



IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE MEDIA:  
REPRESENTATION AND MARGINALIZED VOICES IN MALAYSIA

DANE LIM CHIU TONG

A RESEARCH PROJECT  
SUBMITTED IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE AWARD OF  
BACHELOR OF COMMUNICATION (HONS) JOURNALISM  
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE  
UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. M. Sultana Alam for her unwavering support and guidance. Her willingness to share her valuable experiences and insights has been instrumental in navigating the challenges of this study.

Secondly, I appreciate Mr. Edwin for his role as the second examiner. His feedback helped identify areas for improvement and provided practical recommendations that enriched the study.

Lastly, I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the 10 respondents from various organizations who participated in the interviews. Their insights and contributions have been invaluable to the research.

DANE LIM CHIU TONG

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## **Abstract**

This research critically explores the representation and underrepresentation of marginalized voices in Malaysian mainstream media, focusing on the intersection of identity politics and media narratives. Through an in-depth analysis of media portrayals, the study examines how marginalized groups such as refugees, indigenous communities, and LGBTQ individuals are criminalized, stigmatized, and framed in negative, selective ways. The research draws on qualitative data from interviews with journalists and activists, combined with critical discourse analysis, to uncover the ideological underpinnings of media representations. The findings indicate that mainstream media in Malaysia often reflects the interests of political elites and societal biases, perpetuating exclusionary narratives while limiting the visibility of marginalized communities. In contrast, alternative media platforms provide more inclusive and balanced portrayals, challenging dominant discourses. However, their reach remains limited compared to mainstream outlets. The study concludes with recommendations for more responsible media practices and policy reforms aimed at fostering equitable representation and promoting a pluralistic Malaysian society.

**Keywords:** Media representation, Marginalized voices, Identity politics, Malaysian media, Alternative media

**Subject Area:** PN4735-4748 Relation to the state. Government and the press. Liberty of the press

## 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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## Approval Form

This research paper attached hereto, entitled “IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE MEDIA: REPRESENTATION AND MARGINALIZED VOICES IN MALAYSIA” prepared and submitted by” Dane Lim Chiu Tong” in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BACHELOR OF COMMUNICATION (HONS) JOURNALISM is hereby accepted.

Date: 11 SEP 2024

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Supervisor

Dr. M Sultana Alam

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### **1.1 Research Background**

Identity politics have become increasingly prominent within Malaysian media representations and public discourse, particularly evident in debates surrounding issues such as special rights for the Bumiputera (indigenous ethnic groups), affirmative action policies, and the intersections of language, culture, and religion (Shamsul, 1995). This heightened visibility has, however, magnified the struggles of marginalized groups, spanning ethnicity, immigrant status, gender, and other attributes, to secure equitable representation within mainstream media channels.

For instance, research underscores the pervasive negative portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers, labeling them as “illegal immigrants,” “burdens,” and “threats,” thereby fostering a hostile public discourse (Mohd Don and Lee, 2014). Similarly, the intricate interplay of race, gender expression, and sexual orientation has been shown to influence media recognition, or the lack thereof, for women athletes (Isard and Melton, 2021). Indigenous communities, such as the Orang Asli, confront marginalization and cultural erosion amid development policies favoring the Bumiputera (Nicholas, 2022).

#### **1.2 Problem statement**

In Malaysia, certain social groups have historically been marginalized or underrepresented in mainstream media narratives. While the government and media producers shape dominant discourses that promote a majoritarian national identity (Alexander et al., 2015), this framing often comes at the expense of accurately representing the diversity of voices and experiences that constitute Malaysian society. Minority groups face challenges in having their concerns and perspectives addressed through representation in media. As Alexander et al. (2015) note, media

plays an active role in perpetuating institutionalized biases and can exclude or deride groups that challenge mainstream power structures.

Malaysia has a complex multi-ethnic society with diversity in gender, sexual, and religious identities. However, dominant narratives in Malaysian media often reflect the perspectives and priorities of socially conservative voices. Marginalized groups, such as sexual and gender minorities, face challenges having their issues and lived experiences accurately represented in public discourse (Shah, 2013). The homogenizing influence of government-controlled media also limits alternative narratives on sensitive issues related to ethnic, religious and sexual identity politics (Peletz, 2003).

This study aims to critically analyse the representation and underrepresentation of marginalized voices in Malaysian print and broadcast media. It will examine how identities are constructed in mainstream media coverage and look at perspectives that may be ignored or distorted. Through in-depth interviews with experienced journalists and activists, it will be possible to understand the nuanced manifestations of identity politics in the Malaysian media and the impact of these manifestations on marginalized groups. This study aims to understand the persistent barriers to inclusive media representation and to explore opportunities for marginalized groups to have their voices and issues better reflected in national conversations around the development of a just, progressive and pluralistic Malaysian society.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

- 1) How are marginalized identities, such as refugees, and minority women, portrayed in mainstream Malaysian media?
- 2) What dominant narratives or stereotypes persist in the representation of marginalized groups, and how do these portrayals influence public perceptions?

