The Roles of Media in Realising 'Unity in Diversity'

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Abstract. The 1Malaysian concept, that is, we stand, we think and we act as Malaysians, was introduced in 2009. It aims to strengthen the unity and harmony of people from different ethnics. One way of making the concept known to the public is by means of the media. This paper thus aims to discuss the roles of media in realising this new political branding of 1Malaysia. The data for this study was the 1Malaysia website, that is, the official website of Malaysian Prime Minister. Textual analysis was conducted to examine the ways in which the message of 1Malaysia concept was delivered and to identify the roles of the media in realising the notion of unity in diversity. The findings show that the media plays an important role in portraying the desired images of 1Malaysia, of which, people of different races come together in harmony to mean "this is us". The media is also responsible in educating people on the importance of racial integration and it is believed that racial integration is crucial in achieving Vision 2020, that is, for Malaysia to be a fully developed country. In addition, the media is also a platform in depicting the cultures of different ethnics of Malaysian, which have formed the identity of 1Malaysia. This paper therefore discusses the ways in which the media has played a key role in realising the unity in diversity which is the basic foundation of 1Malaysia.

Keywords: 1Malaysia, Media Role, Cultural Identity, Racial Integration.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is known as a multicultural country, of which the population is made up of many ethnic groups. Given the fact that each group has its own 'unique culture and heritage, such as language, belief system, tradition and religion' [9, p. 36], there is thus a strong reason for instilling unity among the people so that the country's peacefulness and harmonious relationships among different races [12] can be preserved. Right after the independence in 1957, Malaysia faced great racial tensions due to socio-economic and cultural differences. The unresolved racial tensions, which were due to social-economic problems and not ethnic hate [3], was the reason for the outburst of the bloody ethnic conflict on 13 May 1969. Following this, the New Economic Development (NED) programme was introduced in 1971, with which the aim was to achieve national unity by means of 'eradicating poverty irrespective of race and restructuring society to eliminate the identification of race according to economic functions' [12, p. 2]. Since then, the government has managed to eradicate the 'social borders' that divide ethnic based on economic functions.

Having realised the importance to maintain and enhance the unity among people of different races, the Malaysian government introduced the 1Malaysia concept in 2009. The definition of 1Malaysia, as given by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Abdul Razak, is we stand, we think and we act as Malaysians. This thus suggests that Malaysians are urged to take actions based on the needs of all ethnic groups and not restricted to one's ethnic needs. Most importantly, 1Malaysia was introduced in order to achieve Vision 2020, that is, to be a fully developed country. Vision 2020 was introduced by the former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohammad.

It is therefore very crucial to get the message of 1Malaysia across to the public and one way of doing it is by means of media. Due to the fact that the media has a powerful capacity to educate the public on the importance of unity by promoting cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and acceptance of other ethnics, cultures and religions, the media is thus expected to play a key role in promoting the 1Malaysia concept. Following this, the aim of this paper is thus to discuss the roles of the media in depicting the messages of 1Malaysia to the public.

2. Literature Review

Malaysia's population stood at 28.8 million, of which 51 per cent are Malays, followed by Chinese 23 per cent, natives of Sabah and Sarawak take up 11 per cent, Indian 7 per cent and others are about 8 per cent [5]. Each race in Malaysia has their unique identity, which is represented by their language, costumes, food,

festival celebrations and beliefs. The vast diversity of Malaysian society therefore requires acceptance and respects from all parties, despite their differences. Nevertheless, bringing people of vast cultural identities together entails hard work and realizing the importance of unity among different ethnics, the Malaysian government has therefore taken a drastic step by introducing the 1Malaysia concept and it is believed that this concept is able to unite people of different races and the transformation will in turn lead the country toward achieving vision 2020.

The first step of making 1Malaysia a reality is by educating the public of the importance of the 1Malaysia concept. In so doing, the media is the best tool to reach out to the public and the media has the potential to influence the desired racial attitudes especially for ethnics with minimal inter-racial direct contact [10]. Various types of media have been harnessed in making the 1Malaysia concept known to all Malaysians, for instance, television programmes and adverts, newspapers, radio and the 1Malaysia website. Interestingly, the 1Malaysia website, which was used as the data for this study, is an official website of the Prime Minister and this paper therefore discusses the concept of 1Malaysia from the Prime Minister's point of view.

Intercultural competence is a very crucial element in getting people to unite. Intercultural competence, which consists of awareness, an open-minded attitude, intercultural knowledge and skills that interpreted through effective communication and behaviour as an outcome, is the best and an effective tool for social-integration [8]. Open-minded attitudes include respect, openness and curiosity; intercultural knowledge and skills, on the other hand, involve how people interact with each other. Next is awareness, that is being aware of cultural differences and awareness is the crucial tool in developing intercultural competence. Finally, the last two curial elements are the internal and external desired outcomes. The internal desired outcomes include adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view and empathy; and external desired outcomes, on the other hand, are interpreted as effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in an intercultural situation [4]. It is thus interesting to determine whether or not the messages depicted in the media are able to instill the intercultural competence.

3. Methods

Textual analysis was conducted on the 1Malaysia website to examine the ways in which the linguistic messages and as well as non-linguistic messages, for instance, visual images, were depicted in order to instill intercultural competence among people. Linguistic analysis was conducted to determine the messages of the 1Malaysia website, for example, the message on what 1Malaysia is and how 1Malaysia can be realised. Visual analysis, on the other hand, aimed at determining the 1Malaysia images portrayed by the media and investigating the ways in which different cultures of different ethnics were depicted to signify the 1Malaysia identity. The findings in turn helped identifying the roles of the media in promoting the awareness toward the importance of social integration to the people.

