



A PRELIMINARY OUTLOOK OF THE TEXTUAL AND VISUAL
CHARACTERISTICS OF FAKE NEWS IN MALAYSIAN CYBERSPACE: A
CASE STUDY OF FAKE NEWS POSTS ON FACEBOOK

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the presidential campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump in 2016, the term fake news has been mentioned for an unprecedented amount of times, prompting a social phenomenon which scholars have called ‘post-truth’ in a society where misinformation and downright falsity seem to hold greater regard over solid facts. Coupled with technological advancements, fake news has found a home within the cyberspace realm where it has been utilized by rightists/conservatives as a tool to either champion or demonize political ideologies that do not fall in line with its own.

Although fake news is a relatively new concept in Malaysia, it continues to make its impact known namely through Facebook; paving the way for the Anti Fake News Act’s formulation in April last year. Given such circumstances, this research aims to study its textual and visual characteristics, the political ideologies embedded within it, and whether the political discourse in Malaysia is that of a conservative stance through the fake news posts disseminated on Facebook. Theoretical frameworks such as Stuart Hall’s Representation Theory and Roland Barthes’ concept on myths were employed in this study to provide a clearer picture into the mechanisms and purposes of fake news.

Key words: fake news, post-truth, representation, ideology, myths, Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, Malaysia

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SARAH YEOH YU-EN

DECLARATION

I declare that the material contained in this paper is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

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This research paper attached hereto, entitled “A *Preliminary Outlook of the Textual and Visual Characteristics of Fake News in Malaysian Cyberspace: A Case Study of Fake News Posts on Facebook*” prepared and submitted by Sarah Yeoh Yu-En in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Communication (Hons) Journalism is hereby accepted.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Preliminary Outlook and Conceptualization of Fake News

In an age of social media and convergence of media channels, the dissemination of news has reached a new level of speed in which consumers can access to their daily dose of news with just a click and share it among friends and family with ease. As for journalists, it has influenced the way how media content is being produced and its impacts, both good and bad.

However, such technological progress does not bode well for all in the journalism/reporting sector. The rise and prominence of the Internet has given way to another frightening phenomenon – the rise of fake news. Largely unknown and ignored in the past decade, fake news has made a comeback with a vengeance thanks in part to Donald Trump.¹

Trump is not alone in holding such beliefs. With more and more people getting their news from social media, it is not surprising that the attention towards fake news has surged rapidly by as high as 365% in 2017. In fact, the frenzy was so great that fake news was named the 2017 Word of the Year by the Collins English Dictionary (BBC, 2017). Aside from paying attention to fake news, some have even taken it upon themselves to spread fake news online, posing dire consequences for journalists, whose main tenet is to publish and verify facts in an era saturated with information.

As for Southeast Asia, the region not immune to fake news as it has shown itself to be a force to be reckoned with, sometimes bringing about violent consequences as seen in countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines where the spread of misinformation along the lines of

¹ The current US president, who has been attacking reputable news organizations for publishing 'fake news'

race and religion has resulted in the loss of innocent lives (Chandran, 2017). Therefore, the ability to fully understand and recognize the traits of fake news and its effects is severely needed.

1.1 Construction of Selected Historical Origins of Fake News

Given the recent limelight that fake news has garnered, the next few paragraphs will elaborate the definition and concept of fake news, its origins and development. Some events documenting this emerging phenomenon have been selected in order to provide a historical perspective into the early characteristics of fake news as well as debunking the belief that fake news is a new problem which came about with the rise of the Internet.

Though researchers have yet to come to a consensus in defining fake news, it is generally agreed that fake news is “news articles made to mislead readers and are intentionally and verifiably false” (Shu, Silva, Wong, Tang, & Liu, 2017) (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Under this definition, several close associates of fake news do not make the cut such as 1) satire produced within a proper context and is not likely to be perceived as factual, 2) unintentional reporting mistakes, 3) conspiracy theories, 4) rumors that have no links to actual news events, 5) untrue statements by politicians, 6) biased/misleading reports but not downright false, and 7) hoaxes created for entertainment purposes (Shu et al., 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow et al., 2017).

Although the term ‘fake news’ may sound benign, even harmless to some, its past and the effects it left behind is not all heartwarming. The origins of fake news can be traced back to the time when Gutenberg introduced the printing press in 1439. During that period, people had to rely on either religious authorities or individuals who claimed to have “firsthand knowledge” of events. As such, many resorted to believing that leaked secret government documents were accurate enough to be regarded as “real” news. However, it did not take long for faked, copycat versions to make its

appearance. Sensing the need to verify facts, historians in 17th century Europe took much pains in producing and presenting their sources as verifiable footnotes (Soll, 2016).

Despite their best efforts, fake news continued its rampage in the form of bizarre and sensational news aimed in creating widespread panic and outrage. In France, its society was hugely dominated by low literacy rates and an explosion of news being disseminated through pamphlets, affiches, and billets – two factors that exacerbated the problem of fake news. Aside from its written form, news were also spread through songs and stories, adding a much more interactive and memorable facet to it. One famous example of fake news in France occurred when pamphlets known as Mazarinades were circulated during the French civil wars during the reign of King Louis XIV. In the pamphlets, it alleged that the prime minister, Cardinal Mazarin was involved in sexual crimes such as incest and sodomy as well as corruption – charges that were considered serious and shocking to be made against a political and religious officer (Kiernan, 2017). Such scandalous news was made with the intention to stir up alarm and pose political impacts on the reader.

The problem of fake news was not limited to Europe alone. In the days of pre-independence America, Benjamin Franklin concocted propagated stories which painted Native Americans as “murderous” who were working at the beck and call of King George III. Other American leaders in charge of the revolution were also guilty of similar acts by publishing fake stories of British soldiers senselessly killing Americans (Soll et al., 2017). Nevertheless, such stories proved to be effective in strengthening the resolve of the American people to defeat the British and encouraged many to enlist themselves into the army.

In the 1800s, fake news began to adopt and assimilate racial themes into its fold – a feature that proved to be as equally destructive. During that period, America was gripped by high levels of racial tension due to increasing acceptance and entrenchment of slavery. Stories of African-

Americans changing their skin color to white or committing heinous crimes prompted a wave of violence against them. For Italy, such racially-tinged stories is not a new occurrence. Dating back to 1475, a rumor was circulated throughout Trent claiming that the Jewish community had killed a boy and drained his blood for their Passover feast. Although the papacy had stepped in and announced that it was false, the Prince-Bishop of Trent Johannes IV Hinderbach ordered whole Jewish communities to be arrested and tortured, resulting in fifteen being burnt at the stake. To add fuel to the fire, he spread more similar fake news of Jewish communities downing the blood of innocent Christian children.

Eventually, even newspapers found themselves involved in the fake news wave in an attempt to gain profits. The *New York Sun*'s 1835 "Great Moon Hoax" brought in much revenue and cemented its image as a leading newspaper from a string of articles claiming that aliens existed on the moon. Amidst such stories, the term 'yellow journalism' was born, where fake interviews, stories and experts were used to evoke immense emotions among readers. The public struck back however, and triggered a national search for accurate news which saw a growth of objective journalism where reporters were employed to cover beats and statehouses (Soll et al., 2017).

Fast forward to the 21st century, fake news is still as potent and possibly even more sinister when armed with technology. With social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, there is little oversight and regard for authenticity where one fake news article can be shared and circulated like a wildfire in a matter of minutes. Another reason as to why fake news is gaining such a foothold on the Internet is due to its anonymous nature, where creators of fake news can hide their real identity behind bogus or imagined accounts without facing much consequences and even sway public opinion, as evident during the 2016 US presidential election. Technological applications such as Adobe Photoshop have also lent a hand in the growth of fake news, where photographs

can be digitally altered in order to portray what the creator wants the viewer to see, thus distorting the real story in the process.

Another contributing factor is the decreasing number of barriers for one to enter the media, where any ordinary person can create a website easily as opposed to reputational news organizations who favor more entry barriers for the sake of preserving accuracy. Aside from that, the ability to advertise content on websites has prompted individuals to utilize the Internet to disseminate fake news while reaping a profit from it.

With the Internet/social media being such a driving force in the area of news, this has undoubtedly posed serious challenges for journalists and established news organizations in the bid to present news that is accurate, unbiased, and objective. With more individuals opting to get their news online, it has led to a decline of trust in mainstream media as well as the consumer's ability to differentiate real and fake news as there is a possibility of them tending to believe news that fits their preconceived notions, regardless of whether the information is true or not. For the journalists, such dismal effects may reduce the incentives for them to continue investing in truthful reporting (Allcott and Gentzkow et al., 2017).

In light of these gloomy prospects for journalism as a whole, it is important to discover deeper the concept of fake news, how it is used for political means, its effects in the political and public sphere, as well analyzing the textual and visual characteristics of fake news.

1.2 Fake News, Social Media, Media Landscape, and Reformasi

Social media is a term that has become synonymous with social networking sites (SNSs) such as Twitter, Facebook, and Whatsapp. However, there lacks a generally agreed upon definition for these technological applications. Therefore, in order to define this term, there are two aspects that need to be looked into – Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC).

Web 2.0 was first coined in 2004 as a way to describe the ways the Internet is used by software developers and end-users as a platform where the content and applications were not solely birthed and published by individuals, but are subsequently and constantly altered by every user in a participatory and collaborative manner, making Web 2.0 the ideological and technological aspect of social media. However, it is also from these notable traits of Web 2.0 that it is also a form of capitalism where consumers are not only absorbing media content, but are also put to ‘work’ through the process of creating it, thus giving way to the trend of ‘prosumption’; a term originating from Alvin Toffler’s *The Third Wave*. Examples of subtle forms of prosumption on the Internet include blogs and social media platforms where users both consume and produce media content (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

As for UGC, it is broadly used to refer to the content created and disseminated by end-users. In 2007, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) laid out three requirements for it to qualify as UGC: first, it has to be displayed on either a website accessible to all or a SNS meant for a particular group; second, a level of creativity must be evident; and three, its creation is beyond professional and routines and practices. It must be noted that based on these requirements, it excludes content exchanged via e-mails/instant messages, copies of existing content, and generated content made within a commercial market context. As such, social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological

foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010).

Within such a context, it is imperative to briefly discuss the concept of virality on social media. According to study by Guerini, Strapparava, and Ozbal (2011), virality is a social phenomenon where a piece of news/content can either be viral or not with no room for “in-betweens”. They also argued that virality is very much dependent on the nature of the content itself, in sharp contrast to Malcolm Gladwell’s book “The Tipping Point” where he opines that influencers play a central role in making an idea or product – a stance that has invited criticism. Guerini et.al. (2011) proceeds to list out various phenomena linked to virality which are 1) appreciation, 2) spreading, 3) simple buzz, 4) white buzz, 5) black buzz, 6) raising discussion, and 7) controversiality. Although the study was used to analyze text-based content, it can be used for video clips and images as well.

Having defined the concepts of social media and virality, Malaysia’s media and political landscape in terms of utilizing the mainstream media and Internet will be discussed, notably during the *Reformasi* era in 1998. Having experienced much technological and economic growth in the past decades, Malaysians are rather social media savvy like any other country in the world. In an Internet Users Survey (IUS) conducted by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) among 2,402 respondents last year, Facebook came out at the top (97.3%), followed by Instagram (56.1%), and YouTube (45.3%) (MCMC, 2017). Thus, it is safe to assume that Malaysians are likely to access to news/media content through Facebook more often than any other social media platform.

