

## **Festive Season Advertisement: Analysis of Malay Identity Construction**

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**Abstract.** Advertising is the most pervasive form of media in contemporary society. Being pervasive, advertising has powerful contribution in constructing identities as it creates ideal images which are compelling to the audience. Recurring exposure to the images could influence audience in shaping their own identities through ideologies which are embedded in advertisements. In relation to festive seasons advertisements, advertising of this sort are also laden with beliefs and principles behind the celebration of these festivals. These advertisements often focus on imparting ideologies of the festivals and also concepts found in contemporary societies by highlighting those concepts which are often lacking or missing in a modern culture. Guided with theories of identities, this paper examines identity construction of the Malays in local festive season advertisement in Malaysia. We hope to highlight the depiction of Malays, their symbolic representations and what they indicate about Malay values, norms and beliefs.

**Keywords:** Identity construction, Malay identity, festive season advertisement

### **1. Introduction**

Advertisements represent the real life of a society. As a type of media, they mirror dominant values, attitudes and habits practised in a society in creative ways. They highlight images that reflect the society which impart insights by which we come to understand the world at large (Mc Fall, 2004). In a contemporary society, media has a unique power of influence and formative position in developing identity of a society (Fairclough, 2002), thus, media such as advertisements plays a crucial role in the construction of its contemporary identities (Piller, 2001). As a form of media discourse, advertisements make powerful contributions to how we construct our identities, undoubtedly, they play a major role in shaping a person's sense of self (Goddard 2002). Hogan (2005) explained that, advertisements seek to persuade through "aestheticised articulation on social ideas and values" (p.196), providing viewers with the emulation of real life experience which contributes to establishing models for identity formation. This makes advertisement a rich source in analysing identities. In line with this, it is the concern of this paper to explore a local festive season advertisement which reveals the construction of identities of the Malay, a major race in Malaysia. Advertisements seem to fascinate scholars in many ways. Mc Fall (2004) asserts that "critical fascination with advertisements as source material is motivated primarily not by what they reveal about advertising, but by what they reveal about societies, cultures and economics" (p.2).

Identity is central feature to human existence. It is unique qualities of ourselves with which we are identified and defined by others. Its basic premise lies in our name and the inner values within us which constitute who we are (Joseph, 2004). Identity is socially constructed as it is a label acquired by individual or group through the process of interaction (Jenkins, 2008). As a label, identity serves as a reference point for the individual and how he acts to differentiate himself from others. It is fluid and constantly negotiated as we are engaged in interaction.

Identity construction is a constant and dynamic process (Piller, 2001; Hogan, 2005) which involves active negotiation of social actors in context. In relation to the discourse of advertising, Piller opines that advertisements allow people to draw on their various identities which make it suitable for the study of identity construction.

## 2. Methodology

This study seeks to investigate the representation of the Malay in a festive season advertisement. It focuses on the role it plays in constructing identities of this race through the available codes contained in this particular advertisement. Working on the framework of content analysis and inductive reasoning, guided by theories of identities, this study explores the social norms, values and identities portrayed in the advertisement to identify the Malay identities revealed by it.

### 2.1. The Petronas Advertisement

The festive season advertisement chosen for this study was advertised by Petronas which is a national conglomerate. It was aired on national television of Malaysia in the year 2003 as the Muslims in Malaysia celebrated the Eid Al-Adha festival. It is a mini drama mode of advertisement depicting the episode of preparation for this festival where the ideology of this festival is translated into the society of the Malays. The narrative or storytelling performs the important function of laying the good and bad behavior associated with their reward and punishment, thus facilitating the formation of social values in a society which marks the identities of that particular society (Rayner, P., Wall. P, and Kruger, S., 2001). On the other hand, television advertisement was chosen for the reason of it being the most pervasive and invasive form of the mass media. Its multisensory messages demand the audience's attention and are directed towards a broader audience. Therefore, this advertisement offers clues as to which values, experiences and ways of life are assumed to be shared by the mass (usually national) target audience" (Hogan, 2005:196). For the purpose of this study, this advertisement is retrieved through the You Tube.

