

FRAMING AND REPORTING SENSITIVE ISSUES IN MALAYSIA: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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Abstract. The study examines how framing theory can be adapted to improve the understanding of sensitive issue reporting in semi-authoritarian contexts, using LGBTQ coverage in Malaysia as a focal case. The representation of socially contested topics typically reflects the complex dynamics between journalistic responsibility and public sensitivity. The process of frame-building involves both internal and external factors which influence the frame selection for the narrative. The selection of frames is heavily influenced by newsroom culture that involves the intertwining of elements such as editorial policies, journalistic values and news values, while external factor like regulatory pressure heavily embedded in local reporting ethics and acts as the guiding principle in Malaysian news landscape. LGBTQ is a sensitive topic which often treated with biased reportage due to the cultural and values influences. Rather than promoting a specific stance on LGBTQ issues, the conceptual study focuses on the topic to act as the lens to theorize how local news media navigate contested discourses under constraint. While framing theory has been extensively applied in liberal democratic settings, the utilization of the framing approach is still limited in conservative media scenes which is bound by restriction in values and political influences. The conceptual study critiques the Western-centric assumptions that often applied in framing approaches and highlight the need for a local-centric framework that molded according to Malaysian's values.

Keywords: *framing theory, news reporting, sensitive issues, LGBTQ, Malaysia, newsroom culture*

Introduction

Media is a 'medium' function not only as the channel to transmit message from sender to receiver (Shannon and Weaver, 1949), but as the gatekeeper and meaning-maker (Shabir et al., 2015). The media serve the purpose of becoming the 'bridge' connecting the information to the audience and supposed to be neutral throughout the process, yet McLuhan (1964) argues, the 'medium' itself is a message. The message, according to the scholar is never neutral and actively shape the perception of the receiver. On the other hand, Fornäs (2024) and Hall (2007) believes that meaning is encoded by the producer and decoded actively by audiences within their cultural and ideological contexts. Media as a tool to deliver message to the audience can mould differently based on social and political circumstances (Fog, 2004; Gross, 2001). Media is also the primary source for any events that occurs outside the reach of the audience (Lippmann, 1922). Regardless of the extensive differences between the reality and the portrayal of the event, as the audience has limited access to the source material, the crated narrative will become the reality perceived by the audience. The reality, when framed accordingly, will be perceived differently by the targeted audience, based on the selected perspective decided by the journalist. Bateson (1972) defined frame as context

that distinguish what is reality and what is fantasy. Gestures and contexts ultimately effects how individual view, comprehend and respond to information. In contrast, Goffman (1974) believe that frame is a scheme of interpretation for events individual's construction of meaning, depending on their everyday life experiences. Entman (1993) further clarify framing is a process of perceived reality selection which shapes the salience of the issue.

News reporting on socially sensitive topics such as race and religion plays a significant role in shaping public discourse and social identity of a community. In the recent years, another sensitive topic, LGBTQ which involve gender and sexuality, has become prominently discussed in Malaysian's public sphere due its increased visibility thanks to LGBTQ movement and activism on social media that contributes to the formation of echo chamber in discussing LGBTQ (Tuah and Mazlan, 2020; Mokhtar et al., 2019; Subir, 2019). In Malaysia, however, covering such issue can be as walking on a thin line between human rights advocacy and moral panic. The values the local uphold and legal factor in Malaysia influences the overall portrayal of LGBTQ issues by the local media (Roslan and Jamal, 2024; Ting et al., 2021; Subir, 2019; Alagappar and Kaur, 2009). For the legal context, LGBTQ is prohibited to be practised, clearly stated during the 126th Conference of Rulers on 13 December 1989 (Ting et al., 2021; Haridi, 2016). The current punishments for LGBTQ practitioners are a fine of RM5,000 and six strokes of the cane, under the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 or Act 355. However, the possibility to amend the current punishments has not been ruled out by the government.

Malaysian system has been categorized as "quasi democracy" which imply the thin line between democracy and authoritarianism (Lai Fong and Ahmad Ishak, 2015; Guan, 2002). Under Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA), the book *Gay is OK! A Christian Perspective* by local author Ngeo Boon Lin was banned on the 17th of November 2020 on the ground that the book is prejudicial to public order, morality and public interest (Lim, 2023). The ban, howbeit, was lifted a year later by the High Court after no evidence was found on regards the claim made about the book. Yet again, on 25th September 2023, the High Court reinstated the ban. In another case, a raid and seizure of pride-themed Swatch brand-watches occurred on the similar ground of the watch is prejudicial to public order, morality and public interest. Both incidents showed the Malaysian strict regulations on anything LGBTQ-related. Justice for Sisters (JSF), a prominent local transgender rights group called the raid another form of intolerance and discrimination against LGBTQ and was a form of restriction of freedom of expression and equality (Lim, 2024).

