

REFLEXIVELY NEGOTIATING INDIVIDUALITY-COLLECTIVITY: MALAYSIAN TEENAGERS' SELF IDENTITY AND THEIR CONSUMPTION OF THE GLOBAL TELEVISION

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Abstract

Like any country, Malaysia experienced the effects of globalization on its cultural identity. Satellite television became one of the conduits for the inflow of transnational culture through the various channels in Malaysia. A study had been conducted to examine how the meeting of the global cultures through the media are shaping young Malaysians' self-identity, by looking at what forms of global identities that are being reproduced. Secondly, if local collective identities and culture are being disembedded out of its locality due to their consumption of the global television programmes. By capturing the narratives of young Malay, Chinese, Indian and Kadazandusuns from their media diaries and focus group interviews, it is found that media globalization have led to the emergence of a fluid and hybrid identities among young Malaysians. Individualised identities based on Western fashion pleasure and music are forms of individualized identity that draws young Malaysians. However, local cultural identity - religion and ethnicity are not being disembedded rather it is negotiated along with global identities and re-embedded in new contexts. Using Giddens' notion of 'self-reflexivity', it is found that young Malaysians reorganized their sense of self not because of the collapsing of the local culture but because of the prevalent forces of local culture in their daily lives that is constraining their position as global-modern subjects.

Keywords: Reflexivity, self-identity, tradition, global television, globalization.

Abstrak

Seperti negara lain, Malaysia turut mengalami kesan-kesan globalisasi ke atas identiti budayanya. Televisyen satelit menjadi salah satu penyebar kemasukan budaya transnasional melalui pelbagai saluran yang disiarkan. Satu kajian telah dijalankan bagi mengkaji bagaimana pertemuan antara

budaya-budaya global melalui media telah membentuk identiti sendiri golongan belia Malaysia, dengan melihat kepada bentuk identiti global yang terhasil. Kajian ini juga ingin melihat sama ada identiti dan budaya kolektif tempatan kini dipinggirkan disebabkan oleh penontonan program televisyen global. Dapatan daripada diari media dan temu bual kumpulan fokus bersama golongan remaja Melayu, Cina, India dan Kadazandusun menunjukkan bahawa globalisasi media telah membawa kepada pembentukan identiti yang lebih longgar dan bersifat hibrid. Identiti yang bersifat individualistik berdasarkan pada fesyen Barat, muzik dan keseronokan merupakan antara identiti yang menarik remaja Malaysia. Bagaimanapun, identiti budaya tempatan iaitu agama dan etnik tidak menjadi lemah tetapi ia dikompromikan dengan identiti-identiti global yang lain lalu muncul dalam bentuk baharu. Bersandarkan pada idea 'self-reflexivity' oleh Giddens, kajian ini mendapati remaja Malaysia mengubah suai identiti mereka bukan disebabkan oleh lemahnya budaya tempatan sebaliknya, pengaruh budaya tempatan begitu kuat sehingga mengekang kedudukan mereka sebagai subjek global-modern.

Kata kunci: *Refleksiviti, identiti diri, tradisi, televisyen global, globalisasi.*

Introduction

In Malaysia globalization, have raised issues of a change in cultural identities and values particularly among young people. Among the means for cultural globalization has been the launching of its own satellite television – the 'Malaysia East Asia satellite' (Measat – 1) (Zaharom & Wang, 2004), which thrust Malaysians to its first pay-TV services – Astro in 1996. The advent of Astro left a major impact in terms of local audiences' taste, preference, viewing habits and exposure to the outside world.

During the pre-satellite era, imported entertainment television programmes are rather controlled, since it comes mainly from public broadcasting services such as Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). In other words, the state decides what entertainment programmes that are deemed suitable for Malaysians, especially its youth. But with the advent of Astro through its Malaysian youths had the opportunity to sample a variety of global and local entertainment programmes without much censorship from

entertainment channels like 'Channel V' and 'Music Television (MTV). The influx of 'media-scapes', 'ideo-scapes' and 'techno-scapes' (Appadurai, 1990) into the lives of Malaysians stemming from satellite television, put into question the possibility of more fluid and multiple identities. According to Krauss (2008), for the first time, young Malaysians are being directly influenced by the inflow of global youth cultures outside. Thus, this put to question of the sustainability of local cultures in maintaining young Malaysians' cultural identity.

The focus of this article is on the formation of young Malaysians' self-identity by focusing on the interplay between the global cultures and local collective cultural identity markers of ethnicity and religion through their media consumption. Additionally, it is also looking at the possible shift in values from collective to individualism among young people.