Despite these figures, the events leading up to the *Reformasi* movement tell a tale less assuring. Before Malaysia was swept by the global phenomenon of the Internet, news was transmitted to the public via mainstream channels like newspapers, pamphlets, and *surat layang* (flying letters)

which had begun to make its mark on the country's political scene before independence (Weiss, 2012). As soon as the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) took hold of the government, Malaysia's media scene was largely dominated by suppression and self-censorship thanks to draconian laws left behind by the British such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA), Official Secrets Act (OSA), and the now defunct Internal Security Act (ISA) – a trend that is not expected to change anytime soon, where Malaysia's press freedom was rated “Not Free” (Freedom House, 2017).

A ray of hope emerged when then (and current) Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad established the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996 as the world was beginning to experience the wonders of the Internet. Ironically, the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) was set up two years later as a way to monitor and filter content development for telecommunications, broadcasting and online communications (Mohd Azizuddin, 2009). Nevertheless, in a bid to portray Malaysia as the “Asian Silicon Valley”, a Multimedia Bill of Guarantees was unveiled where the government committed not to censor the Internet and give Internet providers less constraining licensing requirements. A minor crackdown occurred shortly after the MSC took off when the police joined forces with Minos, an Internet provider of Jaring which had ties to the government in tracking down supposed “rumor-mongers” who had circulated false information of a riot in Kuala Lumpur, resulting in several arrests under the ISA (Weiss et al., 2012).

The event that shook Malaysia's political scene was the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister on grounds of immorality and corruption in September 1998. In the days prior to his official sacking, a notorious piece about Anwar titled “50 Reasons why Anwar cannot be PM” had already begun to spread among UMNO delegates which claimed that he was a homosexual –

a crime punishable in Malaysia. Although the book was subsequently banned and the content deemed untrue, it is a classic example of false information that was being circulated in an attempt to destroy one's political reputation and standing. To add insult to injury, whisperings of Anwar's sex life was already rife within the public for a long time, something that Mahathir admitted "took me years to believe the allegations" and claimed he had interviewed the people Anwar allegedly sodomized (Mydans, 1998). After his sacking, Anwar carried out roadshows all over the country to proclaim his innocence while urging Mahathir to resign. He was later arrested by the police while giving a press conference and turned up in court the next day with a bruised eye, sparking off mass protests who rallied one common theme – *Reformasi*. (Free Malaysia Today, 2018).

All of a sudden, an explosion of activities and attention surrounding Anwar's arrest and trial flooded the Internet, starting off with online discussion sites such as *soc.culture.malaysia* and *Sangkancil* to pro-opposition sites. According to Rodan (as cited in Weiss et al., 2012), Anwar's episode led to higher Internet subscription, where TMNet saw 14,000 new subscribers during the six months after Anwar's arrest. The event also paved the way for political websites to mushroom, ranging from overtly pro and anti-Anwar sites to those providing coverage of the trial and protests (Weiss et al., 2012). It was under such an environment where famed website *Malaysiakini* was founded by journalists Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran who were frustrated with the biasness of mainstream media and cemented the site's reputation as a resistance media in the 1990s.

As demonstrated above, there were instances of false information disseminated to the public through conventional and revolutionary methods. However, it must be noted that the term 'fake news' was not used to refer to such misinformation but was instead characterized as "rumors" and "fabrication". Now that Malaysia has entered into the era where a political leader in the form of Trump has been throwing the term 'fake news' indiscriminately and the formulation of the Anti-

Fake News Act before the May 9 elections, it raises the question of whether Malaysia is possibly reverting back to the days where misinformation ran rampant.

1.3 Problem Statement

With the far reaching abilities and potential that Facebook gives, it has led to a new trend of the creation of fake news in Malaysian cyberspace and it being used to influence readers through the text and visuals, especially in the political scene. When such misinformation is politically motivated, it will shape the media content in the political and media landscape in cyberspace – a phenomenon that will affect Malaysian society greatly due to high Internet penetration rates as noted earlier. Therefore, there is a need to study the textual and visual composition of fake news in Malaysia and the impacts it brings.

Generally speaking, fake news often aim to promote a political ideology. This is rather evident in the US during the 2016 presidential election, where a large portion of the fake news were extremely pro-Trump/anti-Clinton in nature, with the classic example of a website claiming that Clinton had sold weapons to terrorist group ISIS, which made it into the list of the 20 top fake news stories to emerge during that period (Silverman, 2016).

Another form of politically motivated misinformation involves the sensationalization of one's private life, where such content has proven time and time again to fuel a wave of frenzy and excitement among the public. Social media content like this serve to elevate one political ideology over the other as well as discredit the person's fitness in being a trustworthy and morally upright politician. For Malaysia, it experienced such sensationalization which revolved around accusations being levied against Anwar for sexual misconduct, resulting in him losing the deputy prime minister post as discussed previously.

Malaysia is no stranger to the phenomenon of fake news, where it ranges over a spectrum of issues and themes like religion, finance, and politics. Instances of fake news being circulated include the doctored photo of former Prime Minister Najib Razak (The Star, 2007), social media posts alleging that DAP Wanita assistant publicity secretary Syerleena Abdul Rashid was Islam's enemy (Abu Bakar, 2017), and that Tabung Haji's financial status was in peril, causing approximately 4,000 accounts to close and thousands being disqualified from performing the pilgrimage (NST, 2018).

One telling phenomenon of the rising trend of fake news is that it has been prominently brought up or championed by right-leaning politicians and conservatives. Again, as with the US, Trump is a clear example of such individuals where he displays a strangely strong obsession in exposing what he views as lies and untrue. As for members of his political party, the sentiment is shared as well according to a survey which found that 42% of Republicans are in view of the notion that any news, although accurate, which portray a politician/political party negatively are fake news (Wemple, 2018). To say that such a phenomenon is only limited to the US is highly erroneous as this can be seen in Malaysia too, with the tabling and passing of the Anti Fake News Bill in April which garnered the full support of MPs from the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) (Sipalan, 2018). UMNO is long known for its conservative and right-leaning views, now even more so after joining forces with the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) after the 14th General Election. Thus, there is a considerable amount of evidence to suggest that there is a tendency for rightists/conservatives to support laws that supposedly curb fake news rather than from those who fight for democracy and a just society.

Another area to consider is how fake news are able to be so tenacious in recent years where there has been an explosion of false or misleading information being disseminated online. One possible reason for this could be the emergence of a post-truth society where one's feelings and perceptions

are seen as an accurate portrayal of a current event, regardless of whether it is supported by facts or not. As such, it is important for one to dig deeper into the inner workings of fake news and discover the factors that allow it to grow exponentially in a world that is increasingly slanting towards a trend which favors feelings over facts.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1: What are the characteristics of fake news content (visual and textual) promoting falsehood being constructed in Malaysia?

Due to the nature of fake news that relies on its textual and visual construction to send a particular message to readers, this study will explore and analyze what are the kinds of phrases/words often used in fake news in Malaysian cyberspace along with the pictures that accompany it as a way to add on to the desired effects as devised by the encoder.

RQ2: Do the textual and visual content of fake news in Malaysia manifest the domination of right-leaning groups in terms of power?

There has been a rather startling surge of conservative/far-right governments who, after being swept into power in countries such as the US, Brazil, and Italy have launched efforts to curb fake news or utilized it for political gains. Therefore, this research question aspires to discover whether this social phenomenon manifests itself in Malaysia as well through its textual and visual composition.

RQ3: How do fake news operate in a post-truth society?

Given the fact that a society that values feelings/emotions over concrete facts in determining the validity of an event is beginning to emerge, this study aims to explore the means which has contributed to the rise and increasing permeation of fake news posted on social media platforms

1.5 Research Objectives

- 1) This research aims to study and analyze the textual and visual characteristics of fake news
- 2) This research aims to study and analyze the impact of fake news on the political and media landscape in Malaysia
- 3) This research aims to understand how fake news operate in a post-truth era

1.6 Scope of Research

The scope of this research will be focused on analyzing words and visuals shown in several fake news circulated through social media. Facebook will be the main social media platform to be studied as it is the site that most Malaysians access to.

1.7 Significance of Research

The study will be beneficial for media practitioners and users in identifying fake news posted on social media platforms. This study also aims to provide a framework for future research into this social phenomenon of online fake news in Malaysia as it remains a foreign topic.

1.8 Limitations of Research

The primary limitation of this research is the lack of time as a total of seven weeks was allocated to complete three chapters of this final year project. Thus, there is a possibility of not being able to analyze every piece of fake news published online but only certain news will be considered based on the scope of the research questions. Another limitation of the study would be that “social media” will not include Twitter and Instagram due to their lower level of usage as compared to Facebook even though they are popular among Malaysians. ²

² Based on a 2017 survey by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Development and Construction of Malaysia's Media Ecology in Cyberspace

Before delving into the area of understanding the textual and visual makeup of fake news in Malaysia, one must first study and explore the history and structure of the media industry, both mainstream and in cyberspace.

Malaysia's mainstream media has long been known to be characterized by two features – 1) repression/self-censorship, and 2) media ownership. After the events of the 'communist threat' and the tragic May 13 race riots, the media was subsequently charged with the role of promoting national security, national harmony, and national development by being forbidden to touch issues deemed sensitive. On top of that, certain quarters argued that a set of guidelines must be formulated to ensure that the media would not 'deviate' from its original purpose, effectively calling for it to be controlled by the government (Mustafa, 2002).

Most scholars agree that the birth of Malaysia's media began in 1806 with the publication of the Prince of Wales Island Gazette (PWIG) which was owned by A.B. Bone. Despite the fact that no laws were set to regulate the media in the 1800s, for some peculiar reason the Penang governor issued the PWIG a license and that Bone himself requested every issue to undergo censorship before it came off the press. Another interesting feature of the early newspapers was that it was mainly aimed at the colonists instead of locals due to the latter's low economic standing and the lack of formal education. It was not until 1876 where the first Malay weekly, *Jawi Peranakan*, and publications in other languages such as *Singai Warthamani* was made available for locals.

Mustafa et al. (2002) noted that the restrictions imposed on PWIG (which ended publication on 21 July, 1827) was not applied to the Malay states until the British decided to widen its political and administrative control beyond the Straits Settlements through the introduction and imposing of a plethora of Ordinances and Enactments on the media such as requiring printing press owners in the Federated Malay States (FMS) to apply for a license which was subject to approval. There are a few reasons as to why such restrictions was placed on an industry that is widely expected to be relatively free of state control. First, a number of Chinese and Tamil publications were flooding the market as much as the waves of immigrants making their way into Malaya. Second, the Malays, upon realizing their 'backwardness' in society, published several Malay newspapers aimed in starting an Islamist reformist movement that would lead them back to the true path of Islam. Third, a similar movement was also stirring among the Chinese thanks to the effort of Dr Sun Yat-Sen in mainland China; these events was more than enough to alarm the British to control the press right up until the Japanese Occupation. After the Japanese left Malaya, the British faced a much bigger headache in the form of rising Malay nationalism and the threat posed by the Communist Party of Malaya, triggering a nationwide Emergency rule which gave birth to repressive laws like the Sedition Act and the Printing Presses Ordinance (later rebranded as the Printing Presses and Publications Act).