- 3) How effective are these alternative narratives in challenging dominant discourses and providing more authentic and inclusive representations of marginalized voices?

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

- 1) To examine mainstream Malaysian media to understand how marginalized groups are portrayed and assess the impact of these representations on public perception.
- 2) To investigate how marginalized communities, utilize alternative media platforms to counter dominant discourses and offer more authentic representations of their experiences.
- 3) To investigate the effect of alternative narratives in challenging dominant discourses and fostering authentic, inclusive representations of marginalized voices in Malaysian media?

#### **1.5.1 Theoretical significant**

This research contributes theoretical value by examining the impact of identity politics in shaping media representations of marginalized voices in Malaysia. The study aims to uncover underlying power dynamics, biases, and systemic factors, enriching our understanding of how identity politics operates within the Malaysian media landscape.

#### **1.5.1 Practical significance**

This research holds practical significance by addressing the real-world implications of identity politics in the Malaysian media. By investigating how marginalized voices are represented, the study provides practical insights for media practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. The findings aim to inform strategies for more inclusive and responsible media practices, fostering a positive impact on societal attitudes, representation, and public discourse within Malaysia.

## Chapter II

### Literature review

#### **2.1 The concept of representation**

Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is how meaning is shared within a culture, using symbols like language, images, and signs. Instead of simply showing reality, media helps construct the reality we understand. Hall challenges the idea of labeling media portrayals as “false” or “misrepresentations,” saying that media shapes the reality it portrays. Chris (2007) adds that these media depictions use key identity markers, shaping how audiences interpret and engage with what they see, often diverging from actual reality.

#### **2.2 Political Elites, Media Control, and Representation**

Research highlights the strong connection between political elites and mainstream media in Malaysia, showing how political leaders shape public narratives about identity and exclusion. Mohd Don and Lee (2014) explain that former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s promotion of “Asian values” deepened divisions between native Muslim Malays and minorities, casting minorities as cultural outsiders. Similarly, Shah (2013) notes that this alignment with Islamic values fuels negative media portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals. Firdaus (2011) emphasizes that media ownership and licensing policies give political elites significant control over major outlets.

The media serves as an ideological mechanism, contributing to a homogeneous perception of the “other.” This impact is magnified through media framing, a process that highlights certain aspects of reality while obscuring others. Framing constructs societal perceptions of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ influencing problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment (Mohd Don and Lee, 2014).

### **2.3 Representation of Immigrants and Asylum Seekers**

Concerns have been raised about dehumanizing narratives and inaccurate depictions of migrants and marginalized communities in Malaysian media, highlighting the escalating challenges faced by these groups (UN Malaysia, 2021).

Media representations in Malaysia also play a pivotal role in the criminalization of immigrants and asylum seekers. Mohd Don and Lee's (2014) critical discourse analysis reveals recurring media constructions framing refugees as “illegals,” security “threats,” and de-legitimized "Others" in political elite rhetoric. Longitudinal analysis underscores the consistent labeling of refugees and asylum seekers as “illegal immigrants” across two decades, reinforcing state legitimacy for stringent detention and deportation policies.

While predominant portrayals tend to criminalize migrants, some studies provide glimpses of counter-frames that humanize them. Lee's (2023) examination of refugee representations on Malaysian online alternative news sites reveals occasional neutral and positive depictions. (Mohd Don and Lee, 2014) note NGO voices periodically challenging criminalizing portrayals. Despite these counter-narratives, research indicates that such representations remain on the margins.

### **2.4 Race and Representation**

Research consistently shows that the Orang Asli are often portrayed in media through a limited focus on issues like poverty, land disputes, and reliance on government aid. Rarely are empowering or diverse representations used (Alagappan, 2010; Loh, 2011). By contrast, government officials and agencies feature prominently as key actors and authoritative sources. For instance, Mustafa (1994) found that Orang Asli representatives rarely appeared as credible commentators on broader issues. Evidence overall indicates a systematic downplaying or outright silencing of indigenous perspectives in favor of political-bureaucratic interests.

Fundamentally influencing observed representational biases are the deeper power relations between the Orang Asli and Malaysian state. Media discourse reflects and reproduces symbolic hierarchies relegating native voices to a disempowered position. For example, Ismail et al. (2020) used critical linguistic analysis to demonstrate that news coverage glorifies government authority over Orang Asli communities via word choices and framing decisions. Such scholarship reveals how text itself operates to marginalize and disenfranchise minority groups.