Cultural Globalization, the Formation of Youth's Identity and the Media

Globalization, have certainly raised the issue of identity with the interplay of the global and local cultures through the media. Giddens' (1990:64), famously defined globalisation as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa," suggests that one's sense of self is no longer rooted within its locality. But is formed through processes of negotiation and appropriation between the global and the local culture.

Therefore, it raise the question of the kind of identity that are now being reproduced by young Malaysian as a result of their daily appropriation and negotiation of the local and global culture that constantly interplay with one another. And what then, is the position of local identity markers like religion and ethnicity in the lives of young Malaysians now?

The central debate regarding cultural globalization has been whether it has brought about cultural homogenization from the West to the East, resulting in the decline of local cultural identity. However, those who oppose the cultural imperialism thesis argued that instead of homogenizing, but actually happened

is that a process of cultural hybridization occurs where people negotiate and appropriate the global into the local cultures. Thus the emergence of a more hybrid identities, youth identities are found to be plural and hybridized (Nilan & Fiexa, 2006). In other words, local identities are not being disembedded but it is now being negotiated along with outside identities. But one issue that many scholars failed to adequately address is whether this epitomizes the beginning of an individualized society.

This study adopts the position that identities among young people are fluid and multiple (McMillin & Fisherkeller, 2009). But it is also concerned if that leads to an individualized youth in Malaysia. Findings from Yangzi and Pugsley (2010), found that the use of global media such as the internet through blogs among China's Generation Y, facilitates the emergence of their self-identity that centres around individualism and consumerism. Hence, this presents a different issue of consumption of global media on a culturally and traditionally strong society. It is this issue that this study is concerned about and is intrigued to investigate.

In an age, where young people are living in a period of 'late modernity' (Giddens, 1990; 1991), Beck argued that people become individualized because of the collapse of tradition and collective identities. Scholars have begun to see that the process of forming identity is becoming more reflexive where individuals are forced to draw from various non-traditional identity markers to construct their own identity (Giddens, 1990;1991; Thompson, 1995). Such endeavour, is what Giddens called 'self-reflexivity' where individual reorganized their sense of self with the decline of tradition. Which means that identity inevitably becomes individualized instead of collective. Thompson (1995), in particular, believed the formation of one's self-identity is increasingly due to mediated symbolic materials through the media. Thus, suggesting that the process of forming one's sense of self, albeit through the media, is an individual decision. In Malaysia, there is still a great paucity in the study of the construction of self-identity among young people, particularly from the perspective of cultural globalization and the media. Studies conducted by Samsuddin and Latiffah (1999), Latiffah and Samsuddin (2000), Latiffah and Samsuddin (2009) and Samsuddin and Latiffah (2009), demonstrated the emergence of a fluid identity through the formation of cyber-identities

among young Malaysians. However, it lacks insights into the context of their consumption of the new media. The lack of Malaysian media studies, from a more interpretive approach on young people and identities, means that there is limited information on the reflexive process involved in the formation of the self among young Malaysians. What possible cultural change or shift in values, that are being internalized by young Malaysians when they consume the global media is what needs to be explored.

Methods

This is a qualitative approach to the study of identity formation and media consumption among young Malaysians. It employs the method of a media consumption diary, focus group and in-depth interviews on 49 young people, between the age of 14 – 17 years-old, from four major ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese, Indian and Kadazandusun from a purposive sampling method. The rationale for drawing from those in the age group of 14 – 17 years old is because studies have found that the media is their major source of identity formation (Rygaard, 2003; Clark, 2002). The research was conducted in two sites – Kota Kinabalu, Sabah and Kuala Lumpur, covering the urban and rural areas.

The format of the media consumption diary was a combination of a log and a semi-structured interview, because it provides both quantitative and qualitative data. Informant need to jot down when they start using a media and at what time, it ends. Thus, the duration spent on the media, yields quantitative information of how much time spent on a media.

The research process begins with a focus group interview, asking informants of their media consumption pattern. This is then followed by a media consumption diary where they were each given a diary to be kept for 14 days. Informants were asked to record their consumption of the media as well as to share their thoughts and views about the media that they used.

Out of 49 diaries distributed, only 35 were returned involving 13 male students and 22 female students. The use of a media consumption diary is critical in order to gauge their everyday media consumption practice.