The discussion of news reporting is closely related to Framing Theory. The theory offers a framework that spread the layout of how media construct meaning, which set the agendas, and finally 'guide' the audience interpretation. However, the theory's dominant models have been developed in contexts where pluralism, secularism, and press freedom are largely assumed. These conditions diverge significantly from Malaysia's media environment, where legal restrictions (such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984), religious sensitivities as Muslim majority country and heavy government influence intersect to shape editorial decision-making during the framing process. The persistence belief of 'media is liberal' although valid, Chomsky in *Common Good* (Chomsky et al., 1998) argues that mainstream media, for example, offers certain basic assumptions that work like the pivotal element in maintaining welfare state for the rich. Thus, it is wise to point out that the notion 'media is liberal'

makes people believe the façade of the existence of freedom of speech while there is limit put upon to control the range of discourse. Hence, a significant study on framing within Malaysia is necessary to extend and critically assess the applicability of current existing framing theory models.

Literature review

Understanding the LGBTQ landscape in Malaysia

According to Subir (2019), as a multi-confessional country, with Islam as official and most generally practised, Malaysia has a dual law system, with civil and Syariah law as the moral code and abided law. LGBTQ activities have been around for a very long time. However, it was perceived as an insignificant threat and received low coverage from the local mainstream media (Hesamuddin et al., 2019). Although LGBTQ is constantly perceived as a Western value, culturally and historically, homosexuality in Malaysia initially was associated by the traditional Malay village community with *mak nyah* (male trans) and *pondan* (effeminate men). In some cases, most of the *mak andam* (bride's attendant) and dancers consisted of this group, and during the colonial days, they rarely faced any dire circumstances (Subir, 2019; Koon, 2002). Some other name for transvestites includes *hijras* in India, *kathoeyes* in Thailand, *warias* in Indonesia and *occult* in Myanmar (DeAlwis and David, 2010). Lesbian or lesbianism which refer to as *musahaqah* in Shariah law was never explicitly mentioned nor discussed in any religious book. The term was coined from the Arabic word 'to rub' indicating the action of two women engaging in sexual act (Amer, 2009). In a study by Karim et al. (2023) shows that negative experience with men, family upbringing and identity confusion are some of the factors that drive individuals to engage in same-sex sexual activities. *Sinar Harian*, a Malay newspaper outlet in Malaysia, in 2018, featured a controversial 'go-to' characteristics list that listed down distinctive qualities of t gay individual which includes the love for beards, gym-addict for checking out purposes, branded clothing while for lesbian counterpart, the individual tend to show deep hatred towards male, extreme jealousy issue and tend to enjoy solitude. It shows how stereotypes used to frame the public mindset on LGBTQ-related issues.

The revival of Islamic belief in the late 70s and early 80s led to the Malay community in Malaysia to embrace the Islamic teaching thus shaped the policies to adhere the values. The once viewed as cultural anecdote in Malay community, *mak nyah* is now viewed as socially immoral identity. The conservative values also established a typical ideology of man be man, woman be woman. The belief of man needs to be masculine, while woman must stay feminine has since impact the society perception of genders is to ponder upon. Thus, with the rapid progression of new identities that embrace the opposite 'given task', or LGBTQ, it challenges the normative structure of conservative country like Malaysia. In a recent study by Tan (2022), Malaysia attitude towards LGBTQ community strongly relates to the cis heterosexuality. Factors contributing to the cis heterosexuality attitudes are high religiosity, no prior contact with LGBTQ individual and social stigma towards the LGBTQ community in general. Together with Indonesia, Malaysia has the most negative attitude towards gay and lesbian individuals (Tan, 2022; Manalastas et al., 2017).