## **2.5 Stigma and Narrative**

Stigma, according to Goffman (1963), involves the reduction of individuals or the “Other” from the “whole and usual” to a “tainted discounted one,” safeguarding a sense of normality and often leading to societal dehumanization and mental health challenges.

Link and Phelan's (2001) four crucial aspects for understanding stigma include identifying differences, stereotyping, separating “us” from “them”, and discrimination and rejection. Stigmatized identities impact individuals in terms of self-esteem, academic achievement, and health outcomes (Major and O'Brien, 2005).

Rance et al. (2017) emphasize the narrative approach to grasp the deeper nuances of storytelling by those dealing with social hostility and stigma. Narratives, serve as the primary means for people to organize their experiences, providing a powerful tool for reassembling one's lifeworld and making sense of disruptions to identity.

In the exploration of stigma narratively, individuals construct stories involving recounting experiences, emotions, and semiotic features. Contextual elements and the presence of other interlocutors, such as researchers or interviewers, influence the telling of narratives. Moreover, alternative or counter narratives challenge dominant or master narratives, enabling narrators to subvert, craft a middle ground, or consciously subject themselves to prevailing narratives (Lyotard, 1984; Smith et al., 2008).

For this study, the exploration of stigma through narratives provides insight into how individuals reconstruct their lifeworld and make therapeutic sense of disruptions or threats to their identity. Narratives typically encompass: 1) single or multiple stories or events; 2) the recounting of experiences using imagery, reactions, feelings, and assigned meanings; and 3) semiotic or linguistic features in the telling (Cortazzi, 2001). Attention is devoted to details such as plot, story world characters, and the narrator's evaluation.

In narratives derived from interviews, researchers must consider contextual elements and the presence of other interlocutors, particularly the researcher/interviewer, and how it influences the storytelling process. Alternative or counter narratives should be taken into account alongside the concept of dominant or master narratives (Lyotard, 1984), which encompass culturally-accepted frames guiding how narrators position themselves within their stories. Against this narrative backdrop, narrators face the choice of consciously subjecting themselves to these narratives, subverting them in everyday interactions, or crafting a middle ground or "third space" for themselves (Smith et al., 2008).

## **2.6 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has emerged as a major qualitative methodology for analyzing text, language, and communication within their broader social context. Media discourse in particular has become an important site of CDA research, aiming to reveal the ideologies and power dynamics at play in news coverage, political rhetoric, advertising, and entertainment media.

CDA coalesced as a field in the 1990s through the influential work of scholars like Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, and Norman Fairclough. Though diverging on some dimensions, these theorists share a view of language as social practice and are invested in exposing linkages between discourse, power, and ideology (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA approaches language use as

socially shaped and shaping, uncovering opaque relationships between texts and societal systems of domination.

**Key tenets underpin CDA (Van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009):**

- CDA takes an explicit critical perspective, orienting to issues of power, injustice, and political-economic context.
- It is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on social theory and multiple methods to contextualize discourse.
- CDA focuses on real-world problems of inequality, racism, sexism, etc. rather than testing specific linguistic theories.
- It combines critical social analysis with linguistic analysis to reveal discursive sources of dominance and inequality.

Within this shared orientation, various CDA frameworks have emerged. Fairclough's approach centers the concept of inherent power struggles in social practice. Van Dijk developed tools for systematically relating text to societal positioning of social groups. Wodak's discourse-historical method interrogates the connection between text, discourse, and power (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

## **2.7 Alternative Media**

Alternative media refer to small-scale, politically radical outlets using various communication formats to challenge dominant political, commercial, or ideological narratives. They contribute to diversity by providing platforms for marginalized perspectives, enhancing both external diversity (the variety of media outlets) and internal diversity (the range of views within a single outlet) (Downing, 2001).

**Challenging Mainstream Narratives:** Alternative media often positions itself as a corrective to mainstream media, criticizing the latter for being ideologically biased or failing to live up to professional standards. This role of challenging perceived biases in mainstream media can provide a counterbalance, especially when mainstream media is seen as serving elite or commercial interests (Ihlebaek et al., 2022)

**Democratic Role:** In democratic societies, the media plays a fundamental role in providing citizens with the information necessary to make informed decisions. Alternative media contribute to this process by offering viewpoints that may otherwise be excluded, thus making public debates more inclusive and representative of the full spectrum of societal interests (Ihlebaek et al., 2022)

**Representing Marginalized Voices:** By giving voice to grassroots actors, activists, and marginalized communities, alternative media challenge traditional source hierarchies that dominate mainstream news. These outlets often emphasize the experiences of ordinary people and dissident groups, offering more inclusive and humanizing representations of topics such as migration, social justice, and political dissent (Ihlebaek et al., 2022)

## Chapter III

### Methodology

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study employs the qualitative research methodology of in-depth interviews to explore the research questions. Since the study requires insights and experiences of practitioners in the field, their subjective perspectives are valuable, making qualitative methods an appropriate choice. This approach enables the examination of intricate interactions in a simulated system, with a particular emphasis on the research subject.