Years after Merdeka, Malaysia's media was still struggling to establish editorial independence and freedom from state interference in its affairs – leading to an event that would set the stage for the gradual takeover of the media. In 1961, journalists of *Utusan Melayu* were resisting attempts by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) to make the newspaper more subservient to its demands, arguing that the press should be free from politics. The fight was so great that it eventually led to a strike lasting for three months and the resignation of hundreds of workers.

Nevertheless, UMNO was able to quash the ‘rebellion’ thanks to its status as being the major stakeholder and bought over the entire company, making it the first of its kind to swoop a newspaper and its entirety (Mustafa et al., 2002).

UMNO did not just stop at the acquirement of *Utusan Melayu*, but instead went much further in expanding its control over the media. Spurred by the tragic May 13 racial riots and formulation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), UMNO went all out to buy over major newspapers and dailies. A study by Zaharom (2002) found that four national language dailies published in Peninsula Malaysia are owned by the News Straits Times Press (NSTP) and Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) – major media companies that are closely aligned to UMNO or are owned by individuals who have economic and political ties to the political party. Perhaps not wanting to be outdone by UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) also took similar steps in acquiring newspapers, as seen through *The Star*’s acquirement by Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd and *Tamil Nesan* by Datin Indrani, the wife of former MIC leader Datuk Samy Vellu (Mustafa et al., 2002).

Even other media channels such as the television and satellite broadcasting were not spared from the ownership onslaught. Stations such as TV3 and MetroVision were introduced as a way to provide a form of ‘public services’ to the people. Less than ten years later, these two stations found itself falling under the economic grip of UMNO-linked companies, which happened to MetroVision when it was bought by the Utusan Group. As for satellites such as Measat-1, it is owned by Binariang Sdn Bhd that can be traced to powerful individuals like T. Ananda Krishnan. Such examples have placed the credibility of television as an unbiased channel of information and a way to democratize the media industry at a fiercely debated and controversial level (Zaharom et al., 2002).

Under such circumstances, it is not hard to see why Malaysians hold a strong sense of endearment and at times, obsession with the Internet. Malaysia's first encounter with the Internet came in 1996 following the unveiling of the MSC by then Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad. In order to attract foreign investment into the country, a Bill of Guarantees (BoGs) was rolled out where it listed out the government's commitments, with BoG 7 standing out of the rest where it reiterated the pledge not to censor the Internet (MDEC, 2017). As such, online websites have greater freedom in producing media content compared to their print counterparts. This was very evident during the *Reformasi* era where a huge number of websites exploded and made its mark on ordinary Malaysians hungry for facts untainted by political and economic mongering. However, Zaharom et al. (2002) expressed skepticism towards this newfound freedom, where he stated it 'owes more than a little to their relatively small audience, given the limited, and largely middle-class based, access to computers'; along with the warning that this freedom must be seen from the perspective of a regime afraid of losing foreign investment.

And now it seems such skepticism is not unfounded. With the formulation of legislature and government departments such as the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA), and the recent Anti Fake News Act that seek to regulate and monitor online content, Malaysia's struggle for media freedom is far from over.

2.1 The Erosion of Trust in Journalism

With the phenomenon of fake news gaining foothold in the media scene, it is no surprise why many media practitioners are worried and are wondering what could have possibly led to the erosion of trust in journalism – a profession that was once highly looked upon. Here, media scholar McNair (2018) lists out several reasons as to why this is happening.

The first reason is attributed to the rapid rise of relativism, which states that there is no absolute truth and it depends on the view, standpoint, filters being used, and the questions being asked by an individual. Simply put, it is summed up in this sentence – ‘What may be true for you may not be the same for me.’ Since the 1950s, some journalists have chosen to embark on the path of engaged subjectivity where their intention is not to fabricate news stories, but to rather present a richer form of Truth. An example of this is Truman Capote’s 1966 *In Cold Blood* article, in which he not only described a brutal murder of a family, but also added other elements such as emotions, artifice, and moral ambiguity as part of his attempt to better explain the reasons for the incident and its possible impacts on society. This form of journalism is not ‘fake’ per se, but neither did it practice objectivity in its professional context; rather, it embraces cultural relativism where there is a range of answers to the question of ‘what happened?’ that depends on the actor’s position in the story.

However, D’Ancona (as cited by McNair et al., 2018) notes that such epistemological relativism is vastly different from the recent ‘post-truth’ phenomenon which involves a blatant and conscious choice to reject established truths. Although there still exists widespread mockery for those who fall into the latter category, the emerging post-truth culture that emphasizes faith rooted in emotions in deciding what is true or not over facts has set a dangerous stage for fake news to continue to be rife.

The second reason would be the declining level of trust for the ‘elites’ – be it royal institutions, experts, or upper classes who control the mechanisms of capitalism. In the past, the elites enjoyed a level of trust and privacy from the public. But that all came to an end following the rise of social democracy which demanded a greater sense of accountability and transparency from the elites, thanks to a media that became more critical and intrusive. While this seemed to be good for

governance and democracy, but on the other hand it has encouraged disillusionment and cynicism among the public towards the elites' ability to carry out their functions, eventually becoming less willing to give the latter deference and opting to criticize, debunk, and humiliate them in whatever way possible through the toxic fodder of sex and corruption scandals being offered to them by a media showing no qualms in publishing such stories (McNair et al., 2018).

As for the third reason, it is linked to the economic pressures that every media company experiences. Having so many competitors in the media industry that offer similar content, it is only natural for any company to outdo their opponents by producing content that will attract customers in reading, even if the content were to violate certain ethical boundaries. Publications such as the *The Sun* and *National Enquirer* have long built reputation for making sensational and at times fake news in the bid to gain more revenue than the rest.

Largely confined to the pages of tabloid newspapers and cable news networks, populism has broken free from that constricted space and has declared war on what seems to be the incompetence and lack of awareness towards the issues of the masses by the elites. McNair et al. (2018) cited the 9/11 event which saw Islamist terrorism setting foot on US soil as a trigger point for the public to breed fear and anger towards Muslims and migrants, regardless of whether it is justified or not. Such fears, when left unchecked, has given way to the likes of Trump, Matteo Salvini and other right-wing politicians to feed off the energy and accuse the elites of abandoning the people when the former chooses to refrain from issuing statements that will demonize innocent individuals. As a result, the politics of populism which is built upon irrational fears and a weakened regard for facts have taken several countries by storm, thus contributing to the decline of trust in journalism.

Last but not least, technology has also lent a hand in the crisis of trust towards journalism due to its ability to allow the public to disseminate news and content with little oversight, thus eroding

the gatekeeping process and posing a challenge against traditional media's top-down structure. According to Gu, Kropotov, and Yarochkin (as cited in McNair et al., 2018), the amount of information that is being uploaded on the Internet has caused users to have shorter attention spans. This, in turn, influences the ways fake news are designed and attributes to the likelihood for users to fall for them even more – a classic tactic in line with public manipulation theories. When facts have been manipulated, it changes the perception of readers and make them feel as though they are part of a movement that fits their biases and ideas. Another important observation by Gu et al. – ‘political fake news tends to align with the extremes of the political spectrum; “moderate” fake news does not really exist’.

This is applicable to Malaysia, where fake news tend to take on the cloak of religious or racial rhetoric in order to stir up tensions. In an interview with WIRED, former BN cybertrooper Syarul Ema admitted that along with 80 cybertroopers, thousands of fake social media accounts were created to issue racist statements in order to fan ungrounded anger towards the opposition parties. She also said that these fake news served as a distraction from the real issue; for instance, if a damaging news piece was published about the government, racially tinged issues like “this Chinese fella mocks our people” will be posted to counter it, thus effectively diverting public anger towards the latter (Guest, 2018).

2.2 Ideology, State Apparatuses, and Fake News

In 1970, French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser wrote an essay titled *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)* expounding his ideas and thoughts on classic Marxist theories such as ideology and introducing the state apparatuses that ensure the dominant ideology remains in control over the ruled. In this essay, Althusser provides

a more comprehensive concept of ideology by borrowing ideas from Antonio Gramsci, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan.

When it comes to ideology, Althusser outlines several hypotheses in showing that ideology is much more than just 'false consciousness' as purported by Marx. First, he argues that ideology is not just a 'reflection' of the real world, but that it is a 'representation' of society's imagined relationship to the real world. Put simply, every individual will always be within ideology due to relying on language to establish 'reality'. Second, he states that ideology is not merely an abstract idea, but that it operates within an apparatus or form of practice as he believes that ideology can be witnessed through actions which are then 'inserted into practices'. Third, he suggests that ideology's main goal is to 'constitute' individuals into subjects (a person being under another's control), thus causing them to create their own form of reality as 'true'. To prove this point, Althusser quotes the example of a police officer calling out to a person, to which the latter will respond by turning around without hesitation. By doing so, the respondent has unconsciously made himself into a subject and demonstrated the subtle powers of ideology when he/she does not realize that simple interactions as such was ideological in nature. Fourth, everyone is destined to be a subject from the moment of birth, as seen when a child will surely carry the father's name as its familial ideological configuration (Althusser, 2001).

With such ideological control in place, individuals have come to accept their ideological self-constitution as 'normal' and would have little desire to go against the ruling hegemony which is held together by two state apparatuses – ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs). Here, Althusser et al. (2001) presents the characteristics and differences between these apparatuses.

ISAs refer to institutions such as schools, churches, families, and the media which usually operate in the private domain. Such institutions are reliant on functioning through ideology that ultimately serves and advances the wishes of the ruling class. Due to the heterogeneous and rather autonomous nature of the ISAs, there will always be a constant battle for control in this aspect so that stability can be maintained in the RSAs. As Althusser et al. (2001) notes, *'no class can hold State power over a long period of time without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatuses'*. On the other hand, RSAs function in the public realm and predominately resorts to violence as its primary course of action when the ruling class' hegemony is being challenged. Examples of RSAs are the police force or the implementation of repressive laws on those deemed rebellious against the ruling order.

How then, are these apparatuses being applied in relation to the fake news phenomenon in Malaysia? As mentioned earlier, the media (television, newspapers) is a form of ISAs in any society where it seeks to promote the ideology of the ruling class, where in certain cases the media's mechanisms has been employed as a method to spread conservative ideologies and attack moderates. For Malaysia, this is quite evident in the case of Syerleena Rashid, a moderate Malay politician who recently became a victim of fake news being spread on Facebook which accused her of attempting to change the country's official religion (Abu Bakar et al. 2017).

As for RSAs, Malaysia has had a long history of formulating and implementing media laws on those who resist the existing hegemony by producing content or information that may threaten UMNO's grip on power or damage its reputation. For example, prior to the Anti Fake News Bill 2018's passing in Parliament, Kuala Selangor MP Datuk Seri Irmohizam Ibrahim quoted Pandan MP Rafizi Ramli's statements about Tabung Haji's financial status as evidence to justify the

formulation of such laws. He also claimed that those who resisted approving the Bill are spreaders of fake news themselves (NST et al, 2018).