The framing of LGBTQ issues in Malaysian media

Media framed the LGBTQ issue to question the formation of the community itself; the stigma revolved around it and the value of human rights that lay underneath the big issue. The attention given to LGBTQ was influenced by the social hierarchy in society (Gamson and Moon, 2004), if the issue is considered significant and has a sense of 'belonging' with them, thus the issue will leave a more significant impact. The topic of LGBT had garnered more attention after being publicly mentioned and discussed by influenced figures such as former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad during a press conference in a meeting of the Cabinet Committee. In addition to the attention that LGBTQ receive, the legal and social issue was discussed as Malaysia's conservative scene rejects the idea of LGBT. The concept of 'backgrounding' indicates the reduce of LGBTQ individuals' presence in local newspapers (Ting et al., 2021). The reinforcing of forced invisibility of LGBTQ individuals in news reportage further limit the accuracy of supposed factual reportage. It is prevalent that the mainstream media has the tendency to highlight the depictions of LGBTQ individuals as social deviant in heteronormative society (Ting et al., 2023) rather than focusing on the real issue of the narrative. Furthermore, moral panic and political agenda shaped also the framing pattern, especially during the Reformasi period (Subir, 2019). On the other hand, alternative news media usually delivers contrasting narrative, focusing on neutral tone of reportage compared to mainstream media that often sensationalize the LGBTQ issues (Ting et al., 2022). Sensationalism and moralistic undertones persist, particularly in headlines and opinion pieces. In addition, misrepresentation often happened in reporting LGBTQ-related issues which occurred through unsuitable naming and categorization (Roslani and Jamal, 2024).

The framing of LGBTQ-related issues in the media has evolved significantly across the globe, reflecting broader shifts in freedom of speech and social movement. In many liberal countries, especially in the Western, media narratives around LGBTQ communities have progressively moved from marginalization and victimization toward visibility and rights-based discourse. The shift is often attributed to stronger civil liberties and freedom of press with standard journalism prioritizing human rights reporting (Cruft, 2022). However, these developments do not directly applicable nor build onto media environments in the Global South, particularly in countries where LGBTQ identities are legally criminalized or culturally contested. In many Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia, the framing of LGBTQ issues remains closely tied to dominant values. Rather than functioning as a platform for rights-based discourse, the media often reinforce taboos or state ideologies through negative frames (Yeo et al., 2024; Ting et al., 2023; Subir, 2019). In Malaysia, media coverage of LGBTQ topics must be understood within a complex web of legal restrictions, religious influences, and political control. Laws such as the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act and the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 provide the state with extensive control over both public expression and media content. These legal mechanisms are reinforced by cultural norms that view non-heteronormative identities as antithetical to national conservative values. Mainstream media outlets in Malaysia are owned or influenced by political entities and often employed stigmatizing frames that portray LGBTQ individuals as social deviants, threats to moral order, or symbols of Western cultural intrusion. Headlines using derogatory terms such as "*Pondan Kantoi*" or "*Pondan Dilarang Masuk Masjid*" not only reflect biased language but also reveal the ideological work performed by media frames in reinforcing social hierarchies (Sharif, 2021; Shafiee, 2018).

In contrast, alternative media outlets such as *Malaysiakini* have at times adopted more neutral or nuanced approaches in covering LGBTQ issues. Operating with relative editorial independence and supported by online audiences, online news outlets are less bound by state ownership and have more freedom in reporting on sensitive subjects. However, they are not exempted from external pressures. Recent proposals to extend existing print censorship laws to online platforms have raised concerns about the future of press freedom even in digital spaces (Alhadjri, 2024). The Malaysian case challenges the universality of Western-centric framing models and highlight the need for theoretical adaptations that can account for ideological gatekeeping, legal deterrents, and values bounded actions. Thus, there is a rise in need to understand the dynamics of sensitive issue reporting in hybrid media systems, where liberal belief and authoritarian pressure coexist.

Framing theory

Media frames operate through the process of selection, emphasis, and exclusion that then will shape the public discourse by scrutinizing the alternative perspectives. Furthermore, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) added that media discourse issues utilized "framing devices" such as metaphors and catchphrases to invoke cultural resonance with the public. It shows that familiar terms and symbols influence the public perception of the issues as it sits well with their cognitive attributions. The process of selecting aspects of perceived reality to make frames more salient in communication process and the fragmented nature of framing studies offers interdisciplinary potential (Entman, 1993). By increasing salience, frames enhance the likelihood that audiences will perceive and retain specific interpretations of an issue. Frames are never neutral (Hancock, 2015; Entman, 2010), as frames play pivotal roles in shaping public discourse and policy debates. For example, frames initiated by the media can reinforce existing power hierarchy by promoting narrative interpretations that heavily align with the political agenda of the elites while marginalizing the perspective that is against the narrative intended. The dynamics in narrative framing show the ideological clashing in the dimensional discourse which can subtly sway the public opinion towards specific narrative and lead them to the intended conclusion without overly dictating them.