#### **3.2 Sampling and recruitment**

The study will utilize purposive sampling to recruit participants who have experience in Malaysian journalism, or minority right activists. To gather a significant amount of valuable information in qualitative research, purposive sampling will be utilized to select appropriate samples (Palinkas et al., 2013). Purposive sampling will allow for the selection of participants who are able to provide rich and in-depth data related to the research questions. Participants will be recruited through social media like WhatsApp and Facebook and professional networks like LinkedIn. The study will seek to recruit a diverse sample of participants in terms of professional background. The target sample size is 10 participants, because most common sample sizes for in-depth interviews were 10 to 30 informants (Mason, 2010)

#### **3.3 Interview Protocol**

To initiate the interview, some casual, non-research related questions will be asked to help participants feel at ease. Following that, the actual interview questions will be presented, and respondents may be asked to provide more information or clarity on their answers. The interviewer will guarantee the confidentiality of the participants' responses. After the interview,

the interviewer will express appreciation to the participants for their time and involvement in the research. As the interviews in this study are semi-structured, open-ended questions will be asked to reveal more information relate to the research questions.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

To gather data for the study, a list of questions will be used during interviews with participants (see Appendix I). Prior to the interview, participants will be given a consent form to sign, which must be completed within one week. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed within two weeks for each participant. The data collection process will take a total of 12 weeks, consisting of nine weeks for conducting the interviews and three weeks for transcribing and analysing the research's themes.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

Data analysis will follow a reflexive thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis will involve familiarization with the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, and producing a report. The analysis will be conducted by the researchers and any discrepancies in coding or theme generation will be resolved through discussion and consensus.

### **3.6 Ethical clearance**

This research project will require obtaining permission from an Institutional Review Board, such as the UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (SERC), since it involves conducting in-depth interviews with human subjects. The participants will be asked to complete an informed consent form prior to being allowed to participate in the study. The purpose of the research will be explained to the participants, and they will be asked to sign the consent forms if they feel comfortable and wish to participate. To protect the privacy and identity of the informants, aliases or fake names will be used.

Chapter IV  
Finding and Analysis

**Table 1: Demographic Background of the Informants**

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Professional background</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Informant 1	Journalist	Mainstream Media
Informant 2	NGO Executive	NGO
Informant 3	NGO Executive	NGO
Informant 4	NGO Executive	NGO
Informant 5	Journalist	Independent Media
Informant 6	Journalist	Mainstream Media
Informant 7	Social Worker	NGO
Informant 8	Activist	NGO
Informant 9	Journalist	Independent Media
Informant 10	Social Worker	NGO

#### **4.1 Media Representation of Marginalized Groups**

##### **Criminalization of Marginalized Groups**

The interviews indicate that mainstream Malaysian media often portrays marginalized groups, such as refugees, gender minorities, and ethnic minorities, in a negative light. This portrayal is frequently characterized by criminalization and stigmatization.

informant 1 noted that the Malaysian media tends to frame marginalized groups like undocumented migrants and refugees as criminals.

*"In the case of undocumented migrants or refugees, there is a common practice to refer to them as 'illegal immigrants' or 'pendatang tanpa izin,' which implies a criminal element to their presence in Malaysia" (Informant 1)*

This tendency to misrepresent marginalized groups in the media extends to how issues involving them are framed. Refugees, for instance, are often depicted as a threat to national security or as a drain on public resources. The selective framing of marginalized groups, such as focusing on incidents like evictions or deportations, skews public perception by ignoring the

structural and human rights dimensions of these issues. For example, Sinar Harian, a prominent Malaysian news outlet, often refers to undocumented migrants as "PATI," linking their presence to criminal activities and national security risks (Aminnuraliff, 2024)

### **Selective Framing**

This differentiation in media tone resonates with broader media studies, such as those by Weaver (2007), who elaborates on how media framing serves to set agendas and craft public perception. By choosing which aspects of a story to highlight—whether to humanize or to criticize—media outlets shape the discourse surrounding these groups, potentially affecting their treatment and acceptance in society.

Informant 1 also notes the selective framing in media coverage, pointing out the stark difference in tone when covering Palestinian refugees compared to South Asian or Rohingya migrants.