From these instances, it has shown a picture full of irony – on one hand, rightists are clearly utilizing institutional powers like the media to justify creating fake news in breeding conservatism and attack individuals with moderate views; on the other hand, they have displayed a level of fear and concern towards fake news which resulted in the formulation of the Anti Fake News Act in April of this year to combat misinformation and news that may damage an individual or organization's reputation. It can also be observed that ISAs and RSAs are more than likely to be employed by conservative regimes or governments who opt for undemocratic discourse as a way to stifle views that are seen to be threatening the status quo. Thus, this social phenomenon must be observed in Malaysia's context to see whether it is taking place or not.

2.3 Cyberspace as a Public Sphere in a Post-Truth Era?

As a platform that has been hailed to be a new avenue for the exchange and discussion of opinions and ideas, it is imperative for one to relook into the Internet's supposed role as a public sphere as well as whether the same holds true in accordance to Jurgen Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory.

In his post-doctoral thesis, Habermas et al. (1962) describes public sphere as a public space helmed by the elites in which an individual has the freedom to speak, discuss, and participate in collective decisions. It is also where public opinions are shaped and become a force to be reckoned with when pressed upon authorities to rethink certain actions. Thanks to this, the public sphere is often referred to as a place where decisions are made with no violence and discussions are based on 'rational-critical argument' – a term coined by Immanuel Kant. The most important part of this

theory is that public opinions created within the public sphere are formed by rationality, not negotiation.

According to the 'rational-critical argument' composition of the public sphere, it comprises of four main elements:

1. Every contributor is given the same opportunity to start conversations, share their views, and propose ideas
2. Everyone has the right to question certain topics of discussion
3. Everyone has the right to air their desires, wants, and emotions
4. The speakers must have the chance to express their statements on the discourse's procedures and its practices. In the case where they are being excluded from the discussions, they have the right to declare their position and the relation to hegemonic powers that stifle their expressions

When the Internet made its debut in the 1990s, many scholars believed that cyberspace was quickly asserting itself to be the new public sphere due to its ability in allowing users to generate, share, and critically discuss issues (particularly political) on the whole new level. However, there are some to who beg to differ such as Flichy (as cited in Mahlouly, 2013), who believe that cyberspace's role as a public sphere needs to undergo some rethinking.

The main difference between the Habermasian and online form of public sphere is that digital technology has affected the rationality of social interactions and the sustainability of public opinion, along with shifting the main driving force behind the public sphere from the elites to the masses. According to Flichy et al. (as cited in Mahlouly, 2013), discourses have been vastly diluted to simpler forms and its robustness weakened due to a lack of rational thinking and effective

deliberation. This is quite evident in political discourses, where the ‘democratization’ of the Internet has enabled users to generate and share content at a much lower level of gatekeeping, leading to a flow of information that is not reliable and irrational at times – thus defeating Habermas’ idea of an organized and critical public sphere. Nevertheless, Flichy acknowledges the fact that technology has opened up a wider range of opinions to be shared, and that its quality need not be compromised as long as the discussion is moderated by professionals of public expression.

Another feature of the online public sphere pointed out by Flichy et al. (as cited in Mahlouly et al., 2013) is that it is hard to be localized due to the various opinions being expressed in a diffused manner, thus making the range of political views tougher to identify. Based on the fact that online users show a greater tendency to attach themselves to websites that fit their political ideologies, it is rare for different views to meet on one same platform and this does not aid in the enhancement of arguments presented.

With critical formulation of ideas and arguments seemingly showing signs of decline on the Internet, it has given way for the likes of Trump and other political leaders of similar ideologies to usher in post-truth politics into the fray – where emotions reign supreme over facts. A glaring example of this was during the Republican National Convention prior to the presidential election. In an interview with CNN, Republican senator Newt Gingrich brushed aside a chart of crime rates which showed that violent crime had decreased during Obama’s tenure. When pressed for a justification, he replied by saying that “people *feel* more threatened. As a political candidate, I’ll go with what people *feel*” (Siegal, 2016). Through this instance, we can see that politics is taking a rather alarming turn towards a path slathered with pure emotions than concrete facts and policies. Therefore, given the current circumstances, one must truly reconsider the once high hopes held for

cyberspace to be a public sphere utopia and look deeper into the troubling events unfolding in the wake of post-truth politics.

2.4 Analysis of Representation, Semiotics, Myths, and Power

Based on the nature of the final year project which will focus on the textual and visual components of fake news being disseminated in cyberspace, it is vital to look into several concepts related to this, namely Stuart Hall's theory of representation, semiotics, and Roland Barthes' concept on myths.

To a common person, representation is best defined as the attempt to describe/depict something in the mind or to symbolize an object. Hall (1997) applies a constructionist approach to further refine this definition by stating that humans construct meaning by using representational systems, which is two-tiered in nature. The first level of this system involves correlating 'things' (objects, people, events, abstract ideas) with a set of mental representations which allows us to make sense of the world, whereas the second level involves formulating a set of correspondences between conceptual maps and signs which have been arranged into languages that refer to those concepts. Thus, he calls the link between 'things', concepts, and signs as 'representation'. What then, is language? According to Hall et al. (1997), language refers to signs and symbols that represents one's concepts, ideas, and feelings. It can take the form of written words, electronically-produced images, or even musical notes.

Much of the basic framework for the constructionist approach to language and representation originates from the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. To Saussure (as cited in Hall et al., 1997), meanings are produced through language as he believed that 'language is a system of signs' where words, sounds, or images take up the role of signs within language to express ideas through a system. Therefore, he came up with two important terms to explain the signs – signifier

and signified; the former being the form (actual word, image etc.) and the latter being the idea/concept associated with the form in one's mind. When these two come together, meaning is produced and representation is maintained through its relationship that is fixed by one's cultural and linguistic codes.

One notable observation made by Saussure (as cited in Hall et al., 1997) is that the relationship between the signifier and signified is not permanently fixed as the words (signifiers) and concepts (signifieds) can alter their meaning over time. Every shift will change the conceptual map of a culture, thus causing different cultures at certain historical moments to interpret the world in a new manner. Hall et al. (1997) cites the example of the word 'black' where it was previously associated with death and evil. However, when 'black' was used in a 1960s slogan to depict the beauty of African-Americans, its former negative associations became irrelevant. In such a context, it suggests that meanings are produced within history and culture, always subject to change in both the cultural context and time periods. Although this form of representation derives from the *constructionist* approach, however for the sake of this final year project, the *intentional* approach will be used instead to analyze fake news posts on Facebook. According to Hall et al. (1997), the intentional approach argues that the author attaches his/her own meaning on the world through language, where 'words mean what the author intends they should mean'. Therefore, this approach will be used to analyze the text and visuals of fake news in Malaysia as the final year project is concerned with the encoding component of the posts.

Another vital concept in representation is semiotics, an area which was widely researched by French literary theorist Roland Barthes (along with his concept on myths, which will be discussed later). The main foundation of semiotics is that since all cultural objects convey meaning, along with cultural practices which depend on meaning, signs must operate in the same manner as

language. Using the example of wrestling, Barthes (as cited in Hall et al., 1997) argues that instead of asking 'Who won?', its meaning must be questioned, where wrestling is treated as a text to be *read*, thus leading him to conclude that the wrestlers' gestures is nothing more than a 'pure spectacle of excess'

Under the semiotic approach, aside from words and images, even objects themselves act as signs where they carry a message and meaning as well. For example, a black tie is usually seen as article of clothing that is worn around the neck, but it is also associated with elegance and formality. Barthes divides these descriptions into two levels: denotation and connotation. Simply put, denotation is the literal meaning which most people would agree upon, while connotation is meanings generated by connecting the signifier to wider cultural concerns (Hall et al., 1997).

Barthes' greatest contribution however, is his concept on what myths are and how it used to 'naturalize' certain worldviews. In his essay *Myth Today*, he outlines the basic framework of what constitutes a myth. To him, myths are more than a form of speech that is confined to lingual signs. Drawing from Saussure's signifier/signified theory, Barthes asserts that for a myth to be created, the sign has to be used as a *signifier* and a new meaning will be given, which is the *signified*. He further notes that such meanings are not added without a reason (Barthes, 1972).

To prove his point, Barthes cites the famous example of a magazine cover showing an African child saluting in a French uniform. According to his analysis, the signifier (a saluting child soldier), while offering little insight into the life of the child, was nevertheless still selected to combine with the signifieds of Frenchness, militariness etc. as an attempt to portray a message about France and its inhabitants. Barthes then concluded that through the combination of the signifier and signified, the image creates the myth of 'imperial devotion', thus giving it some form of 'significance'. He puts it as such:

“I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under the flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors...” (Barthes et al, 1972).

After explaining what a myth is, Barthes then moves on to establishing the relationship between myth and power. He believed that since myths occurs in the context of human history, myths cannot take place naturally and that there will always be communicative intentions behind the myth itself. He also stated that myths are born out human creations and highly dependent on the context in which it takes place. As such, it will constantly undergo contextual change in order to alter its effects. Barthes goes on to say that myths indirectly participates in the formation of an ideology where it seeks to deviate from reality, where it ‘cleanses’ the sign and replaces it with meanings that are in line with the intentions of those who created the myth, thus ‘naturalizing’ certain concepts/beliefs. This aspect of myths is what makes it so much more believable to the audience (Barthes et al., 1972).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Content Analysis: Textual and Visual Analysis of Discourse

This research will be employing a qualitative content analysis as its methodology to analyze the textual and visual components of fake news posts on Facebook in Malaysia. This is a form of qualitative research which according to Denzin and Lincoln (as cited in Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), is made up of ‘interpretative, material practices that make the world more visible’ where it involves ‘an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world’. This allows researchers to study a phenomena in its original setting as well as discover the meanings attached to it. Qualitative data analysis also involves the ‘classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it’ (Flick, 2013).

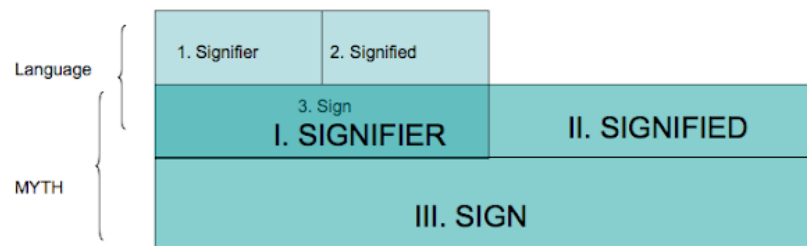
Flick et al. (2013) outlines three main aims of qualitative research. First, it is to describe a phenomena in a detailed manner, where cases (individuals and groups) are studied and compared to find possible similarities and differences. Second, it identifies the conditions on which the differences are based as so to find reasons why such differences exist. Third, it is to formulate a theory of the phenomena being studied based on the analysis of empirical material.

As the name suggests, content analysis is the systematic analysis of a text’s content in both a qualitative and quantitative manner. However, since this final year project will be based on qualitative research, the hermeneutic form of content analysis will be utilized where texts’ subjective meanings will be “interpreted” in its socio-historical context. Simply put, hermeneutics is very much concerned with the theory and practice of interpretation (Ritchie & Lewis et al., 2003).