In Entman (2003) expanded the concept of framing by introducing the 'cascading activation model' (*Figure 1*) frames can be seen to originate from political authorities or influential actors that then transmitted through the media to reach the public. The success of the frame only depends on its compatibility and consistency with the existing schemes in cultural retrospective or the audience predisposition. The more the frames to prevail with the societal norm, the higher the chance for the frames to resonate better with the audience and influences their perceptions. Although the cascading model is said to be the modified version of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (Çeçen, 2015), with both are top-down model, the cascading activation model is more flexible in its application. As both models assume that the elites play a crucial role in shaping the way media narrate an issue, the Propaganda Model is relatively one-directional in the process flow compared to the Cascading Activation Model where the model emphasizes the multi-level influence from top to bottom.

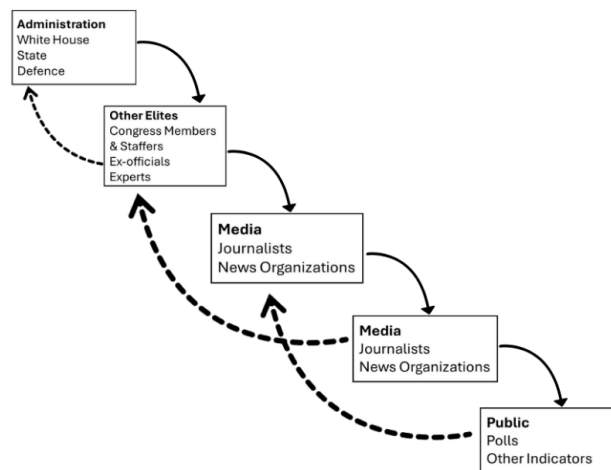


Figure 1. Cascading network activation.

Scheufele (2006) integrates framing theory with agenda-setting theory and priming theory. The frames (how issues are presented) and audience frames (how they are interpreted), emphasizing the framework of which framing influences the public opinion. As the strength of a frame depends on the resonance success with the individuals' values, Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that subtle changes in presentation of the message can significantly alter the public perception and opinion of the issues. Reoccurring debates over the conceptual ambiguity and methodological inconsistencies of framing theory often involves the 'catch-all' term in interpretative process, which calls for more specific and rigorous theoretical precision (Weaver, 2007) and the operationalization of framing in empirical studies requires standardized methodologies to allow better comparability across research (Matthes, 2012). Furthermore, frames are already embedded within the hegemonic process, thus it already limits the democratic debate (Reese, 2001). The extension of framing theory into digital media studies has contributed to contemporary studies. Framing theory in traditional media environment focused on how media select frames to present reality to shape the public perception, however, as media is adapting to the digital environment of dissemination of information, it requires shift in the process. Audience is no longer in the receiving side or just a mere recipient of information (Webster, 2016), the gesture of 'to seek before believe' has become increasingly substantial especially about digesting information from media. Furthermore, the phenomenon of data smog which was first coined by Shenk (1997) lead to difficulties separating information from hoax; increases the audience's mental fatigue in deciding which information should be treated as reality and what should be ignored.

The concept of 'curated flows' emphasizes the role of multiple actors, such as journalists, strategic communicators, individual users, social connections, and algorithms that shape the information distribution and level of exposure (Thorson and Wells, 2016). In the digital age, algorithms particularly played crucial roles in personalizing the content based on the user's online habit thus creating an echo chamber that filters the content that is tailored to reinforce their existing beliefs. The interactive process of framing brings attention to how behaviors counterinfluence the algorithmic decision-making process. The flow of information is now being altered, which then

curated the selective exposure and incidental exposure to information, further amplifying the roles of digital platforms in mediating access to information opposite the traditional process of framing. The inability of the existing traditional models in media theories in addressing the complexity of digital media can significantly be seen in setting the boundaries between mass and interpersonal communication (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Digital media has since empowered users to actively engage with the content by creating a new dynamic in dialogues across context. The increase of affordability then reshapes and challenges the typical top to down framing model by introducing interplay between actors and emphasizing the power of digital affordance. In discussing framing theory, it is crucial to understand that framing studies vary widely in their empirical research operations (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). The differences lie between generic frames and issue-specific frames (De Vreese, 2005). Each frame has its potential and is not static in measuring the effectiveness of a communication process. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) outlined three critical questions to explain the relationships between concepts that exist in framing: *How are news messages created? How are that news messages processed? And how are the effects of those news messages produced?* The questions are parallel to De Vreese (2005) process model of framing that explains the framing process, specifically addressing the process of frame-building and frame-setting.