*“The tone of reporting was welcoming and almost apologetic for the 41 Palestinian patients flown in from Egypt, while descriptions tend to be less flattering in reports on immigration raids rounding up South Asian and Rohingya migrants” (Informant 1)*

Similarly, Informant 2 adds that the media only covers issues affecting marginalized groups when it involves negative events such as evictions or land disputes, further perpetuating the image of marginalized groups as a societal burden.

*“Mainstream media only covers when there are some issues affecting the group. And it is always negative impact on themselves or the community” (Informant 2)*

This selective framing shows societal bias and further entrenches negative stereotypes against certain groups, while portraying others in a more sympathetic light. This selective framing

shows societal bias and further entrenches negative stereotypes against certain groups, while portraying others in a more sympathetic light.

In addition, Informant 9 discusses how mainstream media often portrays indigenous groups like the Orang Asli in a stereotypical and pejorative manner. They are depicted as passive and dependent on external help, which reinforces their marginalized status.

*“Malaysian media...they often show Orang Asli in a way that stereotypical and negative. They usually focus on these groups as being dependent on outside help or authorities, which paints them as passive and lacking in self-sufficiency...” (Informant 9)*

This portrayal diminishes their struggle for autonomy and obscures their advocacy efforts, especially concerning land rights. This portrayal aligns with findings that examined media representation of the Orang Asli from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective. The study found that both mainstream and alternative media frequently deploy stereotypical and pejorative narratives when depicting the Orang Asli, suggesting a systemic issue across different media platforms in Malaysia concerning the representation of indigenous and marginalized groups. As pointed out by the study, the ideological construction in media discourses systematically marginalizes the Orang Asli, emphasizing an 'Us versus Them' dichotomy that serves to alienate and stereotype these communities further (Wong and Jamal, 2023).

## **4.2 Gender and Representation**

### **Women in Traditional Roles**

The mainstream media in Malaysia often limits the portrayal of women, to stereotypical or narrow roles. Informant 6, notes that women are frequently depicted in these reductive roles, failing to capture their diverse experiences and contributions. She highlights:

*“Women are usually shown in traditional roles like being homemakers or focusing on beauty. These portrayals don’t reflect the true diversity and strengths of women in Malaysia.”*

*(Informant 6)*

These limited portrayals reinforce outdated stereotypes and do not show the complexity of women's roles in society. As a result, the public's understanding of the diverse experiences of women is constrained, focusing more on superficial aspects of their lives rather than their professional, intellectual, or societal contributions (Yang Lai & Nyathi, 2019).

Similarly, Informant 7 observes that the media tends to sensationalize women’s struggles, focusing on their hardships without addressing the systemic factors that contribute to their situation. For example, single mothers in financial distress are often portrayed as victims, which can lead to victim-blaming rather than promoting discussions around social support systems or economic inequality.

*“Single mothers facing financial problems are often shown in a sensationalized way, focusing on their struggles without looking at the larger systemic issues behind them.” (Informant 7)*

### **Representation of Gender Minorities**

Informant 3 points out that mainstream media tend to use derogatory terms or reinforce negative stereotypes. For instance, terms like "Pondan" are often used in Malay-language media to refer to transgender individuals in a pejorative manner.

*“Malay media often have a harsher portrayal of marginalized groups...transgender might be called “Pondan,”” (Informant 3)*

A media analysis conducted by Justice for Sisters revealed that in the coverage of a 2016 murder case involving a transgender woman, 24 out of 25 news reports failed to use the correct gender pronouns. Sensational headlines such as *“Pondan mati ditolak dari kondominium”* (Kosmo) and *“Mayat 'pondan' dalam bungkus dalam dicampak dari tingkat tiga kondominium”* (Astro Awani) further exemplify how transgender individuals are often mischaracterized, with disproportionate focus on their appearance and identity.

Informant 8 points out that LGBTQ+ group are often framed in a sensationalized or episodic manner in Malaysian media. For instance, stories about LGBTQ+ activists tend to focus on controversial events rather than their everyday struggles and contributions to society. This framing distorts reality by reducing LGBTQ to isolated incidents or scandals, rather than addressing the broader societal and legal challenges they face.

*“LGBTQ group are often framed in a sensationalized manner in Malaysian media, focusing on controversial events rather than their everyday struggles and contributions to society...”*  
*(Informant 8)*

Su-Hie Ting et al. (2021) further supports these findings, showing that 81.67% of articles related to LGBTQ+ in Malaysian online newspapers use episodic framing. This approach tends to focus on individual events, such as arrests or scandals, rather than providing a broader thematic discussion of LGBTQ+ rights or the systemic challenges they face. The study notes that this framing reinforces negative stereotypes, contributing to societal stigmatization.