Following Buckingham (1993) who cautioned youth scholars that in order to study young people and their consumption of the media, one needs to explore it from the wider context of their social relationships and experience, the use of a diary is expected to be able to capture the social condition of how and where young people are consuming the media. It is less invasive where informants were not forced into giving informations as do in interviews, allowing a more naturalistic way of studying the subject (Alaszewski, 2006). The diary also provides a question on 'why' they do not use the media for the day, and it is through this question that researchers were able to yield the context of the informants' media consumption. For any discrepancies in their answers from the diary, the researcher tend contacted the informants for further interviews. In identifying the informants, they have been categorized through their ethnicity. For example, the first Malay, 16-year-old boy to be interviewed will be labeled as 'M1/Boy/16-year-old' and the process continues with the other informants.

All qualitative data gathered from all the methods used were then analyzed thematically according to Braun & Clarke's Thematic Analysis (2006) framework.

Quantitative Findings

Before proceeding to discuss the major findings of this study, it will first begin to present the quantitative findings derived from the diary on the media consumption pattern of young Malaysians.

In viewing their diary data, it is found that television is the most widely used media in among informants which corroborates with the findings of Samsuddin and Latiffah's (2009) study. The way to determine the popularity or the most frequently used media is calculated through the number of hours that they have spent on the media. If an informants records that he or she watches cartoon for 30 minutes every day for 14 days, then the total viewing hours will be 420 minutes in that period of study. In this case, there is one informant who happens to be a great fan of Asian serial drama, who watches two drama a day for total period of nine days. Each drama lasted to an hour. This means that this informants' total viewing hour for serial drama has been 18 hours.

Overall, it is found that informants in this study prefer to watch global television programmes rather than local ones as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1 The most preferred global television programmes based on total viewing hours

Country	Type of Programmes	Total Hours
USA	Films Serial Drama Cartoons Documentary/Magazine shows Reality Television Entertainment Teen series Thriller/Horror Crime series Talk shows Children show	119 hours 15 min
Taiwan	Serial Drama Entertainment Film	59 hours
India/Kollywood	Serial Drama Film Entertainment	47 hours 20 min
Hong Kong	Serial Drama Film	41 hours 50 min
Japan	Cartoons	36 hours 45 min
Korea	Serial Drama	30 hours
Indonesia	Serial Drama Sitcom	25 hours
India/Bollywood	Film	5 hours

The total viewing hours for global television programmes among informants were 364 hours 10 minutes as compared to 116 hours 50 minutes local television programmes. The assumption that local audiences prefer their own local television programmes was somewhat challenged here. Findings by Van der Rijt et al (2000) in among young Dutch people who preferred their own local popular music television station than U.S' MTV, proved otherwise in Malaysia.

The United States (US) seemed to be the most popular choice of global television programmes here. Among the most popular programmes are *Tom & Jerry*, *CSI* and *Fear Factor!* While studies by Strelitz (2002) and Gritxi (2006) suggests that preference for imported programmes are determined by class, this study found that it is not the case in determining preference over local to global programmes. Programmes from the U.S tops with 119 hours and 15 minutes. Apart from the U.S, young Malaysians watched a wide range of global television programmes from other foreign countries such as Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan and India.

For the Chinese and Indian informants, their consumption practice is also shaped by the ‘cultural proximity’ factor (Straubhaar, 1991). Chinese informants’ divide their viewing habit between global Chinese-language programmes with English-language programmes from the US. The total viewing hours for Chinese informants for imported Chinese programmes are 72 hours 30 minutes compared to 16 hours and 30 minutes for American programmes.

Indian informants, on the other hand, watches ‘Bollywood’ and ‘Kollywood’ shows from India. ‘Bollywood’ popularly refers to Hindi language film industry, located in Bombay while ‘Kollywood’ or Tamil cinema, is said to be from the South India (Ganti, 2004). Apart from difference in language, ‘Bollywood’ serves as the national cinema while ‘Kollywood’ functions to propagate Tamil cultural identity (Ravi, 2008). Although Malaysian Indians are largely from among the Tamil ethnic group, a young Indian informant watches Bollywood and Kollywood programmes, apart from American programmes. Similar to the Chinese informants, Indians informants’ watches more programmes from India with 47 hours 20 minutes compare to 20 hours 20 minutes for American shows.

Apart from the wide variety of choices in terms of language, type of programmes and attractive actors/actresses, ‘quality’ in production is among the major reason why young Malaysians are more drawn to global television programmes.

The only local programmes that is frequently watched by young Malaysians is the local news in Malay. Although there are English, Mandarin and Tamil news, most of the informants here prefer Malay news.