According to Chai and Liu (2025), framing is more than just presenting the highlighted topic in a narrative; journalist is bare the responsibility and power to choose any preferred elements in curating the narrative such as imagenary or specific language cues in order to guide the audience. Integrated Framing Process Model (*Figure 2*) by De Vreese (2005) provides an insightful framework for understanding the processes of frame building and frame setting, focusing on how media content is constructed and received. The first phase of framing according to the integrated framing model by De Vreese (2005), is called frame-building process. The selection of frame during this phase involves dedicated method, editorial filtering, pressures from external entities of interest and power and cultural assumptions (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). The external factors often exert pressure on the newsroom, in attempt to shape the narrative according to specified interest that align with their agenda. Editors and journalists need to adhere to the request, especially if it's related to sensitive portrayal of an issues. Thus, it creates a narrative that downplays certain aspects of the issues while highlighting specific interest to be presented to the public.

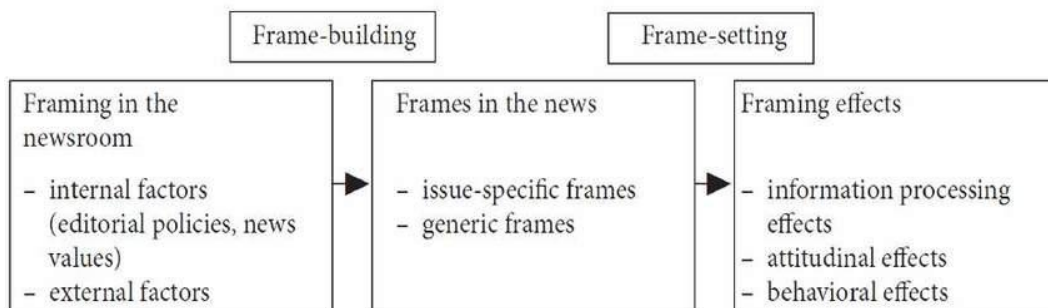


Figure 2. *Integrated Framing Process Model*

Frame setting is the phase where media frames interaction with audiences' perceptions influence their understanding of the issues (Tewksbury et al., 2000). It will then leads to manifestation of attitudes and behaviors towards the issues. Frame setting operates in both individual and societal levels (D'Angelo, 2017; Weaver, 2007; Druckman, 2001). The interaction between prior knowledge and beliefs at individual level will then contribute to collective attitudes, especially in homogenous society where cultural values are often shared and lastly triggers the public discussion at the societal level.

Conclusion

The conceptual study has explored the relevance and adaptability of framing theory in understanding the coverage of sensitive issues in constrained media environments, with a specific focus on LGBTQ reportage in Malaysia. The classical framing models, while the framework treated as foundational, still require contextual refinement when applied outside the liberal-democratic settings in which they were developed. Existing framing models (De Vreese, 2005; Entman, 2003) were made with assumption that media is free or freedom of press is autonomous. The Western-centric approach tends to overlook the complexity of cultural aspects of society and the dynamic of power that exist outside Western society. The understanding of news framing process reveals how sensitives issues such as LGBTQ has hierarchical values to attain the attention from the public. The gatekeeping process in newsroom during the frame-building process will further highlight the critical decision made by the editors to decide which news is considered newsworthy and how the decision will then reflect the values embedded in the reporting of LGBTQ issues by the news outlets. By observing the connection between internal and external factors in newsroom, it will give further explanation on the structural process of the news production from the news selection, frames and tones utilized. The journalists themselves embraced their own belief, closely shaped by the newsroom culture itself in addition to editorial stance and organizational priorities. However, in discussing journalist's personal belief or values, personal opinions without filter may lead to political backlash, public's hatred or lawsuits.

Furthermore, through the conceptual study, it highlights the pivotal roles of Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (Act 301) in exerting control over news framing strategies. The study over mechanism of control over narrative of news portrayal of sensitive issue such as LGBTQ and the evaluation over influence of amendment of preexisting law can be utilized as preventive measure to maintain the freedom of speech and counterbalance in news reporting. For example, the amendment of PPPA Act 301 that include the extension of the law over online content can be considered, if penalization of inclusive content is not included. Rather than advocating for a particular stance on LGBTQ issues, this paper uses LGBTQ reporting as a strategic entry point for theorizing how journalists approach sensitive subjects in environments where both cultural sensitivities and legal restrictions are prominent. This study contributes to the localization of media theory by centring the realities of underrepresented contexts. The process of frame-building in Malaysia often constrained by the influence either from internal or external entities.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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