In addition, the article from *The Guardian* titled *“Malaysian Newspaper Publishes 'How to Spot a Gay' Checklist”* revealed an article in *Sinar Harian* describes specific physical appearances and behaviors to identify LGBTQ+ individuals, a practice that not only lacks

scientific basis but also trivializes and mocks their identities (Ellis-Petersen, 2018). This kind of media portrayal not only reflects but also reinforces the societal prejudices that exist against LGBTQ+ populations in Malaysia. By presenting LGBTQ+ identities through a lens of ridicule and misinformation, the media fails in its duty to provide balanced and respectful coverage. Instead, it plays a role in perpetuating a cycle of prejudice, discrimination, and violence against marginalized communities.

### **4.3 Impact of Media Ownership on Reporting**

#### **Government and Political Influence**

Informant 1 provides a detailed account of how media ownership in Malaysia is closely tied to political patronage, with influential figures connected to political parties holding significant control over major news outlets.

*“Malaysian media continues to be beholden to political patronage, such as in the case of the Media Prima Group, which owns titles like the NST and TV3. The Prime Minister also holds a golden share in Media Prima, a government-linked company” (Informant 1)*

This setup discourages critical reporting on marginalized groups, as media outlets tend to align with the government’s narrative to avoid backlash. For example:

*“When Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim claimed in February 2024 that hardcore poverty had been eradicated in certain regions, the media did not question this assertion or provide a counter-narrative” (Informant 1)*

This lack of critical engagement reflects a broader pattern where media narratives are curated to reflect government interests, especially in matters involving marginalized communities.

Shukri (2023) discusses how political control extends beyond traditional media to online platforms. The Malaysian government, established the Malaysian Communications and

Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to regulate media content, particularly focusing on protecting political and religious interests. The control exerted by the government, under the guise of preventing slander (*fitnah*), creates an environment where dissenting voices are suppressed and critical reporting on government policies, such as poverty or statelessness, is rare.

Informant 7 also highlights how government policies, such as the 3R rule (race, religion, royalty), further restrict open discussion of sensitive topics in Malaysian media.

*“The government maintains pressure on newsrooms to follow its agenda through policies like the 3R rule, which restricts open discussion of sensitive topics,”(Informant 7)*

This aligns with Shukri’s analysis of how political influence over media narratives, reinforced by laws and regulations, curtails freedom of the press, limiting the diversity of narratives, particularly those related to marginalized communities. (Shukri, 2023)

### **Patriarchal Norms and Gendered Media Coverage**

Informant 6 touches on the systemic issues within Malaysian newsrooms, where patriarchal norms contribute to the underrepresentation and negative portrayal of women. She notes that entrenched gender biases in editorial leadership limit the diversity of perspectives shaping media narratives

*“Several factors contribute to biased portrayals, including entrenched patriarchal norms, lack of diversity in editorial leadership....” (Informant 6)*

Malaysia media report 2021 highlights how the lack of women in senior editorial roles has created a "toxic and self-perpetuating cycle" in newsrooms. The report explains that the underrepresentation of women in key positions, such as directors and editors, has resulted in poor coverage of critical issues affecting women, including gender equity, domestic violence,

and sexual harassment. This underrepresentation not only affects the working environment but also contributes to biased and incomplete portrayals of women in the media, reinforcing gender stereotypes and limiting the diversity of perspectives in media narratives (The National Union of Journalists Peninsular Malaysia & The International Federation of Journalists, 2021).

Informant 8 connects media portrayals of LGBT communities with conservative religious and political views. She explains that media outlets often align with these dominant ideologies to avoid backlash from more conservative audiences.

*“Primarily societal discomfort with LGBT issues and stringent laws...which criminalizes same-sex relationships. This discomfort leads to negative and episodic framing where LGBT issues are presented through scandalous or controversial angles...” (Informant 8)*

Latiff and Ananthalakshmi (2023) highlights how increasing political influence from conservative Islamist parties, such as PAS, has intensified media scrutiny and negative portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community. Media outlets often align with these dominant ideologies to avoid backlash from conservative audiences and maintain their readership.

Similarly, informant 10 highlights how religious conservatism and political motivations drive the media’s negative portrayal of LGBT individuals.

*“Laws in Malaysia that criminalize same-sex relationships and non-conforming gender identities allow the media to perpetuate these biases without accountability.” (Informant 10)*

Government rhetoric and laws criminalizing same-sex relationships contribute to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes in the media. This bias is often sanctioned by media ownership, which avoids challenging conservative views to preserve its audience.

## 4.4 The Role of Alternative Media

### Lack of Deeper Investigation by Mainstream Media

Informant 1 critiques the mainstream Malaysian media for its reluctance to engage in deeper investigations, especially regarding marginalized communities.