4. Findings and Discussion

Malaysians, in particular, are very sensitive with the issues of race or ethnicity. There were instances 'when relations between ethnic groups were fraught with tension and distrust' [9]. National integration, which is the process of bringing different ethnics close together to be one nation [11], is therefore highly needed in the Malaysian context. National unity has thus always been the top priority agenda and it has become a political discourse in Malaysia, or in other words, each political party highlights the needs of national integration as part of their political branding.

The logo of 1Malaysia, as shown in Figure 1, consists of number one and resembles the Malaysian flag, which symbolizes all Malaysians, regardless their ethnic, belong to one nation. Hassan [6; 7], in her studies on tourism and corporate websites, has found that logo plays an important role as an identification marker to a country or company, similarly, the logo is found to be the most important element since it acts as an identification marker of 1Malaysia. The 1Malaysia tagline, placed at the bottom of the page, is read as *people first, performance now,* which has been actively promoted in the media and has obviously turned into the current political branding of the National Front government. Having the logo and tagline in the media, indirectly informing the public of the government's policy, that is, the priority is on the people no matter

who they are and next comes the performance. Performance is highly important to Malaysia and this is due to fact that performance will in turn enable the country to enjoy being a fully developed nation as stated in Vision 2020.

Fig. 1: The logo of 1Malaysia.

It is important to note at this point that the tagline is in Malay and it is also found in English since English is the second language. Given the fact that Malay language is the official language, this language is widely used in the media, and it is found that the media 'has been more successful in language education in an indirect way' [2, p. 40]. This thus clearly indicates that the media can be an effective tool in educating people.

Following this, it is very obvious that one of the crucial roles of the media is to educate the people on the meaning of 1Malaysia. In addition, the picture in Figure 2, for instance, clearly symbolizes 1Malaysia, which means 1Malaysia is about people from various ethnics and cultures who come together, or in other words, it signifies the meaning of 'this is us'. Portraying 'this is us as one regardless who we are' is also aimed to strengthen the peace and harmony that have been achieved in the past.

Fig. 2: The people of Malaysia.

Besides delivering information and educating the public, the 1Malaysia website becomes a platform for an open forum, within which the people can discuss things that are related to the Nation directly with Malaysian Prime Minister. Extract 1, for instance, obviously shows the role of the website as an interactive medium for the government and people. Not only the government can deliver messages, nevertheless, the public can also make their voices heard and this can be construed from the clause in Extract 1, that is, *it provides a chance to express and explore the many perspectives of our fellow citizens.* This is the advantage of using the new technology, of which two-way communication can be fully harnessed to benefit all parties.

Extract 1:

> Malaysia is intended to provide a free and open forum to discuss the things that matter deeply to us as a Nation. It provides a chance to express and explore the many perspectives of our fellow citizens. …
>
> 1Malaysia's goal is to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been our strength and remains our best hope for the future… Each of us – despite our differences – shares a desire for a better tomorrow.

The second sentence in Extract 1 clearly indicates that the role of the media is to convey the goal of 1Malaysia to the public, which is to preserve and enhance the unity in diversity. As mentioned earlier Malaysia is known as a multicultural country which comprises a fascinating diversity of ethnic cultures, and most importantly, the various ethnic cultures have become the unique and alluring image to Malaysia [6]. It is therefore very crucial for the country to preserve the peacefulness and harmonious relationships among different races that have been achieved so far.

Extract 2, in addition, indicates that the media is being used to remind people of various ethnic festivals which are celebrated in Malaysia and most importantly, it is indirectly to signify the meaning that each ethnic is free to celebrate their festivals. Different ethnic celebrations which are portrayed by the media is to connote the 1Malaysia identity and interestingly, these various festival celebrations have become a significant trademark for Malaysian tourism industry [6]. The first sentence in Extract 2, for instance, refers to the Hindus celebration that is Thaipusam. It is followed by the day for Muslims to remember Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the last sentence is for Chinese who celebrate Chinese New Year.

Extract 2:

1. We can, once again, appreciate our diverse culture as Malaysian Hindus mark the auspicious day of Thaipusam.
2. Emulating the Medina concept founded by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Malaysian Government gives preference to the people's welfare through various 1Malaysia initiatives as well as the national transformation agenda. I admire the Prophet's success in bringing about transformation through his love for the people and his concern for their well-being.
3. I joined my friends, colleagues and Malaysians in ushering in the Chinese New Year of the Water Dragon. As Malaysian tradition has it, the Yee Sang takes centre stage to welcome a prosperous new year and the Open Houses bring together family and friends from all races.

Interestingly, the images in Figure 3 also have the same meanings as the linguistic messages in Extract 2. In conjunction to this, Hassan in her study on the relationship between different multimodal modes in conveying meaning has found that there is a bi-directional relationship between word and image in constructing meanings, or in other words, 'meaning are developed from a combination of both modes; visual text and verbal text' (7, p. 158). Hence, this means that the images in Figure 3 help readers to construe the meanings of the linguistic messages in Extract 2, or vice versa.

Fig. 3: Depicting different ethnic celebrations to mark the 1Malaysia identity.

In summary, the findings of the study reveal that the media is the key player in portraying the image of IMalaysia, educating the people on the importance of racial integration and depicting various ethnic cultures to represent the identity of 1Malaysia.

5. Acknowledgements

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