Table 2 Total viewing hours for local news across ethnicity, age and gender

Ethnicity	Local Malay News	Local Chinese News	Local Tamil News
Kadazandusun	12 hours	-	-
Malay	7 hours	-	-
Indian	3 hours 30 min	-	30 minutes
Chinese	-	30 minutes	-

Qualitative Findings: Negotiating Individuality and Collectivity

Textual data from media consumption diaries, focus group and in-depth interviews were as aforementioned analyzed thematically, seeking for a ‘patterned response or meaning’ in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 82) which counts as a ‘theme’.

Two set of contrasting values of ‘emancipation’ and ‘conformity’ are found to be the major theme of the data. On their own, there is a great sense of pleasure and excitement that they experienced when watching global television programmes. A sense of feeling emancipated is evident when they share their thoughts and feelings about the programmes they watched.

“(MTV). Well, basically, I’m a music geek. Music is my life, so watching MTV, it can give me satisfaction to my music taste. Well, criticism about this channel? Emm... I don’t have one,” (M3/Boy/17-years-old/19/1/2008)

“Channel E! is very entertaining. Because I get to see lots of new things like clothes, shoes and stuffs that model always wear and I get to see who is in the rich actor’s top 10 (list),” (C8/Girl/14-year-old/2/3/2008)

‘Emancipation’ in this study, also alludes as to how young people are drawn to the values of ‘independence,’ ‘openness’ and ‘creativity’ found in imported television programmes as compared to local television programmes. For example, they are fascinated by documentary shows like *National Geographic*.

Interviewer: “What’s so interesting about *National Geographic*?”

“It expands the creative side of you,” (I11/Boy/14-year-old/Focus Group 4).

Interviewer: “What about our local documentaries? What do you think of those programmes?”

“I don’t like to watch local documentaries. [They are] all about Malaysia only. I like [learning about] other countries. (You know) expand,” (I11).

The fact that foreign documentaries talks about things across one’s own boundaries, and dare to expand is what draws this particular informant. He viewed ‘National Geographic’ as a manifestation of the attitude and values of the West as more ‘open’ and dare to move away from the confinement of its own locality, as opposed to Malaysia’s documentaries, which often focused on local issues as ‘insular.’

Conformity

Conformity’ is the second theme found in their narratives. While they experience joy and pleasure out of watching imported television programmes, they also need to negotiate their individualized pleasure with the various social roles that ascribed upon them as student, son, daughter or siblings. Aside from that, they also have to negotiate their identity based on their ethnicity and religion with the pleasures derived from global television. And in trying to negotiate between these roles, it is evident that while they manage to live between identities, there are times when the collective life of conforming to rules, becomes a source of tension for them.

Two source of tension here namely parents and school. Parents of these informants have a very dominant role in determining how they should use the media and when. Lull (1990) and Morley (1986) found that parents are an influential factor in young people’s media consumption practice at home. Parents, hold the remote control and decide what the family should be watching. This is evident in Malaysian homes based on the account given by the informants.

“Today, I went out to celebrate my birthday with my friends. So, I came home at 5 in the evening. When I got home, my father was watching his favourite programme, so I had to joined in with him.”
(C8/Girl/14-year-old/1/3/2008)

“TV2- the story is not too bad. TV3- *had to watch* ‘cos mum and dad wants to watch (news), so *had to watch as well*. 8TV (One In A Million!) – as usual, can’t missed it.”
(K3/Girl/16-year-old/5/3/2008)

The young informants often had to negotiate with their parents with what they like to watch with what their parents wants to watch, every day (Hagen, 2007). The power struggle of hierarchical relations between parents – children occurs every day in the living room.

The young people, in this study, also unanimously resented the overwhelming pressure imposed by school into their lives. The mounting number of homework, extra curricula activities and hostel rules were viewed as ‘invading their private space.’ It is a form of ‘domination of their private space’ that delimits their right for leisure and their choice of lifestyle that forms the basis of their opposition towards ‘school’ and teachers. It also prevent them from watching television, where they are prevented from watching their favourite television programmes to ease their mental and emotional pressure.

“I don’t have the time [to watch television] as I am currently at school to study. So, in that sense, time does not permit me to watch television. If there is no school, I would stay at home and watch all my favourite programmes but the opportunity is not there to do so [now]. It’s really frustrating. Oh! God.”
(I4/Girl/16-year-olds/17/1/2008)

The fact that they had to spent more time on homework is claustrophobic to them. They are unable to watch their favourite television programme because of the unspoken norm to finish their school work.

“I did not listen or watch anything today because I have so much homework to do that needs to be completed and I must submit my exercise book and note book tomorrow. I feel like ‘forcing’ everything

in this book into my head, so that all the answers will pour out when we sat for our exam.”

(K10/Boy/14-years-old/3/2008)

“Doing my homework... I’m so angry!! That I cannot watch any TV at all!!!”