Aside from analyzing text, this final year project will be analyzing images used in fake news as well. When it comes to images, they have been recognized to have the potential to establish a connection between viewers and the world, where amidst this interaction certain attitudes are suggested to be adopted by viewers towards what the image represents. According to Jewitt and Oyama (2004), three factors play a role in ensuring such meanings are realized: contact, distance, and point of view. For contact, it is mostly found in images where the subject inside the picture frame is looking at the viewer in a certain manner, thus ‘making contact’ in the process. Such images are termed as ‘demand’ pictures as they indirectly demand a form of response from the viewer, which is done through facial expressions and gestures (e.g. hands on hips, a penetrating stare). For images where such gestures are absent, it is termed as ‘offer’ pictures as it causes viewers to ‘observe’ the subjects in a detached and informal manner.

Distance also plays a vital role in the visual analysis, where the ‘size’ of the frame will give viewers the message of either closeness or remoteness. For example, a close-up image suggests an intimate relationship, a medium-shot a social relationship, and a long-shot an impersonal relationship. As for point of view, different angles are used in images/posters that seek to identify who are the ones that the viewer should engage with or observe. A classic example of this can be seen in images which portray hegemonic forms of masculinity, where men are usually shown to be in charge and strong through a frontal angle, whereas women are shown to be fully obedient and ‘dominated’ through an oblique angle (Jewitt & Oyama et al., 2004). By using these methods, it falls in line with the aim of carrying out a qualitative content analysis of the textual and visual composition of fake news in Malaysian cyberspace.

3.1 Hall's Theory of Representation and Barthes' *Myth Today* as Methodology



*Graph 1: Adopted from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957, trans. Annette Lavers, Vintage: London, 1993), 115.*

A pilot study will be conducted in this research by using Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Roland Barthes' concept on myths in his essay *Myth Today* as shown in Graph 1. The reason as to why these two concepts were chosen is because it will aid in the analyzing of the textual and visual composition of fake news found on Facebook. Due to these two concepts dealing with the interpretation of meanings (both direct and hidden) encoded in texts and visuals, it will be very useful in discovering the kinds of discourses and forms of power being constructed within fake news as well as executing the pilot study successfully.

Another analyzing method will also be employed in this study i.e. coding. A total of 30 fake news articles will be selected, undergo the coding process where it will identify several themes embedded within it (e.g. religion, ethnicity), the number of fake news posts according to the themes, and analyze the political ideologies presented. This method will be used primarily in the textual analysis as it deals more with words. As such, Table 1 will serve as a guideline in analyzing and coding the textual composition of fake news.

Themes Identified	Number of Fake News Posts
Contradiction/Irony	
Religion	
Ethnicity	
Personal Attack	
Health/Environment	

Table 1: Coding method in analyzing the textual composition and themes in fake news posted on Facebook

3.2 Brief Execution

Using the concepts presented by Stuart Hall and Roland Barthes, a pilot study will be executed as an attempt to analyze fake news being disseminated on Facebook and reveal the various discourses being encoded in it as well. The reason why these concepts were conceptualized as this study's methodology is because it fits with and aids in fulfilling the study's aims, which is to look deeper into the hidden meanings and intentions behind words and pictures shown in fake news in Malaysian cyberspace. Aside from that, the coding process will also lend a hand in dissecting and analyzing major themes presented through the words formulated by the encoder in order to shed light on the rising phenomenon of fake news being disseminated with the intention to mislead readers.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the findings and analysis of this final year project will be based upon Barthes' concept and construction of myths and Hall's theory of representation in the analysis and coding of the following fake news posts disseminated on Facebook. Several elements will be taken into account in the analyzing process such as the color, words, facial expression, and individuals featured. Each news post will have three subsections – first order language, second order language, and a brief elaboration.

4.0 Textual and Visual Analysis of Fake News Posts



First order language: Syerleena Rashid pledges to change Malaysia's official religion to Christianity after the 14th general election and that she'll attack JAKIM for DAP

Second order language: Syerleena is involved in a Christianization agenda by DAP. Therefore, she is an enemy of Islam and not a true Muslim

Elaboration: In September 2017, the above image was shared on Facebook by an account named “Darul Ehsan Leaks”. In this post, Democratic Action Party (DAP) Women’s Assistant Syerleena Abdul Rashid was depicted as an individual who swore to “attack Islamic institutions”, particularly Jakim for DAP, along with pledge to change Malaysia’s official religion to Christianity after the 14th General Election. The color of the post was red, which is commonly associated with DAP as its party’s main colors are red and white. On the facial expression, Syerleena was portrayed having a look of determination to carry out her ‘pledge’, suggesting that she will not stop until it’s fulfilled. DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng was featured in the post as he holds the most powerful position within the party, which may imply to readers that he gave his blessing for Syerleena’s ‘pledge’.



First order language: Hannah Yeoh expresses her support and prays for the protection of Israel

Second order language: Since she has shown that she is for Israel's wellbeing, Hannah Yeoh is an enemy of Islam and is not fit to be part of Malaysian society

Elaboration: Months before the 14th General Election, this post emerged accusing Segambut MP and former Selangor State Assembly speaker Hannah Yeoh of expressing support for Israel, a country which Malaysia has no diplomatic relations with due to the former's alleged human rights abuses on Palestinians. Yeoh was alleged to have claimed that Jerusalem belonged to Israel, asked for divine protection on Israel's behalf, and described the efforts of those aiding Palestinians as worthless as it brings no benefits while speaking at several churches.

Being a DAP member herself, the post also claimed that Israel will give the party 300mil USD in exchange for better diplomatic relations if Pakatan Harapan (PH) were to become the federal government. Due to Yeoh's reputation as an outspoken Christian, this post employed the religious stance in attempting to smear her public image and DAP by stoking fears of a possible Christianization agenda among Malays. Like Syerleena, a somber face of Hannah was chosen to be used in the post as a way to show that she was firm in her decision to stand by Israel.



First order language: DAP wishes to do away with Islam as the official religion

Second order language: The party is harboring plans to threaten and overthrow established laws and Malay rights. Thus, they are dangerous and the foe of every practicing Malay Muslim

Elaboration: A fake news post involving DAPSY (DAP's Youth Wing) Perak Chief Howard Lee was circulated online alleging that he stated DAP intends to “abort” Islam’s status as the official religion of the country. Religion was again used to stir up tensions and pit two major races in Malaysia (i.e. Malays and Chinese) against one another by portraying DAP as a political party whose sole purpose is to go against established Islamic institutions and challenge Malay rights enshrined in the Constitution. Such posts levelled against DAP also helps to reinforce current perceptions that it harbors resentment towards Malays for being given special privileges and is constantly plotting to get rid of those privileges. The Pakatan Harapan logo consisting of three political parties was also featured in the post, most likely with the intention to show that Howard Lee is speaking not only for DAP, but for the entire coalition as well.



First order language: Scores of Bangladeshis are making their way into the country and have landed at the airport

Second order language: Bangladeshis are acting as phantom voters who are in cahoots with BN in order to swing the election to their favor. Therefore, they are part of BN's scheme in winning general elections whenever the former needs votes to do so.

Elaboration: In two videos uploaded on Facebook by a user on April 23 last year, it showed a throng of Bangladeshis landing at the Penang International Airport. The post's caption said that the government was bringing them into the country to support BN in the upcoming general election while calling it a "dirty tactic". Shortly after the post went viral, it sparked a string of similar accusations towards the Bangladeshis by labelling them as "phantom voters" or using poop emojis to show a longstanding distaste among Malaysians for their unwelcomed neighbors. Although it was later reported that they were not brought in for political purposes, it did little to dispel entrenched notions such as Bangladeshis being dirty, unruly, a public nuisance, and potentially

dangerous criminals that terrorize those around them. To this day, most Malaysians still do not perceive kindly on Bangladeshis, constantly blaming them for many social ills plaguing the country. Such posts as the above, however misleading it may be, will continue to be the stereotype that Malaysians fall back on whenever it comes to foreign workers.



First order language: An Indonesian alleged that Anwar Ibrahim had sodomized him in Singapore

Second order language: Anwar Ibrahim is a morally perverted person who cannot hold any position in the government and is a tainted Muslim as sodomy is a heinous sin in Islam

Elaboration: On October 1, 2018, UMNO Supreme Council member Datuk Lokman Noor Adam made a shocking allegation on Facebook, in which he claimed that a police report was made against Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the husband of Deputy Prime Minister Dr Wan Azizah by an Indonesian student in Singapore for sodomy, even quoting Singaporean news outlet Berita Mediacorp to back up his claim. Subsequently, Berita Mediacorp said that the information was fake and Lokman later retracted his statement. This post clearly aims to bring up Anwar's past

controversial sodomy trials which have caught great media attention and dogged his political career. By doing so, this will undoubtedly cast Anwar in an extremely bad light where he will be seen as a compulsive sodomizer and unfit to run for a public position such as being Port Dickson MP, a position which he was running for when this allegation was made.



First order language: The Sultan of Brunei is donating 1bil USD to the government to repair Malaysia's economy

Second order language: The PH government is no different from the previous BN when it comes to corruption because it is willingly accepting monetary donations from another country

Elaboration: Shortly after PH became the new federal government, this series of photos was circulated on Facebook where it showed the Sultan of Brunei paying a visit to Prime Minister

Mahathir Mohamad, accompanied with the caption claiming that the ruler was going to gift a large sum of money without any repayment. Prior to this, the BN government was voted out as a result of the 1MDB scandal, out of which the RM2.6bil donation allegation became infamous. In this post, it seems to suggest that PH is equally as corrupt as its former counterpart in taking Brunei's financial 'donation' and using the need to repair Malaysia's economy as a cover.

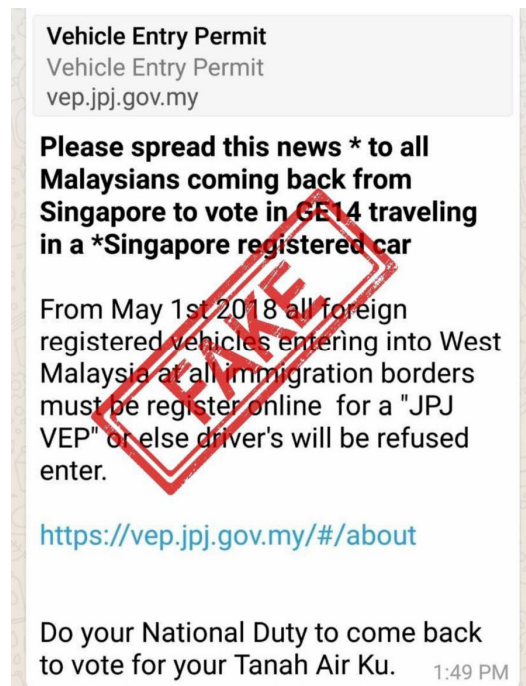


First order language: A long line of foreign workers are queuing up at one of Malaysia's airport

Second order language: Foreign workers are being brought into the country by the BN government to act as phantom voters to turn the tide to their favor during an upcoming general election

Elaboration: Once again, foreign workers were caught up in the crossfire of Malaysians' disdain and debate when a series of videos showing them lining up at an airport went viral on Facebook during the run-up to GE14. Accusations were soon thrown at them by many, saying that they were phantom votes working on behalf of BN. To further substantiate those claims, they pointed to the

fact that the foreign workers were wearing blue caps with a white logo – similar to BN's party colors. Authorities later concluded that the foreigners were simply coming into the country to work and were wearing caps which showed the factory they worked at.