*“There was little attempt by Malaysian news agencies to test” government claims related to poverty and marginalized communities.” (Informant 1)*

As highlighted by Downing (2001), mainstream media often reinforce dominant narratives due to their political, economic, or ideological alignment. This shallow coverage tends to marginalize critical systemic issues, such as poverty and migration, as noted in studies on mainstream media's tendency to avoid challenging government narrative. This shallow coverage results in reporting that reinforces official narratives rather than exploring the systemic issues affecting these communities, such as poverty, undocumented migration, or statelessness (Carlson et al., 2021).

Informant 5 recognizes the critical role alternative media and NGOs play in shifting narratives around marginalized communities. She points to organizations such as OrphanCare and Voice of the Children, which provide more comprehensive coverage of issues

*“Platforms like OrphanCare and Voice of the Children are bringing attention to important issues, like the need to move kids out of institutions, problems in the foster and adoption systems, and the legal challenges stateless children face.” (Informant 5)*

These platforms delve into deeper structural issues often overlooked by mainstream media, offering solutions-oriented reporting that goes beyond surface-level emotional storytelling. This is consistent with the broader literature that frames alternative media as a vehicle for

underrepresented voices, especially in contexts where mainstream outlets neglect such issues (Atton, 2002).

In contrast to mainstream outlets, alternative media platforms offer more nuanced and balanced coverage.

*“There has been some effort by Malaysian news organisations like Malaysiakini to change the narrative, for example by avoiding using the term ‘illegal immigrants’,” (Informant 1)*

As alternative outlets like Malaysiakini shift narratives away from criminalizing terms, they provide a corrective to mainstream portrayals, as suggested in studies by Cushion and Thomas (2021), which argue that alternative media offer more humanizing representations.

### **Balanced Portrayal of Marginalized Communities by Alternative Media**

Informant 4 acknowledges that alternative media platforms and NGO-driven campaigns have begun to provide a more balanced view of marginalized groups, particularly stateless individuals. She explains that

*“...special interview sessions with stateless individuals could help raise awareness and foster empathy...” (Informant 4)*

Informant 6 also acknowledges the efforts of alternative media platforms in providing more balanced and nuanced representations, particularly of women. She highlights platforms like CodeBlue, which focuses on health issues that disproportionately affect women, offering more comprehensive coverage that challenges the traditional gendered narratives found in mainstream outlets.

*“...focus on health issues that disproportionately affect women, offering more comprehensive coverage that challenges the traditional gendered narratives found in mainstream outlets” (Informant 6)*

By focusing on underreported issues, these platforms contribute to a more accurate portrayal of marginalized communities.

Informant 8 praises platforms like Malaysiakini for offering empathetic and detailed coverage of LGBT issues. These platforms humanize marginalized groups by focusing on personal stories and broader social contexts, countering the sensational and episodic framing typical in mainstream outlets.

*“Empathetic and detailed coverage of LGBT issues. These platforms humanize marginalized groups by focusing on personal stories and broader social contexts” (Informant 8)’*

Informant 9 notes how alternative media platforms like Malaysiakini portray marginalized groups such as the Orang Asli in a more empowering light.

*“...they portray Orang Asli in a more empowering light, highlighting their activism, particularly in their struggles for land rights and self-determination...” (Informant 9)*

This contrasts with the mainstream media’s more disempowering narratives, showing these communities as active participants in their future.

Informant10 highlights the role of NGOs such as Queer Lapis and Seed Foundation Malaysia in countering mainstream media’s negative portrayals of LGBT individuals.

*“...provide platforms for LGBT individuals to share their stories and experiences, helping dismantle harmful stereotypes” (Informant 10)*

Through social media and grassroots campaigns, these NGOs foster understanding and build supportive communities that challenge prevailing discriminatory attitudes. Research by Holt and Eldridge (2022) asserts that these media challenge mainstream hierarchies by focusing on grassroots actors and dissident voices, offering a more inclusive discourse on issues like land rights, social justice, and human rights.

## **Limited Impact and Reach of Alternative Media**

While alternative media platforms and NGOs have made efforts to provide more nuanced and balanced coverage of marginalized communities, their impact remains limited compared to mainstream outlets.

*“The key drivers behind efforts to reshape public discourse on marginalized communities are non-governmental organizations and civil society groups focused on human rights and related issues, and they do not get as much play in Malaysian news media compared to benign statements by ministers on their accomplishments” (Informant 1)*

Informant 2 also points out that statements from civil society groups receive inconsistent media coverage, particularly in Malay-language outlets, limiting the reach of alternative narratives.

*“Most of the time, when there are statements put out by CSOs, some media picks up, but not necessarily all media, especially the Malay media” (Informant 2)*

Despite gradual progress, Informant 5 notes that the shift in public discourse is slow and faces significant challenges due to political barriers and limited public awareness.