(M9/Girl/14-year-old/16/1/2008)

M9, is a great fan of Korean serial drama and one could trace the shift in emotion when she watches her favourite Korean serial drama – *Yoo-Hee The Witch*, a romantic comedy.

“(Yoo-Hee The Witch). This story has some elements of comedy and in the beginning, the couple were at odds with each other. Anyway, what is most important is the hero in this story is handsome. Hehehe... Whatever it is, I am willing to buy its CD if it’s out.”

(M9/Girl/14-year-old/23/1/2008).

However, it would be a mistake to interpret their identity to be in a fixed and constant tension of wanting to break free from the chains of tradition. What is significant about their identity is that it is contingent and contradictory. While they may resent to some degree of parental control and school, they, however, do not find religious duties as confining. Despite their fascination for foreign fashion, entertainment, lifestyles and values, religion remained central to young Malaysians’ life.

Maintaining Religious Identity

This is evident in their diary, when they often negotiate time between attending church service, Sunday school, mosque and also celebrating religious festivities with worldly pleasures of global television. This was their reason as to why, they did not use the media for the day.

“I didn’t fill in this diary today because I had to pray in church and I went to pray in my village’s church which is in Kampung Putatan and we pray between 8.30 or 9 am. After I pray, I went to Sunday school so

that I learn how to enhance my faith and I left at 12 pm but I reached the hostel at 2 pm.”
(K10/Boy/14-year-old/2/3/2008)

“It’s Friday night, I go to the mosque as there is the recital of Quran.”

(M1/Boy/16-year-old/17/1/2008)

“I went to Batu Caves and celebrate Thaipusam. So, there is no other entertainment but the *kavadi* and others. Hmm...enjoy!”
(15/Girl/16-year-old/23/1/2008)

Some adopt various negotiating strategies to reorganize their life between religion with secular pleasures. For instance, those who have to attend service in the evening, would watch their favourite programme in the morning. But most often, they happily forego television for religion.

In this respect, religion can be interpreted as an extended part of who they are, aside from appropriating global and individualized identities. Young Malaysians selectively choose ‘culturally-safe’ global television shows and appropriated its value into their existing local cultural identities. Creating a hybrid and multiple identities of global-local culture and modern-tradition identity of individualism-collectivism.

Discussion

The results of this study certainly invites some refining to the concept of ‘self-reflexivity’ from its original idea. Giddens (1991:32) main argument that the self becomes a ‘reflexive project,’ because post-traditional societies are forced to reorganized and recreate their self-identity as traditions are on the decline. As tradition rapidly losing its hold with the constant interplay of the global and the local, he argued, people are forced to negotiate other lifestyle options to recreate their identity. One’s self is now being “reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography,” (Giddens, 1991:53). While, most of what he says is true, however, people do not necessarily have to be reflexive because of the decline of tradition. Rather, it can also be due to the strong

opposing forces of culture – global and local that forces people to constantly rethink and reorganized their self-identity.

And in societies where local traditional, collective life of family, ethnic communities and religious duties are prevalent and intact, cultural continuity and maintenance is accepted without much question. While we are also witnessing shifts towards individualization among these informants, it is yet leading towards a full and complete individualization process.

Reflexivity is still a useful concept to be used in understanding identities of modern societies especially young people. No doubt, people are consciously reworking their own identity at this period of late modernity but the reason is not the same as those in among Western societies. Nilan (2008) argued that the concept reveals the limitations of Western theories for non-Western societies. The young people in Malaysia are reworking their identity not because of the collapsing of traditional institutions such as family and religion. Rather it is the reverse. They had to reorganized their self-identity because of the strong forces of both globalization and local culture. Young Malaysians had to negotiate between the prevalent forces of the global, individualized culture with the equally omnipotent power of the local, collective culture. They do so, because they still see the importance of ‘religion’ and ‘ethnicity.’

Secondly, the deep collective culture of ethnicity, filial piety to parents and religion where young Malaysians had been socialized into, made it difficult for some young people to be fully individualized. Therefore, identities that emerged are hybrid of individualism and collectivism. It is also fluid where elements of global youth culture is appropriated alongside local culture of ethnicity and religion.

Conclusion

The concept of self-reflexivity need to be redefine as a process where individuals are continually reinterpreting their own biography through reworking the global and local cultures. It cannot be seen as occurring from the confines of a declining tradition.

The two contrasting themes of 'Emancipation' and 'Conformity' found in their diaries and interviews, reflects young Malaysians' identities as a hybrid of modern-traditional, individualism and collectivism.

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