phase of modernity does see society being exposed to various information through technology and especially media, but the access to technology is not equally distributed amongst the society. In my study, it could be seen that the adolescents from urban areas are more privileged and exposed to the various technologies compared to those from rural areas. The digital divide does not necessarily mean they view television text and reality in contrasting ways, because a group from each of the rural and urban area interpreted the portrayal of Malays on television similarly.

My attempt to explore the notion of audience activities with relations to their decoding processes was empirically conducted through this research. I set out to find out how adolescents make meanings, based in the activity which I believe happened in the process of decoding (based on encoding/decoding theory) because it was mentioned in the theory that audience struggle in making meanings. But, how do they struggle? I propose that the concept of activity in

decoding actually can explain how they derive meaning and decode television texts. Through this research, I found that the decoding process entails activity such as phases in exposure, orality and selectivity. As such, this study provides additional insight into the process of decoding television text and meaning making.

Firstly, selectivity in terms of adolescents' programme preferences seems to have a consequent on their perception on Malays. A group from the rural area who admitted that they like watching foreign programmes and the group from urban area who loved watching foreign programmes both saw Malays as being wrongly represented in Malay television programmes. Both agreed that the representation of Malays are exaggerated and does not reflect reality. The group which favours Malay programmes, meanwhile, saw the Malay characters as representing reality and to a certain extent identified with the television characters. Thus, it can be said that selectivity is an activity which can be looked at when studying audience's process of decoding television text.

What I also found was that orality has a big stake in the process of meaning making. Orality actually affects how they shaped their cultural identity. It was established that the urbanites identified themselves as being Malaysians as opposed to the young people from rural areas who identified themselves as Malays. This, I found was related to the fact that urbanites discussed television programmes and referred to their friends for information as opposed to the groups from rural areas which referred to their elders. I feel that the worry about traditions being left behind to make way for modernity can be put to rest if the society ensures and keeps a strong bond with their families. That way, traditions, beliefs and values can be passed down to generations.

Findings from the content analysis indicated that a local Malay programme either showcases specific cultural ethnicity or concentrates on 1Malaysia values, but do not emphasise or give equal weightage on both aspects at the same time. Additionally, the findings indicated the need for a television show to try and include cultures of other ethnicities to create a better understanding of others and also for one to be more informed of his or her cultural identity. Doing so would ensure that the programmes are parallel to the Malaysian Prime Minister's vision which

is to create unity by inculcating 1Malaysia values while at the same time celebrating the diversified cultural identities. Also, I believe the concept of 1Malaysia can be inculcated only if there is an equal representation of 1Malaysia values alongside representations of the diverse cultures.

Malaysia's effort to establish a stable and harmonious society, without introducing a national identity should be applauded because it strives to ensure that each ethnicity is equally represented and important in the development of the country. The source of information, and mass media in particular, should be fully utilised for this effort. However, judging from my findings, it is quite difficult to have a balance of representation of cultures in the media and promote the concept of 1Malaysia as well. Hence, I think that there is a need to increase young people's media literacy in order to ensure that they are not gullible and are aware of what they are being exposed to.

## APPENDIX

### CODING SHEET

PROGRAM: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ MINUTE: \_\_\_\_\_

#### CULTURAL UNIQUENESS

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	ETHNICITY	KINDS OF CONTENT
RELIGION	M	
	C	
	I	
	E	
ETHNIC APPEARANCE	M	
	C	
	I	
	E	
LANGUAGE	M	
	C	
	I	



	<b>E</b>	
<b>SEXUAL IMAGERY</b>		

**MALAYSIAN CULTURAL DIMENSION**

<b>UNITS OF ANALYSIS</b>	<b>KINDS OF CONTENTS</b>
<b>MASCULINITY</b>	
<b>COLLECTIVISM</b>	
<b>HIGH            UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE</b>	
<b>HIGH   POWER   DISTANCE INDEX</b>	

## COMMON MALAYSIAN VALUES

UNITS OF ANALYSIS	KINDS OF CONTENTS
PRESEVERANCE	
EDUCATION	
LOYALTY	

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