### 2.2. The Eid Al-Adha Festival

Eid al-Adha or "Festival of Sacrifice" is celebrated by Muslims worldwide to commemorate the sacrifices made by Prophet Ibrahim who demonstrated immense faith when he was put to test by God. Prophet Ibrahim was commanded to offer his son Ismail up for sacrifice as an act of obedience to God and though it grieved him greatly, he made ready to perform the task. However as he was about to strike his son, God intervened to provide him with a ram to sacrifice instead ([www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eid\\_al-adha](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eid_al-adha)).

As such, during Eid al-Adha, the sacrifice of four-legged animals such as lambs, goats, cows, bulls and camels is performed. The slaughter of the animal is done after the congregational prayer in the morning of Eid al-Adha. The animals are killed in accordance with the proper religious rites and are first divided into three parts before being distributed to stipulated parties. One-third is for the family, another one-third of the share is given to relatives, friends and neighbours and the other third is given to the poor and the needy.

Eid al-Adha is celebrated annually on the 10th day to the 12th during the last Islamic month of Dhu-al Hijjah (Zulhijjah) of the lunar Islamic calendar. It marks the end of the Haj pilgrimage period. Every year, millions of muslims make the journey to Mecca in Saudi Arabia to perform the Haj, one of the five basic tenets of Islam. Those who do not perform their Haj celebrate the rest of the day visiting relatives and friends.

### 2.3. The Petronas Eid Al-Adha Advertisement : "A Story of a Divorcee and Seven Sons"

This advertisement carries a theme of "Heaven lies beneath the mother's feet" in its literal meaning, which can be explained as when a Muslim treats his mother well and be obedient to his mother, he is promised a place in heaven in the life hereafter. Therefore, in this advertisement, it is shown that the children are doing all they could to please their mother and to fulfil her wish. In explanation parallel to the concept of sacrifice of Eid Al-Adha festival, this advert depicts the sacrifice of the sons in fulfilling their mother's wish.

This advertisement revolves around a widow and her seven sons preparing '*Rendang*', which is the main dish for the Eid al-Adha festival. The mother is checking with her sons whether the raw ingredients are all prepared for them to cook. To her surprise, when she asks each and every one of her 7 sons about the main raw ingredient which is the meat, unfortunately it is not ready. Feeling upset with her sons' indolence, the mother leaves the sons with all the chores and goes back into the house. Upon seeing the reaction of the mother, the sons (except the youngest) leave the house and flee to their *sampan* to look for meat to be cooked by their mother. The youngest son is left to care for the mother while the older brothers go out in search of the meat. The rest of the advertisements demonstrate how the efforts of the sons look for the meat at all possible stalls available in the village. As all the six of them are at the point of giving up, one of the brothers

sees an Indian boy who sells fresh cow's milk. Therefore, it occurs to them that this boy could help them solve their problem of finding meat to be cooked for Eid al-Adha. At the end of the advertisement, their problem is solved. Instead of coming back with a bag of meat, the sons return with a cow on a raft on tow their sampan, to the extent of shocking their mother that she faints when she sees what her sons have brought home. Upon regaining her consciousness, the mother pats the sons, holds and kisses their hands feeling blessed and grateful for her sons.

## 2.4. The Malays

Malaysia is a multiethnic country which consists of three major races which are the Bumiputera ethnic, Chinese and Indians. Out of 28.3 millions population of Malaysia, 67.4% are from Bumiputera ethnics, Chinese (24.6%) and Indian (7.3%) and other races make up 0.7%. The Malays are the main Bumiputera ethnic group (69.7%) in the Peninsular of Malaysia and the rest are from Sabah and Sarawak (30.03%) (<http://www.statistics.gov.my>).

