Exploring the Construction of 'National Unity' in Malaysia: Framing Analysis of Texts and Audiences

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Abstract. This paper examines the construction of 'national unity' within the culturally diverse society of Malaysia. It does so through a framing analysis of 102 recent Malaysian government advertisements. Audience responses, based on a series of focus group interviews, were also analysed. Although the power of visual advertisements comes from its capacity to blend fact and emotion, to engage audiences, and to add the narrative complexity of ethnicities, this paper also discovers a struggle over the meaning when the frames become contested. The findings suggest that multiple, often conflicting frames are involved in making sense of 'national unity' for different stakeholders, yet contested narratives of nationhood and ethnic identity is a central theme of the analysis. This paper contributes to a critical understanding of 'national unity' beyond culture, images and identity of multi-ethnic groups from two different narratives: the government through which discourse is constructed and the presence discourse of ethnicity.

1 Introduction

The discourse related to power, identity, and 'national unity' has emerged across the social sciences as an appropriate theoretical framework [1] that forms the connection between the theoretical approach and practical aspects of the investigation undertaken. This paper examines the construction of 'national unity' beyond culture, images and identity of people within a multi-ethnic contemporary Malaysia through framing analysis of texts and audiences. The discussions about 'national unity' is not something novel as scholars in various disciplines have raised concerns about the idea of class, gender, identity, ethnicity or race, and also nationality [2, 3, 1]. The use of government advertisements to promote 'national unity' is understood to only represent one particular, albeit dominant, representation of what 'national unity' might constitute and how it should be achieved. The diverse, multicultural nature of Malaysia however, suggests the need to examine other perspectives beyond the State's point of view to understand the multiplicity of perspectives

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of the Malaysian public. The paper argues that the people's voice including minority ethnic groups are important for fully understanding 'national unity' as this concept is far broader and more complex than the meaning in common usage. In doing so, this paper not only concentrates on an analysis of the language of powerful elites but also takes into account focus group discussions of people from different ethnic groups.

Although Engstrom [4] argues that 'national unity' is a highly problematic notion that presumes the existence of 'single-nation-states' instead of 'multinational states', this paper approaches 'national unity' differently. 'National unity', according to Amienyi [5] is a process that seeks to unite people of different ethnic, culture, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds for reciprocally beneficial goals. Correspondingly, it occurs when people from the same nation think, feel and care for one another and are willing to sacrifice the individual interest for the nation [6]. We, however, acknowledge that the meaning of 'national unity' is not fixed, as it is also negotiated and contested through its communication. Despite the reality of having a unique multi-ethnic Malaysian society representing different cultures and religions, ethnic diversity has always posed a challenge to 'national unity'[3]. Realizing the tensions among ethnic groups as a result of ongoing issues such as special privileges and rights for Bumiputera (People of the Soil) and the distribution of economic wealth [3], the following questions will be examined:

– How 'national unity' is constructed in Malaysian government advertisements?
– What 'frames' are created by the Malaysian audiences who view government advertisements for 'national unity' and in what ways have the 'frames' become contested?

This paper contributes to these debates by providing an in-depth analysis of precisely how the concept of 'national unity' has been constructed, tracing the dominant narratives, metaphors, and imagery used to promote a particular version of what a unified nation might entail. It is to the theoretical and methodological framework of the paper that we now turn.

2 Framing: A theoretical and methodological framework

This study adopts framing as a theoretical and methodological framework for examining the construction of 'national unity'. Framing studies that focus on 'audiences' have the tendency to restrict their analysis to the effects of specific frames on the information processing and decision-making processes of audiences (See, examples, [7,8]). Yet, very few studies examine the framing process in terms of construction (i.e. how a certain issue is constructed and how the frame-makers choose certain frames over the others to present a specific issue). Specifically, the voluminous literature on framing effects has ignored elite control – control by those with power in society and access to the means of producing and distributing mass communications – over framing or how the frames become contested and negotiated [9]. Through the theoretical framework of framing, this study focuses on how 'national unity' is constructed by frame-makers and how the frames get contested by audiences.

Methodologically, framing by definition is an interpretive process [10, 11, 12]. As such, it guides an interpretation of the construction of 'national unity' that embraces visual and textual elements, with readings and counter readings of words, images, as well as metaphors through a systematic interpretation of framing devices [10, 11, 12]. These devices provide a rigorous interpretation of how the selection of particular words, images, and visuals was constructed by the elite power and how they are received by people of different ethnic groups. For this study, we analysed 102 Malaysian government advertisements in the form of print media (stamps, postcards, magazines, and billboards), broadcast media (television), and online media (from government official websites). Examining the construction of 'national unity' in the data begins with asking questions about "how are particular words or

images given specific meanings" [13] to the nation that people are identifying with – in specific the object of identification. Table 1 shows how this paper systematically applies the framing devices as the guiding principle to develop the coding process and conduct a coherent analysis of the government advertisements.

