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Impact of Television Drama from Audience Reception Perspective

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Abstract

Mass media have influence on the ways people perceive the world. This assumption is entrenched in the Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis of television effects (1969). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to understand how the rapid process of cultural globalization affects Malaysia television industry and the Malays culturally. Collecting of data in this study adopted: content analysis. Results of the study showed that with rapid process of cultural globalization, Malaysian prime-time television dramas portrayed more Western values and lifestyles. Amongst the Malays, especially the youngsters, there were evidences of the adoption of other Western values like individualism and consumerism.

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1. Background of the research

Broadcasting in Malaysia started in December 28, 1963 with the formation of RTM1 under the Ministry of Information and operated by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). while broadcasting of RTM2 began in November 1969 when RTM television channel was split into two channels. Over several years, private terrestrial television channels, namely TV3 established in 1984, NTV7 in 1997, Channel 9 in 2003 and 8TV on January 2004. Malaysia's

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first satellite television channel, ASTRO was established in 1996. These developments have ultimately brought a lot of changes in the presentation format of the government television channels (TV1 and TV2) so as to gain popularity and collect more revenues. After losing grounds to the private stations and at the same time realizing the threat to their audience share the government stations made drastic changes to its programme scheduling; no doubt with the blessing of its political masters. It was quite obvious then that the government at that time, desperately looking into ways and means to increase revenue has definitely endorsed the government channel's profit-making intention (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 320).

The commercialization of Malaysian television has definitely brought about many other consequences to the industry and the Malaysian culture. The government channel has emphasized more on importing foreign programmes. The government, especially through its own second television network (TV2), has also showed a marked relaxation of its moral standards in controlling sex, violence and other undesirable elements. Irrespective of national origins, these elements of sex and violence were not only from Hollywood but also from Hong Kong and Taiwan television programmes. Even though censorship is practiced, it is sometimes impossible to exclude these elements entirely since 'Western concept of sex and intimacy had become so liberalized and pervaded entire programmes... intertwined with dialogues and action essential to the story line such that editing them out would make the programme incomprehensible'.

In the Malaysian situation, the availability of more television channels also mean the proliferation of foreign programmes on some private channels even though the government has introduced the 70:30 quota policy on television programmes. There has also been a lot of criticisms regarding the double standard applied by the government especially when the government has a stake in the stations. It is also evidently clear that the introduction of private television channels does not help much in encouraging more quality local production. With regards to the production aspect, local producers are also to be blamed in this context. It is not uncommon to see imitations of Western values, norms, patterns of behavior and models of social relations in locally produced programmes. Of course, public broadcasting is not immune to these trends. It follows the same pattern, reluctantly, sometimes with bad conscience or at least against inner conviction. To justify their form of finance they need a significant share of the audience. To reach big audiences, they have to give the masses what they want – entertainment and games.

Thus, the kind of programmes shown have also caused public interest groups, religious leaders and groups, and concerned academicians and parents to complain about the inherent values portrayed. Basically, these complaints revolve around their concern for the influence these foreign programmes (apart from other factors) might have on the increasing social problems faced as the country modernize.

2. Purpose of the research

Given the developments in the political and economic sectors in Malaysia, and most important here, the proliferation of communication channels and foreign programmes on television, it is therefore important to see whether foreign culture including ideologies and values are influential in transforming the habits and patterns of life of the local people. To answer the questions posed in this research, the methods employed to this end are content analysis.

2.1. Why content analysis?

Content analysis involves specialized procedures for processing the data. Its aim is to uncover the systemic and qualitative description of the manifest content of communication. It produces data by counting and measuring things. The method produces a statistical summary of a much larger field and it has been used for extracting data from content about frequency of distribution of references. The analysis as a whole stresses the manifest content of the message. Drama here is defined as serials, series, single plays and feature films. Sample criteria will be based on i) channel and ii) prime-time dramas. This means that the sample will be collected from all the drama programmes shown during prime-time (8.30pm to 10.30pm) on the two major television networks, TV1 (the government network) and TV3 (private network). Although, there are four television channels available now, the programme content of the other two channels do not fit into the criteria provided for the selection of this sample. The programmes sampled for a period of two weeks. However, to reduce the chance of any bias, the sample recorded comprised of one complete week and one composite week.

2.2. Unit of analysis

The main aim of this part of the study is to provide a general picture of the content of local and foreign dramas on Malaysian television stations sampled. This is vital in uncovering the ideological and cultural content in the dramas. The drama coding schedule will be used based on a modification of the schedule used by Hartman's study on radio drama in the Philippines in 1977 and Hansen's study on the portrayal of alcohol on British television in 1984 and Hansen's study on the portrayal of alcohol and alcohol consumption in television news and drama programmes (Hansen, 2003). It is also suggested that the main unit of analysis will be the programme, underlying themes, subject matter, motives and characteristics of the main characters in each drama, and scene. The programme will firstly be coded in terms of its title, channel, time of transmission, source of production, language of the narrative, type of drama (format), location of the drama, setting of the action, social class of families involved, type of family structure, subject of the drama and basic themes of the story. The characters were coded in terms of their demographics and their type of clothing, types of housing, types of restaurants attended, types of foods and drinks consumed, number of instances foreign language was used and theme of the dramas.