First order language: Malaysians coming back from Singapore will be denied entry by JPJ into their homeland if they do not have a Singaporean registered car

Second order language: The government is utilizing agencies under its fold to discourage Malaysians working abroad to return to vote as part of its plan to sabotage the upcoming general election and secure victory

Elaboration: In the days leading up to GE14, the above message was made viral among Malaysians working in Singapore to quickly obtain a Vehicle Entry Permit (VEP) if they planned on coming back to vote. The reason why was because the Road Transport Department (JPJ) would

conduct spot-checks on vehicles entering Malaysia and turn back those who did not have a VEP, which was seen by many as a tactic by the then BN government to reduce the number of overseas votes. Thus, Malaysians abroad are urged to return and fulfill their ‘national duty’ as a way to fight back against the government’s ploy to secure the election in the post above.



First order language: Soldiers from the Malaysian Armed Forces are holding a banner with the words ‘Don’t insult our Prophet’ written on it

Second order language: The military are united in their determination to use force and sacrifice their lives against those who insult Islam and Prophet Mohammad

Elaboration: Prior to this post, a senior citizen pleaded not guilty to charges of allegedly insulting Prophet Mohammad in a cartoon. This then set the foundation for this post, where it depicted the Malaysian Armed Forces joining the counteractive to combat further insults against Islam. With tanks lined up behind them, this picture serves as a warning to would-be aggressors that the army will not hold back in using force, even to the point where they are willing to do so with their own

lives and blood. The Malaysian Armed Forces later condemned this post, saying that it was an attempt by irresponsible parties to stir up racial and religious tensions



First order language: A newspaper headline showing a Facebook post of a man being in a compromising position with a woman

Second order language: Suggests that the man is morally weak by cheating with another woman and shows no shame in taking a fully nude picture with her

Elaboration: Local newspaper China Press reported on a viral Facebook post by a woman who, while claiming that she was the wife of former Bercham assemblyman Cheong Chee Khing, said that he was a compulsive cheater and womanizer as he has a long history of infidelity. She then

further warned other women to stay away from him as he will never divorce her for them. This post clearly aims to portray Cheong as a morally compromised person who should not have the right to hold a political position and incite others to despise/shun him. Cheong denounced the accusation, calling it fake and a ‘smear campaign’ to tarnish his reputation.



First order language: Former Prime Minister Najib Razak showing a picture of a hall bearing the name of Education Minister Dr. Mazlee Malik

Second order language: Najib is attempting to portray Mazlee as a power hungry politician who has a school hall named after him after just ten months of being a minister

Elaboration: Ever since losing his position as Prime Minister after GE14, Najib Razak embarked on a social media trolling spree by poking fun at PH ministers. In his official Facebook profile, he directs his sarcasm towards Education Minister Mazlee Malik by ‘congratulating’ him for having a school hall named after him after ten months of being a minister. Here, he attempts to imply that

Mazlee has become arrogant after holding an important portfolio and named a hall after himself as a way to inflate his ego. Unfortunately, the photo turned out to be forged and the post was subsequently deleted.



First order language: Teluk Intan assemblyman Nga Kor Ming is holding a political rally in the presence of prominent Malay politicians

Second order language: By using racially-tinged and coarse language, Chinese politicians such as Nga show no respect to Malays in general. Also, those Malay politicians who were present at the rally have no qualms in allowing their dignity to be trampled on by the likes of Nga

Elaboration: Racial harmony was put to the test in this Facebook post where a user by the name Azhar Mohd showed Nga allegedly calling Malays by a derogatory term referring to a female genitalia during a rally. He describes Nga as a '*bangsat*' (bitch) who displays no respect towards Malays. He also called out the Malay politicians such as Mat Sabu who attended the event for their support of Nga who insulted their self-worth and dignity. Through such a portrayal, it is obvious that he intends to pit the Chinese and Malays against each other by accusing the former of despising Malays and possibly inciting them to rise up and counter such despicable terminologies uttered by Chinese individuals such as Nga.



First order language: Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng giving a speech during an official event with Religious Affairs Minister Dr. Mujahid Yusof Rawa beside him

Second order language: The purity of the Holy Koran has been defiled by Lim who was invited by Mujahid to officiate the opening of a printing center for the holy book. The post also alleges that Mujahid is practicing a libertarian form of Islam and thus is not fit to hold his ministerial position.

Elaboration: As seen in the post above, Lim was present at an event announcing the federal government's RM5mil contribution to an Islamic institution named Nasyrul Quran with Mujahid present. However, a Facebook user named Esmee bin Mat Isa claimed that Lim was instead requested to officiate the opening of a printing center for the Holy Koran, which constitutes to defiling the holy book. He also used the term '*kafir harbi*' (belligerent infidel) to describe Lim – a word that is usually reserved for non-Muslims who have allied themselves with Islam's enemies and are deserving of war. This term was first employed by Pahang mufti Abdul Rahman Osman, who used it to describe those who opposed PAS' Syariah Private Member's Bill and likened their opposition to hating Islam itself.

As for Mujahid, he was labelled as a liberal Malay, which carries a narrative largely distorted by multiple fallacies and is often attached with negative connotations. By describing Lim and Mujahid in such a manner, it can lead to ill feelings and violence against non-Muslims and open-minded Malays by those who see it as a way of defending Islam's sanctity.



First order language: Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) member William Mawan Ikom is sitting at a gambling table with a few other people

Second order language: Ikom is participating in illegal activities such as gambling, which is forbidden in Islam. Therefore, he cannot call himself a true Muslim and is unfit to be part of the Malay community

Elaboration: In February this year, a photo of PBB member William Mawan Ikom sitting at a table filled with bank notes surfaced on Facebook. Netizens were quick to point out that Ikom was sitting at a ‘Gourd Crab’ table, a kind of gambling game that originated from China. The post was accompanied with the caption “*buat apa bossku?*” (What are you doing?) as so to imply that he was participating in an illegal activity such as gambling. As gambling is forbidden in Islam, the post attempts to portray him as one who breaks religious laws and is considered ‘unclean’ in the eyes of fellow Muslims. Ikom’s team later clarified that the photo, which was taken ages ago, showed that he was simply observing others playing the game as he had trouble understanding it. They also claimed that the photo was posted to demonize Ikom.



Lim Guan Eng
@cmlimguaneng

Antara [#ManifestoPH](#) yang kita akan lancarkan adalah langkah penjimatan wang rakyat melalui pemansuhan ~~University~~ seluruh negara. Peruntukan itu akan diagihkan sama rata kepada semua University Kerajaan Pakatan Harapan nanti.

First order language: Lim Guan Eng releasing a statement that one of PH's manifesto promises is to save the people's money by shutting down all public and private universities

Second order language: PH is attempting to encroach upon Malay rights and privileges by abolishing public universities such as Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) which was created for educating and helping the Malay population

Elaboration: When PH first unveiled its electoral manifesto, the above post claiming that one of the manifestos was to abolish public and private universities like UiTM in order to save public expenditure went viral. UiTM has long been known to be reserved exclusively for Malays, where it practices the quota system to allow more Malays to gain admission. The post prompted angry reactions from the Malay populace, who saw it as a way of challenging the long held principle of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and Malay rights guaranteed in the Constitution. Certain

words were also used to intentionally attack Lim and PH such as ‘*CM*’ (Chief Minister), ‘*#ManifestoPH*’, and ‘*Kerajaan Pakatan Harapan*’ to clearly single them out for public anger.



First order language: Transport Minister Anthony Loke announcing the abolishment of Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) during a rally in Seremban

Second order language: Loke is implying that Malays/Muslims are lazy as they are the largest recipients of BR1M and often rely on government handouts to survive instead of finding a job

Elaboration: BR1M is a form of government aid that was created during Najib’s tenure, where it aims to provide financial assistance for needy families regardless of race and religion. However, the post alleges that Loke claimed PH, at the direction of DAP, plans to get rid of BR1M due to the fact that the largest number of BR1M recipients are Malay Muslims. Thus, it implies two things – 1) DAP, as the ringleader of PH, constantly finds ways to further strain Sino-Malay relations

among Malaysians, and 2) Malays in general are lazy people who would rather rely on government aid than to work hard – a stereotype that has been fully entrenched in Malaysian society for a long time.



First order language: A poster showing Defense Minister Mat Sabu saying that he would rather eat pork with DAP rather than eat chickens with UMNO

Second order language: Mat Sabu is not a genuine Muslim and is anti-Malay as he would choose to associate with and defile himself with a political party whose members indulged themselves in unclean activities such as consuming pork

Elaboration: Mat Sabu is well known for being a progressive Muslim during his membership with the conservative Islamist party PAS. He later left along with a few others to form a splinter group comprised of former PAS members called Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH), which later became a part of the PH coalition. In this post, he was alleged to have said that he would rather eat pork with DAP, which is considered serious for Muslims as pork is forbidden and deemed unclean in

Islam. Another interesting aspect of the picture is that Sabu is wearing a yellow shirt, which is often synonymous with civil rights group Bersih (meaning ‘clean’ in Malay). The choice of this color is to show to viewers Sabu’s hypocrisy in claiming that he’s an upright person while doing otherwise. Furthermore, the post attempts to paint Mat Sabu as a Muslim who chooses to break Islamic laws in order to have better relations with DAP or to gain political leverage.



First order language: Stulang Assemblyman Andrew Chen said that Malays living in Bakar Batu are rude in not allowing DAP to hold a rally in the area

Second order language: Chen is implying that Malays who do not allow Chinese-dominated parties such as DAP to organize rallies do not have a good upbringing and are rude individuals

Elaboration: In this post, a Facebook user named ‘Lidah Hitam’ alleged that Stulang Assemblyman Andrew Chen called Malays living in Bakar Batu rude for not allowing a DAP rally

to take place in the area. With the caption '*Apa komen ORANG MELAYU PEMBANGKANG?*' (What is your comment, Malays from the Opposition?), this post clearly attempts to stir up tensions between Malays and Chinese by posing a question in order to unify Malays in taking strong action against Chinese people who insult them. The post's caption also bears an uncanny resemblance to propaganda posters created after the Pearl Harbor attack, where multiple posters with the caption 'What do YOU say, AMERICA?' aimed in uniting Americans to fight against their Japanese aggressors.



First order language: Lim Guan Eng making an insulting statement about Malays in Malaysia and across the world based on an extensive research done on all ethnic groups

Second order language: Malays in general, are the most unintelligent and laziest ethnic group in the world. Therefore, they cannot be relied upon in anything and always have to depend on others for their survival as they lack the intelligence and are unwilling to work hard

Elaboration: In Malaysian society, the notion of Malays being lazy has been a stereotype that has existed since the British colonization era and still is a divisive topic in Malaysia's rather volatile racial relations, notably among the Chinese and Malays. This notion was clearly used as a tactic to provoke ill feelings between these two groups in the post through the superimposing of DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng's blurry and solemn face beside a disparaging statement about Malays being the most stupid and laziest ethnic group in the world. This only serves to drive a deeper wedge and reinforce the perception that DAP is an anti-Malay and a Chinese supremacist political party within the Malay community.