*“Public discourse is slowly shifting, particularly among more socially conscious individuals and groups, but there is still a long way to go” (Informant 5)*

Alternative media’s influence, while growing among socially conscious groups, still lags behind mainstream media’s broader reach, highlighting the need for sustained efforts and deeper investigative reporting to foster widespread change. This reflects a common limitation discussed in the literature, where alternative media, despite their potential to reshape narratives, struggle with limited resources, smaller audiences, and political barriers (Fuchs, 2010; Downing, 2001).

## Chapter V

### Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined the portrayal of marginalized groups in Malaysian media, exploring how identity politics intersects with media representation. The findings offer important insights into how mainstream media constructs, reinforces, and occasionally challenges societal narratives surrounding marginalized identities, such as refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals, and indigenous communities.

A key finding is the consistent negative portrayal of marginalized groups in mainstream media, which aligns with previous literature. The media often acts as an ideological tool, reinforcing dominant societal narratives. For instance, refugees and asylum seekers are frequently criminalized, labeled as "illegal immigrants" or "threats." This selective framing fosters public stigmatization and justifies exclusionary policies, such as deportation or restricted rights. This was particularly evident in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals, who are often sensationalized or reduced to episodic incidents, further entrenching social stigma and limiting opportunities for more inclusive narratives.

The findings highlight the media's significant role in shaping public perception and policy. Consistent negative framing of marginalized groups influences how they are viewed by society and supports exclusionary practices. However, the study also identifies the growing presence of alternative media, such as *Malaysiakini* and NGO-driven platforms, which offer more nuanced and balanced portrayals. These platforms provide marginalized groups with spaces where their voices are heard, and their stories are presented in a more empowering light. For example, indigenous groups like the Orang Asli are depicted positively in alternative media, emphasizing their activism and struggles for land rights, in contrast to the stereotypical portrayals found in mainstream outlets.

Despite this progress, the reach of alternative media remains limited. Mainstream platforms still dominate public discourse, and the political and financial challenges faced by alternative media hinder their ability to significantly influence societal perceptions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this research provides valuable insights, there are limitations to consider. First, the study relies on interviews with 10 participants, which, while providing rich qualitative insights, may not capture the full diversity of experiences within the Malaysian media landscape. A larger sample size could have provided more generalizable findings, allowing for broader perspectives on media representation across different media outlets and contexts.

Secondly, the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method offers depth but may be subject to participant bias or memory recall limitations. Since participants were mostly journalists and activists, their responses may be shaped by their specific experiences, potentially overlooking other viewpoints from marginalized communities themselves.

Finally, the study relies solely on interviews, which limits our ability to observe how media representations of marginalized groups have evolved over time. Future research could benefit from incorporating content analysis of media texts, providing a richer, more detailed view of these portrayals and how they change over time.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The findings of this study offer valuable takeaways for media practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. First, greater accountability is needed to ensure that marginalized voices are

represented accurately and fairly. Journalists and editors should avoid selective framing that distorts public perception, aiming instead for balanced coverage that reflects the diversity and complexity of marginalized communities.

Policymakers have an important role in fostering a more open and diverse media environment, but they should avoid exerting control over media narratives. Instead of influencing media content for political gain, they should promote media pluralism by supporting independent and alternative outlets that provide counter-narratives to mainstream portrayals. Additionally, investing in media literacy programs can help the public critically engage with media, identify biases, and seek out a range of perspectives.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on media representation and identity politics, highlighting the systemic barriers that marginalized groups face in achieving equitable representation. Moving forward, creating a more inclusive and just media landscape will require the combined efforts of media practitioners, policymakers, and civil society, ensuring that all voices are heard fairly and equally.

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## Appendix A

Research Questions	Interview Questions	
RQ1: How are marginalized identities, such as refugees, and minority women, portrayed in mainstream Malaysian media?	1.	In your experience, how do mainstream Malaysian media typically represent marginalized groups, such as refugees and minority gender in their coverage?
	2.	In your opinion, what factors contribute to the inaccurate or biased portrayal of marginalized groups in mainstream Malaysian media?
RQ2: What dominant narratives or stereotypes persist in the representation of marginalized groups, and how do these portrayals influence public perceptions?	3.	Can you provide specific examples of how marginalized groups are portrayed in Malaysian media, and how these portrayals might differ from reality?
	4.	How do you think these portrayals impact the way the general public views and understands these marginalized communities?
RQ3: How effective are these alternative narratives in challenging dominant discourses and providing more authentic and inclusive representations of marginalized voices?	5.	Have you noticed any efforts by alternative media platforms to counter mainstream narratives about marginalized groups? If so, can you describe these efforts?
	6.	How successful do you think these alternative narratives have been in reshaping public discourse around marginalized communities in Malaysia?