3. Research findings

This section will look into some of the more pertinent issues as a comparison between the local and foreign dramas. Apart from looking at whatever similarities or differences in the themes, obvious cultural artifacts and life-style of the local and foreign dramas, this analysis will clarify the extent to which local programmes and also foreign ones further promote cultural imperialism / cultural globalization.

A total of 188 characters were studied from the sample selected; 152 local, 28 foreign (all from the US) and 8 others (co-production between RTM and Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia [RCTI] of Indonesia). However, for the purpose of this analysis, only local dramas and foreign dramas from the United States will be selected for the study. Even though as discussed earlier, family saga constitutes the majority of the dramas shown on Malaysian television, there are differences in terms of programme type when compared from the perspective of country of origin. The majority of the local dramas in term of its type sampled were the family saga (44.7 percent) followed by docudrama (18.4 percent), situation comedy (15.8 percent) and historical fiction (10.5 percent). For the foreign dramas, only three main content types were recorded during the prime-time sampled. Situation comedy constitutes the majority (42.8 percent) followed by family saga (28.6 percent) and science fiction (28.6 percent). American police dramas, although popular amongst the audiences was not shown in the analysis because they were mainly shown after the prime-time slot.

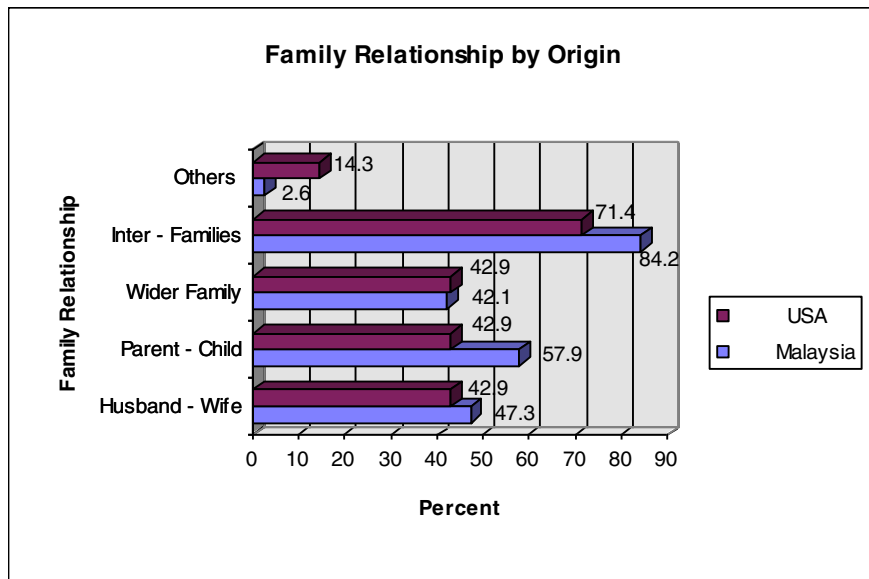
4. Comparison between foreign and local setting

In terms of their setting, there was a great similarity in terms of the setting of the dramas that were analyzed. Given the content of the drama, it is not surprising that the urban areas were given more concentration by the dramas from both countries. All the foreign dramas (100.0 percent) had an urban setting while the Malaysian ones had slightly less (76.4 percent) setting in the urban areas and only 18.4 percent rural setting. With regards to the kind of family portrayed, the Malaysian dramas had more nuclear type family (60.5 percent) than the foreign ones (42.9 percent) while the number of extended family portrayed were 18.4 percent and 14.2 percent respectively. However, the main difference between the Malaysian and American dramas was the presence of many characters as individuals ('unclear' category) in Western dramas (42.9 percent) which may partly reflect the more individualistic nature of their society. The Malaysian dramas had 60.5 percent of the family shown as the nuclear family compared to 42.9 percent for the foreign dramas. In terms of the extended family, the local dramas had a slightly higher number of extended families shown (18.4 percent) compared to the foreign dramas (14.2 percent).

4.1. Family relationship in foreign and local dramas

There was a somewhat mixed kind of family relationship pattern shown by the Malaysian characters (Figure 1). There was more portrayal of parent-child relationship in the local dramas (57.9 percent) than the foreign ones (42.9

percent). The same was also true in terms of the family in terms of husband-wife relationship (47.3 percent compared to 42.9 percent) respectively. The slightly higher emphasis may be due to the different notion of the family between the two cultures whereby in the Malaysian society, the family means a husband and wife and also children as opposed to many single parents family in Western society. Being under strict government scrutiny, this may also be a reflection of the government’s ideology. In response to the ever increasing family problems like violence in the family, divorce, drug abuse and moral decadence among the younger generation as the country modernize, regular campaigns on health (examples are, AIDS, cholera and dengue) and general related ones (examples are, road safety, anti-litter, buy local) and specific campaigns about the ‘Happy Family’, ‘Compassionate Society’, ‘Tak Nak’ and ‘Anti-Drug Abuse’ have been conducted. There was however an almost equal emphasis on the wider family relationship given by the Malaysian (42.1 percent) and foreign (42.9 percent) television dramas.