First order language: A netizen claiming that Defense Minister Mat Sabu had used a government helicopter for a family Raya trip

Second order language: Mat Sabu is a corrupt politician who misuses his power as a minister to fund personal trips at the expense of taxpayers' money. Therefore, he is an untrustworthy person who does not deserve the people's support in the future.

Elaboration: In a rather lengthy Facebook post, a netizen claims that Defense Minister Mat Sabu had used a government helicopter for a family Raya trip by using taxpayers' money to pay for the costs. To back up his claim, he posted screenshots of a video allegedly showing Sabu and his family posing in front of the helicopter. He then urges others to not be deceived by the PH government as they had lied to the people by compelling them to save in order to repay the country's debts but have instead spent it on themselves. At the last paragraph, the netizen uses the phrase '*test sekali boleh selam*' – a phrase which refers to the infamous Scorpene scandal where former Prime Minister Najib and his former aide Razak Baginda allegedly bought two Scorpene submarines for personal gain. Through this phrase, the netizen is implying that Sabu is equally as corrupt in using government assets for himself.



First order language: Padang Terap assemblyman Dato' Seri Mahdzir Ahmad is defecting from UMNO to join BERSATU.

Second order language: Mahdzir is a traitor and ungrateful to UMNO by choosing to switch to BERSATU's side. He also shows characteristics of a '*lalang*' (weed) and '*katak*' (frog) through his decision to join BERSATU instead of continuing to support UMNO.

Elaboration: After BN's disastrous loss in GE14, many UMNO members began to leave the party in large numbers to join the ruling PH government's component parties, notably BERSATU. These people were soon given the name of '*kataks*' (frogs) to describe their action of party hopping. Here, Mahdzir is rumored to have left UMNO for BERSATU, fueling accusations that he was a traitor and party hopper by choosing to leave when it was at its lowest point.



First order language: Two Facebook posts showing that Prime Minister Tun Mahathir promised to abolish e-hailing service Grab, thus causing 500,000 Malaysians to lose their jobs

Second order language: Tun Mahathir is a power-crazed and heartless politician who makes empty promises without considering the financial consequences on citizens.

Elaboration: E-hailing service Grab was a topic of contention for Malaysians, particularly among taxi drivers who regularly resented the fact that Grab was snatching away their livelihood as it attracted more customers. In these posts, it claimed that Prime Minister Tun Mahathir had promised to abolish Grab as a way to provide more jobs during his electoral campaign in Langkawi. However, in doing so, he had caused 500,000 Malaysians to lose their source of income, thus leading to financial hardship. The posts alleges that the reason Tun Mahathir made this promise was to seize power and posed the question of whether he can guarantee the future of these unemployed Grab workers.



First order language: A picture showing a road sign named Jalan Koo Chong Kong in Ipoh

Second order language: The authorities in Perak is attempting to wipe away traces/signs of Malay history through the change of the road's name from Jalan Panglima Bukit Gantang Wahab to Jalan Koo Chong Kong

Elaboration: In an article by Perak Today (link: <https://peraktoday.com.my/2019/02/kerajaan-negeri-nafi-tukar-nama-jalan-panglima-bukit-gantang-wahab/>), rumors were flying around town that the road where the Perak State Health Department head office was located, Jalan Panglima Bukit Gantung Wahab, would be changed to Jalan Koo Chong Kong instead. This soon caused a flurry of reactions, with many saying that this was an attempt by the state government to completely erase Malay identity from the area. Perak Chief Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Faizal Azumu later clarified that the office was merely changing its address for its patients' convenience and condemned those who manipulated an official letter from the Health Ministry to incite racial tensions.



First order language: A screenshot of a video posted by KiniTV on Facebook showing scores of dead fish in an unnamed location

Second order language: The safety and health of Malaysians living in the area are in jeopardy as wildlife is dying in massive numbers due to an environmental hazard. The livelihood those who depend on fishing to survive and earn a living is also being threatened. Such incidents will bring panic and chaos among residents

Elaboration: During the current Pasir Gudang toxic spill crisis, a video showing hundreds of dead fish floating on the water's surface caused widespread panic among residents in the area as many own fish farms as a source of income. However, the Fisheries Department issued a statement saying that the video was false and that there were no reports by any fish farms of such incidents.



First order language: A photo showing Johor Chief Minister Osman Sapian posing with a few people while playing golf at Batam, Indonesia

Second order language: Osman is an inept and unsympathetic Chief Minister who abandons his people who are suffering an environmental crisis and chooses to go overseas for a golf session and enjoy fresh, clean air instead of staying back to handle the crisis

Elaboration: In another post related to the Pasir Gudang toxic spill crisis, a photo of Chief Minister Osman Sapian posing with a golf stick with his companions at Batam, Indonesia surfaced on Facebook while many Johoreans were hospitalised due to the toxic fumes. According to the caption which reads, *'I'm at Batam playing golf and the air here is extremely good. You don't have to worry about me'* attempts to portray Osman as a politician who is only concerned about his own health and leisure. The post also aims to tell readers that he shows no care towards his subordinates who are undergoing a health crisis by choosing to go elsewhere in order to escape air pollution. It was later revealed that the photo was taken years ago and was called an attempt to damage Osman's reputation.



First order language: A post showing that Tunku Aminah is going against her family's wishes in deciding how to run her new business

Second order language: She is a rebellious daughter to the Sultan of Johor and is an individual who wants to run her life independently from her family.

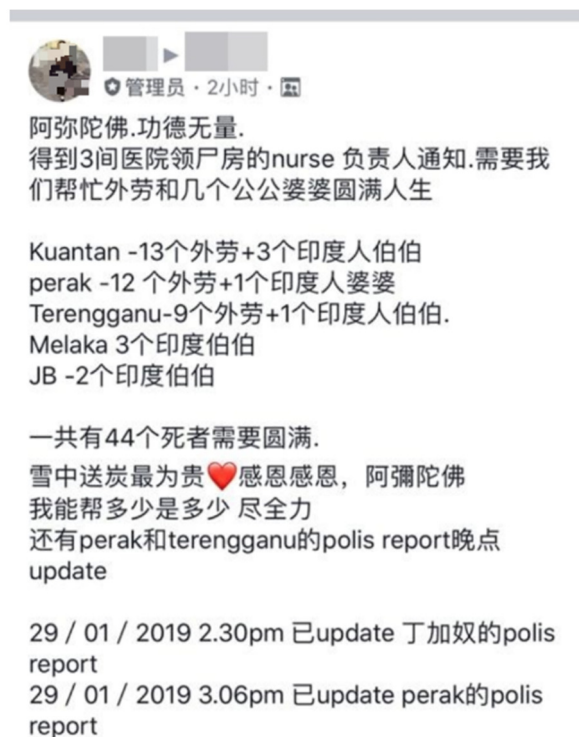
Elaboration: Members of the Johor royal family soon found themselves caught up in the fake news phenomena when this post by a page named Eventide Soup claimed that the family was angry with the princess, Tunku Aminah, after learning what she planned to do in her new business. Despite of that, it alleged that she chose not to give in to her family's demands but instead insisted on doing it her own way. Through this post, Tunku Aminah is portrayed as a rebellious and disobedient daughter who refuses to heed the advice of her family and wants to lead her life separately from them



First order language: The Sultan of Johor is urging Johoreans to stay away from BERSATU

Second order language: Since the order came from the Sultan, the people should deeply consider following it without question lest they be accused of treachery

Elaboration: In another fake news post linked to the Johor royal family, this time it was alleged that Sultan Ibrahim had called upon Johoreans to keep their distance from BERSATU. In the Malay community, the Sultan is seen as a person vested with the responsibilities of being the head and protector of Islam and the Malays, and that those who go against his orders are ‘*derhaka*’ (treacherous) – which is a serious offense. Thus, this post misused Sultan Ibrahim’s position to discredit and damage BERSATU’s image among Malays.



First order language: A netizen appealing for help in settling funeral arrangements for 44 victims as three hospitals were unable to do so

Second order language: The bureaucracy i.e. the three hospitals has shown itself to be incapable of carrying out its job efficiently by causing common citizens to do the dirty job of burying dead people. These hospitals are also practicing racial preferences in refusing to help the victims who are minorities

Elaboration: As seen in the post above, a concerned netizen appealed for help in settling funeral arrangements for 44 victims due to three hospitals being unable to do so. Although it may seem an a genuine call for assistance, however it can be interpreted as an indirect attack on the bureaucracy by implying that it was inefficient in caring for the dead and instead relied on others to do its job. Another point to be noted in this post is that all of the victims were either Indians or foreign workers, which may give readers the impression that these hospitals prefer to tend to patients of a certain race while neglecting the rest; thus deeming them to be racist and ethnocentric.



First order language: The Health Ministry announcing a new health insurance scheme starting January 2019, where 5% of every Malaysian's income will be deducted monthly

Second order language: The government is adding on the financial hardships of the people by taking a portion of their monthly income without asking for their views before implementing the proposed health insurance scheme

Elaboration: Malaysia's healthcare is considered one of the most affordable in the world, where citizens only have to pay a minimum fee of RM1 to see a doctor in public hospitals – a model that greatly helps those from low income families. However, it was rumoured in this post that a new health insurance scheme by the Health Ministry will require 5% of all Malaysians' income to be deducted monthly in order to fund it. Thus, this post aims to portray the Health Ministry as a government department that shows little sympathy to the financial plight of poor Malaysians by taking more money away from their already meagre income.



First order language: A netizen claims that his nephew has died due to the toxic fumes released at Pasir Gudang

Second order language: Citizens are living in an environmental hazard as a child has died, causing chaos and panic among them. Hospitals in Johor are incapable of helping the victims who are affected by the environmental crisis by allowing an innocent child to die needlessly.

Elaboration: In the midst of the Pasir Gudang toxic spill crisis, a netizen took to Facebook to claim that his nephew had died after inhaling the toxic fumes surrounding the area. Such a claim can lead to widespread panic and chaos to others, especially parents who would want to protect their children from becoming a potential victim. The post has also painted hospitals in Johor in a bad light for failing to respond to the crisis quickly and efficiently, as seen through the death of an innocent child.

4.1 Coding and Observations of Fake News Posts

As stated in Chapter 3, a table will be used to code all 30 fake news posts in order to find out which theme(s) are the most commonly used in these posts in Malaysia's cyberspace, primarily Facebook.

This table below is as follows:

Themes Identified	Number of Fake News Posts
Contradiction/Irony	9
Religion	11
Ethnicity/Race	13
Personal Attack	19
Health/Environment	3

Table 2: The various themes identified in fake news posts disseminated on Facebook

Through the coding of the fake news posts, it can be seen that the most common theme observed is personal attack (19 samples), where an individual or a group of people's character and reputation is targeted as a means to cause others to shun them. Following behind it is the theme of ethnicity/race (13 samples) in which one's racial composition is used to generate stereotypical notions of a racial group or to create a perceived threat against one's own racial group. Religion (11 samples) was the third most popular theme found in the fake news samples, with Islam being used to either discredit and demonize an individual, or to unite Malaysian Muslims in fighting back against those who defile and insult their religion.