Traditional Malay values rest enormously on Malay traditional customs and their beliefs in Islam because as Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas advocates (as quoted in Mohd Zariat Abdul Rani, 2007) that Islam plays a pivotal role in the history and culture of the Malays. As Muslims they are guided by the teaching of Islam as provided by the Holy Quran and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (Shukor, 2006:25). As pointed out by Abdelmajid Charfi (as quoted in Metzger, 2007), "Among the values that originate from the modern attitude and honesty of the Prophet Muhammad is the fact that human has to be seen as a responsible individual and not only as a group of individuals". In fact, Islamic values such as being generous, warm, having a good heart, showing sympathy and empathy, obedient towards parents have long been practised by the Malays. The Malay society is also known for its concept of *Musyawaharah* (meetings) and justice which is important in the Islamic religion. The practise of *Syura* which is a concept where a decision made by one is unanimously agreed by all is also evident in the Malay society.

Tham Seong Chee (1977) revealed that the key concern in Malay families and their social life are good manners, courtesy, good breeding and sympathetic tact. The Malays also have the beliefs that what is good and desirable is *budi* which can be defined as "a social conception of the ideal personality to be aimed at" (1977:7). Therefore, this ideal personality concerns the kindness, character, common sense, breeding, good disposition, doing good, showing gratitude and social sensitivity. One's social standing in the Malay community is measured in terms of the amount of their *budi*. A person is considered common and shameless because of lack of *budi* (Tham Seong Chee, 1977). The concept of *budi* in the Malay community emphasizes on nobility of one's character obtained through a conscious acting that are socially integrative. It is individually attained irrespective of one's status or economic position.

Hashim (2008) advocates that '*hati*' is central to human existence. '*Hati*' does not only refer to the human organ which is the heart that pumps blood in our body but '*hati*' in the Malay world also means a fine spiritual element, granted by ALLAH the almighty, and is related to the heart (the organ). In addition, '*hati*' as stated in hadith (the words of Prophet Muhammad), which reveals that there is a piece of meat inside every human being, if it is good, the person becomes a good person and if it is rotten then the whole human being is spoilt. So, '*hati*' determines one as a good person or otherwise. Hashim explains that there are other elements which are closely tied to '*hati*' which contribute to the construction of identity of the Malays based on Islamic religion. They are '*akal*' (mind), '*roh*' (spirit) and '*nafsu*' (lust). The '*akal*' (mind) is related to the concept of '*budi*' which is human thinking abilities and intellect to acquire knowledge which enables one to make wise judgement. '*Roh*' (spirit) is closely related to '*hati*' which enables us to know and recognize everything we know and '*nafsu*' (lust) refers to the aggressiveness and sexual desire in human. It also means a very fine element in human which is the verity of human existence. Thus, '*hati*', '*roh*', '*nafsu*' and '*akal*' make up the identity of the Malays on the ground of Islamic religion.

Malay parents demand absolute respect and obedience from their children. Questioning the parents and criticizing the elders in a manner unpleasant to them as well as answering them in a high tone can constitute rudeness. As a leader in the family, the father's word is final and cannot be disobeyed or argued (Shukor, 2006). In addition, the Malays have a lot of respect towards the elderly and this is considered as the good Malay values as claimed by Khoo Kay Kim (as quoted in Metzger, 2007). This is because age is honoured in

the Malay society and the elders are not only respected but quite often they are being given preference over the young in terms of holding leading positions within institutions (Syed Husin Ali as quoted in Metzger, 2007).

Metzger (2007) opines that the Malays are polite. They are also impassive which is taken as an innate sense of modesty. They do not show their dissatisfaction openly because it has to do with the politeness attitude. Very often the Malays do not show or express their dissatisfaction towards certain action or attitude openly. In general the Malays are opposed to any misdemeanour or misbehaviour.

### 3. Findings of the Study

This advertisement begins with a flipping of a cover page resembling a story being laid open for the audience. On the cover of this storybook is written "*Tersebut alkisah seorang janda beranak tujuh*" (which means "*This is a story of a divorcee and seven sons*"). This reveals the significant tradition of the Malays in oral tradition since telling stories is prominent in the Malay culture (Metzger 2007). "Every member of the Malay society is a bearer of an oral tradition (Amin Sweeney as quoted in Metzger 2007). This oral tradition has made the Malays less individualistic as compared to other societies which have been practising a writing tradition since the early times (Metzger 2007). Furthermore, the use of this story telling mode of advertisement is relevant to the Malay culture which highly regard moral values. Story telling helps to instil good and positive values since it is one of the means to foster these values especially in children within the framework of religion and culture which is important in the Malay society. Values such as honesty, diligence and tolerance are some of the motivating elements needed in the development of personalities and good behaviour can be taught through stories. Furthermore, moral values found within a story are still relevant today as much as it was in the past. In fact, every culture in the world seems to create stories (narratives) as a way of making sense of the world (Norhayati Abd Mukti and Siew Pei Hwa, 2004).