Table 1. The coding process for interpreting government advertisements

Codes	Themes/ Phrases/ Slogan	Message of the ads	Depictions of characters	Logo / Emblem	National instrument	Historical and cultural celebration
Sub-code	*Rakyat Didahulukan, Pencapaian Diutamakan* (People First, Performance Now)	Unity / ethnic relations	Non-characters	Malaysian emblem	National flag	*Merdeka* Day
Sub-code	*Janji Ditepati* (Promises Fulfilled)	Nilai-nilai murni (moral values)	Celebrity endorser	Ministry's logo	Country's map	Malaysia Day
Sub-code	*Bahasa Asas Perpaduan* (Language is the foundation of unity)	Patriotism	Adults (man and woman) -Live and animated-	Govt's department logo	National anthem	Chinese New Year
Sub-code	*Perpaduan dalam kepelbagaian* (Unity in diversity)	National identity	Children (Live and animated)	Theme's logo	Cultural artefacts	*Hari Raya*
Sub-code	Transformation Successful, People Prosperous	-	Metaphors	1Malaysia logo	Buildings, monument, and sites	*Deepavali*

Furthermore, a total of six focus group interviews of different Malaysian ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) were used to gather data to discover their responses towards the construction of 'national unity' in government advertisements. The interview questions were divided into two parts. In the first part, participants were asked about their understanding of 'national unity' and general questions about government advertisements. In the second part of interviews, participants were shown twenty-three advertisements and the remaining questions were asked to them about their responses towards the advertisements. Using Atlas.ti, a comprehensive coding structure was developed from the advertisement and interview data for an in-depth analysis.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Media text

There are three frames emerged from the analysis of 102 government advertisements: 1) Nationalistic-based frame; 2) Ideology-based frame; and 3) Ethnic identity-based frame. The descriptions of each frame are explained below.

3.1.1 Nationalistic-based frame

The nationalistic-based frame explores the ways in which the contents of the advertisements construct 'national unity' from the Malaysian national manifestation such as the use of slogans/catchphrases, exemplars, metaphors, and visual images to communicate nationalistic ideas. In the examined government advertisements, one of the national symbols that appear repeatedly throughout the data is the Malaysian flag. The use of catchphrase of *Perpaduan dalam kepelbagaian* (Unity in diversity) reflects the idea of 'national unity' from the perspective of ethnicity as shown in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. A living interaction among people of different ethnic groups

3.1.2 Ideology-based frame

The ideology-based frame in this paper ascertains the use of certain words and images in the ways that promote the ideological power of the State. The ideology-based frame in this paper refers to a system that prioritizes idea, opinion, and beliefs of a given social group, and legitimizes certain ones as true, proper, natural and correct [14]. By identifying recurring images, words, and narratives through government advertisements, this analysis gain a greater understanding of how ideologies, in particular relating to 'national unity', are produced in the society [15]. The ideological framework that is discursively constructed through government advertisements are the recurring images of *1Malaysia* logo, *1Malaysia* narratives, and interestingly the images of children. An illustrative advertisement is provided in Figure 2.

Fig. 2. The use of *1Malaysia* logo as an ideological power of the State

3.1.3 Ethnic identity-based frame

Ethnicity can be associated with a group of people who share a culture, language, nationality, heritage, or religion [16] and thus, the meaning of ethnic identity is continuously negotiated, reviewed and rejuvenated. The analysis of the government advertisements reveals that the idea of 'unity' is always related to individuals of the different ethnic group. The images of individuals from different ethnic groups are not only in the form of 'real people', but also metaphors. Some illustrative data which are empirically analysed are shown below:

Fig. 3. Images of people of different ethnics in the form of metaphors and real people

3.2 Media audience

The findings show that the meaning of 'national unity' was explicitly interpreted as 'unity among different ethnic groups' by audiences. Some of the participants' responses are:

> *Participant G4-YY: From my own perspective, I think 'national unity' means that everybody comes together regardless of races, age, sex, religion, and others.*

> *Participant G1-SHH: 'National unity' is usually associated with a nation. In Malaysia, we always refer to Chinese, Indian, Malay and we would say that we must unite and co-operate each other.*

However, further analysis reveals that competing frames exist when audiences construct certain frames that opposed the meanings of preferred frames as the outcome may not necessarily consistent with the intent of the frame-maker (See Table 2). Here, 'elite-framed reality' refers to the preferred frames for understanding 'national unity' produced by those with power – in this case, the Malaysian government.

Table 2. The competing/conflicting frames (Elite frames vs. audience frames)

Elite-framed reality Illustrative textual data (ads)	Audience-framed reality Powerful foam of counter interpretations
The recurring images of people of different ethnic groups are manifested through the advertisements in several ways: • people stand side by side and close to each other; • their harmonious relationships; • the idea of togetherness; • a living interaction between each other; and • the sense of national pride These manifestations celebrate the idea of 'national unity' and ethnic harmony from the authority-defined context.	The analysis of audience responses suggests that there is an intense struggle over the meaning of 'national unity' as the frames become contested as below: • *Participant G3-PP: The government wants people to watch these ads and get the message of the ads, <u>but the ads don't show the reality of the society…not telling what is happening in the society</u>.* • *Participant G2-TN: The <u>ad is trying to identify people according to their ethnic groups</u> such as through their skin colour and the use of dialect. But those criteria don't necessarily refer to that particular ethnic group.*

4 Conclusions

The use of framing analysis for analysing both advertisements and interview data summarize and define 'national unity' as the way people of different ethnic groups can work together in achieving a united nation and looking towards 'unity in diversity', is massive and still far from the finished plan. What can be concluded here is, much of the communication efforts of meaning-maker or (frame-maker) belong to the realm of producing 'frames' that are not realistic here-and-now, but are anticipated to become real in the future (there-and-then). Furthermore, frames attempt to convince individuals (essentially the general public) that a given frame is, in fact, the best interpretation of reality and thus, it appears to be the one and the only truth to approach a specific issue [10]. The ideal representation of the nation (people of different ethnics) rests on the construction of 'imagined community' [17] where people are ideally projected as practicing a harmonious relationship, a living interaction between each other and 'unity' through the findings.

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