A few key observations were also made through the textual and visual analysis of the 30 fake news posts. First, the pictures of individuals featured in the posts were small, blurry, and often had solemn looks on their facial expression. This is to give the perception that these individuals have a rather menacing aura and aids in exploiting feelings of fear and intimidation among readers. Second, DAP and its members was featured the most in the fake news posts whereby they were constantly accused of being anti-Malay and anti-Islam. Third, red was the colour of choice for these posts, where it was intended to make an emphasis on certain words, or to implicate DAP as an aggressor as red is the party's major colour. Other colours were also used such as yellow, black, and white, although not on a large scale as red.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATION, AND CONCLUSION

Having carried out the textual and visual analysis of the 30 fake news posts disseminated on Facebook, I will now discuss as to whether the results and observations gathered have concurred with or proven the theories, assertions by various scholars, research questions and research objectives made in Chapter 1 and 2 of this final year project.

5.0 Prosumption, Virality, and Fake News

As stated by Ritzer and Jurgenson et al. (2010), social media platforms have enabled users to practice prosumption, whereby they produce and consume media content simultaneously and subsequently give social media its ideological aspect. This is quite evident in the fake news posts, where the posts were mostly made and disseminated by Facebook users for their peers' consumption in hopes that it garners support for a particular political ideology. According to Guerini, Strapparava, and Ozbal et al. (2011), what makes a news viral is dependent on its content and social phenomena such as spreading, raising discussion, and controversiality tends to be attached to it as well. This can be observed in the fake news posts, where posts which centered on the themes of personal attack, race/ethnicity, and religion were the ones that were distributed via Facebook the most and have the potential to trigger heated debates among Malaysians while inviting controversy to the individuals featured in the posts.

5.1 Operation of Fake News through Ideology and State Apparatuses

Based upon the textual and visual analysis of the fake news posts, it can be seen that conservative ideologies and narratives will continue to be imposed and disseminated regardless of whether there is a change of hands in who holds political power. This goes back to Althusser's theory on ideology, where he stated that every person will find himself within an ideology thanks to the reliance upon

language to construct ‘reality’. In a nutshell, every individual will always be involved in the making or enforcement of an ideology whether they realize it or not. The second point that Althusser made regarding ideologies is that since it is an abstract idea, it requires an apparatus which will allow it to operate and observed through actions which are then ‘inserted into practices’. Here, he then outlines the two major state apparatuses, namely ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) as a means for the ruling power to maintain the status quo or to impose a certain ideology (Althusser et al., 2001).

From the visual and textual analysis of the fake news posts, social media platforms (ISAs) have been used by individuals who support conservative views to attack moderates and label them as deviants or libertarians, as seen in the posts involving Syerleena Rashid, Mat Sabu, and Dr. Mujahid Yusof Rawa, while promoting conservative views on Islam as the ‘correct’ way for Muslims to lead their lives and oppose, occasionally with violence, those who live otherwise or associate with their perceived enemies, especially DAP. As for RSAs, the Anti Fake News Act is still alive and well due to its Repeal Bill being rejected by Dewan Negara, where it is dominated by UMNO and PAS members who argue this law is necessary to protect democracy. These evidences support the notion that conservative governments have the tendency to choose undemocratic discourses to silence views seen as threatening or repulsive to the status quo.

5.2 Journalism and Fake News

In Malaysia’s context, there are grounds to support two factors observed by McNair et al. (2018) for the decline of public trust in journalism, which have paved the way for fake news to gain momentum, as seen through the characteristics of fake news posted on Facebook.

McNair opined that economic pressures often force newspapers to resort producing exaggerated, sometimes even fake headlines in order to attract customers and outdo their competitors in terms

of revenue. However, in Malaysia's case, it is not the revenue that spurs people to spread fake news through newspapers, but rather to gain support for an ideology. There has been an increase of irresponsible parties utilizing headlines from reputable online newspapers and news portals such as *Malaysiakini* as a cover to disseminate fake news as a platform to gain support from Facebook users, fully knowing that readers would not give an extra thought into verifying its authenticity.

The next factor is populism shaking off its shackles from merely being constricted to tabloid newspapers and cable news networks and has made its way into public discourse due to the elites' apparent incompetence in addressing and solving pressing issues, causing the masses to harbor resentment towards them. McNair cited the U.S. and Italy as such examples where its right-leaning leaders have successfully exploited these emotions and whipped the public into a frenzied retaliation against those whom they deem as threats to their way of life and culture. This is rather evident in Malaysia where there is the perception that non-Muslims are able to express anti-Malay, anti-Islamic rhetoric, show no respect for Malay rights, and be '*kurang ajar*' (uncouth) on a daily basis due to the government's inaction, thus justifying forceful tactics to be taken in order to 'put them back into their place'. Ethnic Chinese members from DAP have constantly been targeted in this aspect whenever they are featured in fake news posts, often finding themselves being accused of attempting to overturn Islam's status as the official religion, insulting Malays and Islam, or supporting social deviancy. To further reinforce the idea that such individuals are dangerous, captions calling for strong action to be taken or using derogatory terminology to describe them was also observed within the fake news samples gathered, which can act as a platform for individuals to take out their anger on them without realizing that their fears are mostly misplaced and unfounded.

5.3 Fake News in the Cyberspace Realm

Technology has no doubt created a more convenient method for people to communicate and exchange information with others all over the world, but it has also lent a hand in enabling users to disseminate media content and news with little to no oversight, thus defying the traditional practice of gatekeeping which has played a vital role in ensuring a steady flow of accurate and unbiased information is given to the public. According to Gu, Kropotov, and Yarochnik (as cited in McNair et al., 2018), information overload on the Internet have led users to have shorter attention spans, which not only weakens their ability to differentiate what is true and fabricated, but have also given makers of fake news new methods to craft fake news in a way that will cause readers to fall for it even more as they are under the impression that they are part of a movement that is in line with their beliefs.

This is especially true for Malaysia, most Malaysian Facebook users have the tendency to participate in annoying and harassing online activities such as trolling and spreading false rumors. In a 2015 finding by Telenor Group, 47% of Malaysians have admitted to have spread false information on the Internet (Malaysian Wireless, 2015), thus bearing witness to the lack of media literacy skills in the country. Given such circumstances, it is of no wonder that certain parties have misused the liberal space of the Internet to spew fake news filled with incendiary captions in an attempt to stir up racial and religious tensions. With race/ethnicity and religion being the top themes alongside personal attack for political fake news in Malaysia, it has proven to be the most effective method to provoke strong reactions from the public.

Another point made by Gu et al. is that political fake news is often associated with the extremes of the political spectrum and a 'moderate' form is unlikely to exist. Again, we can see this evident in the political fake news uploaded on Facebook, where it often supports an extremely conservative

stance on Islamic and Malay affairs and calls for force to be taken against non-Muslims and moderate Malays in order to warn them not to cross into/challenge particular areas such as Islam being the official religion, Malay rights and sovereignty, and aligning themselves with those who fail to abide by or are deemed '*haram*' (unholy) according to Islamic law and standards.

The emergence of fake news in social media has thoroughly concurred with Flichy's et al. (as cited in Mahlouly, 2013) view that the Internet can no longer be seen as the 'perfect' public sphere. Unlike the traditional Habermasian concept of a public sphere where the elites were the driving force, technology advancement has enabled the masses to take over that role instead and this has reduced political discourse into a much weaker form due to the fact that users can now generate and share media content at lower levels of gatekeeping, subsequently leading to irrational and inaccurate information to abound.

Another factor that contributes to the rise of fake news on the Internet is the tendency for users to form 'echo chambers' where they would actively seek out and attach themselves to news/platforms that fit their political ideologies, further decreasing the chances of different views to be exchanged and accepted, along with the enhancement of arguments presented. Under such circumstances, the likelihood for fake news and post-truth politics to gain a foothold is high as there is a painful lack of critical argument and rational thinking. As the analysis shows, Malaysia is currently experiencing this firsthand as many are embracing news that are in sync with their personal emotions and ideology, even if it were to be proven fake or harbors the intention to propagate conservative ideologies.

5.4 Representation and Myths within Fake News

As mentioned in the earlier chapters, the theoretical frameworks used in the textual and visual analysis of fake news posts in Malaysian cyberspace are Hall's theory of representation and

Barthes' concept on myths. Among one of the approaches proposed by Hall is the intentional approach, in which the encoder attaches his/her own meaning on the world through language, with the aim of using words that is in line with what the encoder intends they should mean' (Hall et al., 1997). This approach is very evident in the analysis of the fake news posts, where one can see that most of the posts aim to propagate a conservative stance of Islam and gain support from others who might share similar sentiments; the other aim in using this approach is to turn these fake news as an ideological weapon in attacking and painting individuals who adopt a moderate stance or form political alliances with non-believers (in severe cases a *kafir harbi*) in an extremely bad light whilst calling for a forceful and united action to be taken as a means to protect the sanctity and dignity of the Malay race and religion.

Barthes' concept on myths can also be clearly seen in the posts he states a myth is created when the signifier and signified is combined together in order to portray a certain message to the audience. According to him, myths will always carry an intention behind it as it cannot operate naturally. Since myths are dependent on the context in which they were formed, they constantly undergo contextual changes in order to fit in and alter its effects – a process that cause myths to be an indirect participant in an ideology's formation, sway it away from reality, and instead insert meanings that completely follows its creator's intentions. This then 'naturalizes' the myth itself, making it more believable and 'normal' to the audience as they will think that such beliefs is acceptable and a way of life in society (Barthes et al., 1972). Based on the results gathered through the analysis of the fake news posts, we can see that the dominant myths found are that non-Muslims, specifically Chinese DAP members are dangerous and show no respect for Malays and Islam, moderate Muslims are social deviants, and that all Muslims living in Malaysia must unite in

fighting off these forces that threaten to destroy their religion and Bumiputera position with everything they have, even if it means sacrificing their own lives.

5.5 Recommendations

Several recommendations can be made for further research on the topic relating to the dissemination of fake news in Malaysian cyberspace as it is still a relatively new field of research. First, in-depth interviews or focus group interviews can be conducted with individuals who have been victims of fake news as they can provide valuable information about what they think the intentions are behind it and why they were targeted. Second, aside from carrying out textual and visual analysis of fake news posts, future research may consider utilizing other methods such as thematic analysis and studying the relationship between discourse and power in the realm of fake news. Third, fake news posted on other social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube can be included in order to provide a wider range and variety of fake news samples instead of limiting it solely to Facebook. This will enable researchers to discover whether the same phenomenon occurs in these social media platforms as well.

5.6 Conclusion

The textual and visual characteristics of fake news in Malaysia has shown itself to be a tool for conservative powers and supporters of conservative political ideologies to gain traction or to impose certain ‘myths’ to readers using the themes of race/ethnicity, religion, and personal attack. Through the wide-reaching powers, low gatekeeping levels, and information overload on social media platforms like Facebook, readers are more susceptible to believing fake news and unwittingly accepting conservative ideologies embedded within its contents. Thus, it is imperative for future research to be made in order to educate readers in identifying and understanding the hidden meanings and purposes behind fake news.

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