The mother in this advertisement takes on the role of a divorcee with seven sons. It implies the identity of a Malay woman raising seven children on her own as having great strength and perseverance. It portrays a Malay woman who perseveres in facing all the challenges raising all the seven boys by herself. The pertinent point put across is the respect she commands from her sons. This is proven when she is able to make all her sons contribute in preparing food for the festival which is a task normally performed by daughters. After all, in Malay family helping parents is the main virtue expected by the parents (Shukor 2006). It is always the responsibility of the elder brother in the Malay family to care for the family when there is an absence of a father figure. The sons show that they carry their responsibilities seriously.

The Malays portrayed in the advertisement are obedient to the mother. This is mainly because in Malay community, a mother is regarded as the utmost important figure in the family and based on Islam, one who obeys the mother, treats her with great respect and places the mother first before anything else is promised a place in heaven in the life hereafter. Hurting a mother, making her upset, disobeying her would result in life without blessing. Parallel to the theme of this advert which is "Heaven lies beneath the mother's feet", the children are trying hard to fulfil their mother's wish by looking for meat so that the mother could prepare *rendang* for the Eid al-Adha festival and make her happy. It can be seen in the advertisement when they paddled the sampan to every market in the area in search for the meat but to no avail. However, they did not give up but sat together to find solution to their problem and determined not to come back empty handed.

In line with the ideology of sacrifice of the festival, the Malays are viewed as risk-takers. This is shown when the children are willing to take the risk despite the enormous amount of energy they take to paddle their sampan to each market in finding the meat despite them knowing that their chance to find meat at that very last minute before the festival would be slim. But, they are willing to do all it takes for the sake of their mother.

The mother shows her upset face to the children when she realizes the main ingredient is missing. Instead of saying it openly and expressing her dissatisfaction or sadness towards the attitude of her children, she says "*What is to become of all of you?*" This expression implies that they are hopeless children. However, this statement may actually reflect her own inability to educate her sons. This is an example of how implicit are the Malays in expressing themselves especially their dissatisfaction. They are often not straightforward in giving their opinion or expressing themselves as far as dissatisfaction is concerned.

Based on this advertisement, the characters of the seven children represent determined, hardworking, respectful, responsible, creative and resourceful identities of the Malays. They are filial children who attempt their best in fulfilling their mother's festive wish despite being seen by her as "hopeless children". The children's antics, while they appear funny, exhibit respect especially towards the elders. All the seven children lifted their head and faced their mother when answering their mother's question which is a polite gesture to show respect. As can be seen in the advertisement, the children addressed the elderly with "pakcik" or "Pak" followed by the name, which means 'uncle' in translation, although they are not related to them. This is a common name used by the Malays to address with respect an elderly man and "makcik" which means 'auntie' is used to address an elderly woman. In a Malay family, the call name as "abang" is used to address the elder brother and "busu" as used in this advertisement is used to address the youngest son in the family instead of addressing the siblings with their respective names.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this festive season advertisement, the identities of the Malays are defined mainly through the values portrayed by the characters. Although certain aspects of the advertisement may not reflect the current setting and identities of the Malay community at large, the identity of the Malays could still be identified through the attitude and actions of the characters in it. The advertisement reiterates certain ideals central to Malay identity – being respectful and polite, determined, adhering to cohesive family values, upkeeping of tradition and practising filial piety. While the advertisement does not overtly promote the purchasing of Petronas products, yet it reminds the audience that Petronas promotes these superior qualities and by consuming Petronas gas, the consumers among Malay communities are identified as those upholding the true Malay identities.

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