* More than one family relationship can be recorded for each drama

Fig. 1. Family relationship by origin

4.2. Underlying motives of characters

The television dramas were further analyzed according to the motive of the characters in the story. Figure 2 showed that the characters in the local dramas were shown to be more involved in a marital kind of relationship (38.2 percent) than the characters in the foreign dramas (35.7 percent). A high proportion of the characters in the local dramas (38.2 percent) were portrayed to be involved in non-marital relationship; almost as much as those portrayed by the foreign dramas (39.3 percent). This is a somewhat unexpected phenomenon given the government’s consistent campaign towards inculcating Islamic and moral values in everyday life, and despite the different social norms. However, compared to foreign dramas, no love scenes like kissing (between married or unmarried couples) in public or private places were shown. There was also no bedroom scenes between lovers (outside marriage) shown in local dramas. Again, there is a higher proportion in the unclear category (23.0 percent) compared to the foreign characters (10.7 percent) due to the higher number of dramas about students in colleges and universities.

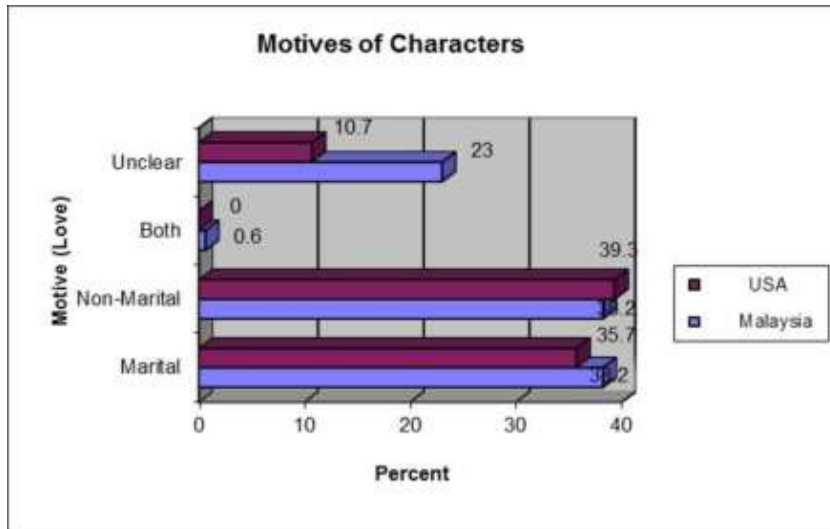


Fig. 2. Motives of characters

The characters were also compared in terms of other underlying motives like fulfilment of ideological beliefs, fulfilment of religious beliefs, pleasure seeking, peaceful life, educational, financial and others. The local and foreign dramas showed that there were differences in their portrayal of their characters along these motives. Achieving a peaceful life tops the priority of those in the local dramas (40.8 percent) whereas fulfilling ideological beliefs is the most important motive amongst the foreign characters (39.3 percent).

5. Discussion

The analysis of this sample reveals that there are similarities and differences between the Malaysian dramas when compared with the American ones. The basic composition of the dramas especially the serials in terms of the cliff-hanger formats, running time and the domestic world were apparent. Overall the urban setting which predominates the foreign dramas were also common in the local dramas. The local dramas, especially the modern ones also shared many similar attributes with the imported dramas in terms of the life-styles portrayed, especially the consumption of western foods, attending western style restaurant and using foreign words which are portrayed as positive. However, only in the older dramas were some basic characteristics maintained, for example, dressing, the kind of foods and families portrayed.

The value system portrayed showed that the modern Malaysian dramas exhibited very little of the Malay values of collectivism, idealism, docility and femininity. With the exception of some older Malay dramas like those by P. Ramlee which still remain popular till this day, the new Malay dramas have more families shown as in the upper middle-class, nuclear families and most of the time leading a Western oriented life-style. The content analysis study also showed most of these dramas portray the younger generation as mainly promoting a culture of consumerism, very materialistic, individualistic and aggressive.

This is particularly evident in the theme of the drama in the sample like 'Cinderella'. In addition, the females are also mostly shown as single and embracing Western-oriented values such as individualism and feminism. In 'Spektra- „Ikut Rasa Binasa', apart from the rampant consumerism shown in the drama serial, the heroine would rather sacrifice her plans for married life since the fiancée's demand for more time together is hampering her work. This is quite similar to the trend in the United States as the dramas on Malaysian television also have more wealthy families portrayed. There was also a higher percentage of wives/mother shown as being employed outside the home.

However, it cannot be concluded that the characteristics of the dramas described here as an adequate representation of the dramas on Malaysian television stations. As described earlier, the samples were collected from only one private terrestrial television channel and one government's television network. Furthermore, there is also the need to look into how the viewer's themselves negotiate and respond to the dramas on television.

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