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## MEDIA LITERACY OF SARAWAK YOUTH TOWARDS THE OFFICIAL DOCUMENTARY FILM



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### Abstract

Sabah Sarawak Malaysia's (SSKM) vision to separate these two states from Peninsular Malaysia has become a menace to the unity among the people of Malaysia. This vision is well received especially among youth who are keen in obtaining equal economic and political rights in Malaysia. Although SSKM has been labelled as an illegal movement by the federal government in the past, SSKM has used the social media medium as an important platform to disseminate their ideas to the people in Sabah and Sarawak. As a mass media medium, documentary films play an important role in the distribution of information and also as a way for ministries, departments and government agencies to disseminate and reinforce the reputation of their organizations. The storytelling documentary was then used as a propaganda weapon by the dominant party to improve their position in society. The research result has shown that Sarawakian youth see the mainstream media as a source of high credibility. As such, historical documentary films are seen as an important political tool in transforming and persuading Sarawakian youth to stabilize the political situation and boost the spirit of Malaysian patriotism. Sarawak youth media literacy needs to be taken care of so that the ideology that the mainstream media wants to convey to them can be properly interpreted and understood.

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## 1. Introduction

The ideological concept has been operating discreetly in a society and it operates in sustaining the existing social structure. It is a concept developed in the Marxist tradition explaining about the structuring of the society by the group/class who is in power, or dominant group so that they have maximum control towards the society by involving minimal conflict (Wahab & Ahmad, 2009). The people in power use dominant institutions in the society as a tool to spread ideas, values, symbols, concepts about something to confirm upon the readily available social arrangement. In this tradition, the ruling class known as the class holding economic power is seen as an agent responsible for spreading ideas, values, symbols, or concept on certain things to retain their position and power in the society (Downing & College, 2013). The ideas, values, symbols or concept about something are examined closely in the discourse available in films. Discourse is a 'language' or a representative system related to the economy/capitalism, gender, class, and ethnicity formed through the social system planned to spread the sets of meaning that can be accepted without having been questioned by the society (Fiske, 2011).

Discourses are structured and look natural in a media product. A systematic structure of a discourse by the dominant people enables ideas, values and views about politics, economy and socio-culture to operate well in a society. The dominant group will control the uniform, mainstreamed formation of meaning through dominant institutions so that they will appear natural as can be seen in a society. Documentary films, just like other mass media, do not operate in a vacuum; it is one of the medium that is carried out to meet certain purposes. It is seen as a medium to structure the process of producing meaning in the society. Ideological tendencies display the pattern and arrangement of the subject decided by the documentary film producer to the general public. The presentation chosen by the documentary film producers must be able to build the meaning that can channel the ideology that is to be delivered to the general public.

Documentary films are a very clear tool to help the government in shaping the national development activity and the change in people's attitude (Sarji et al., 2009) based on the characteristics that narrate the event or the non-fiction scenario. Indirectly, documentary films contain certain values and views that are to be promoted by the dominant parties so that the subordination process and the production of all existing social order can be sustained. Thus, documentary films do not operate in a vacuum, but they contain ideas, values, symbols and concept about something or an event that is structured systematically by the dominant party especially those that have the political power.

## 2. Problem Statement

Today, Sarawak has been free from British occupation for 57 years and it has been in Malaysia since 1963. There are various challenges and issues faced by Sarawak after its independence in Malaysia. This includes the challenge from the communist that started during the era of Japanese occupation (Bilcher Bala, 2016). The Communist Clandestine Organisation (CCO) weaved their way into the United People's Party to oppose the foundation of Malaysia. Their threat led Malaysia to make effective the Emergency Law in Sarawak in 1963. The operations then were Hammer Operation, Sri Aman Operation

and Rascom Operation where they successfully ended the threat of communism in Sarawak. Today, Sarawak has waded through multiple challenges to become a fast developing state in various fields.

This success is seen as an effort of credible leadership (Bilcher Bala, 2016; Mohd Fuad Mat Jali et al., 2012). The former government Barisan Nasional (BN) had ruled Sarawak for 10 consecutive terms through its main party Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United Peoples Party (SUPP), Sarawak People's Democratic Party (SPDP) and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS). BN had obtained the support of young voters to make its government stronger in the General Election of the Sarawak Assembly in 2011 (Mohd Fuad Mat Jali et al., 2012). The majority of Sarawakian youth placed high hopes to the Prime Minister at the time - Najib Razak because they were confident that he would be able to fight for the cause of the people through the national development transformational plan. BN has successfully ruled Sarawak for 10 terms consecutively and it sustained the political stability and developed the economy, social and infrastructure.

That said, the separatism movement which is Kesatuan Sabah Sarawak (SSU) or Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia (SSKM) was founded in the same year seeking to separate Sabah and Sarawak from Peninsula Malaysia. The vision was warmly welcomed especially by the youth who ask for equal rights in terms of the economy and politics in Malaysia (Mohammad Saiful Sinring & Anantha Raman Govindasamy, 2018). They opine that the people in both states become the 'political slaves' and the Federal Government before the 14th General Election had manipulated the agreement and failed to fulfill their promises during BN's ruling. Today, SSKM has a clearer and more assertive direction to bring Sabah and Sarawak from Peninsula Malaysia for the welfare of the people in these states, especially those living in remote areas who lack the knowledge about the rights of Sabah and Sarawak (Mohammad Saiful Sinring dan & Anantha Raman Govindasamy, 2018).

Although SSKM is labelled as an illegal movement by the federal government previously, SSKM has adopted the social media as an important platform to spread their understanding to the people especially those in Sabah and Sarawak. They are active on the social media such as in Facebook, blog and YouTube by uploading historical videos of Sabah and Sarawak. However, the victory of Parti Warisan Sabah that has previously won the state government in the 14th General Election in 2018 has turned down the heat of SSKM. They were seen to be less active in spreading their principles in the social media or movements in remote areas (Mohammad Saiful Sinring & Anantha Raman Govindasamy, 2018). It is possible that SSKM feels that their rights are defended with the triumphant Parti Warisan Sabah who had toppled the formidable party, BN in Sabah. However, it needs to look into the strategies done by the new government to reduce the fighting scope of SSKM in both states.

In influencing the thinking of audiences, the media plays an important part. Thus, in the communication process, the public's perception is very critical in order to assess the effectiveness of the process. According to Shahizan Ali & Lyndon (2015), understanding a message conveyed to the public by a medium is crucial because the content of the media can have several impacts, whether positive or negative, on the public. Documentary films are films with non-fiction genre and they have the credibility to channel the information to the public. Additionally, there is an increase in the number of historical documentary films of late, where it has become a platform to deliver certain messages especially the ones that are patriotic (Shahizan Ali & Lyndon, 2015). Therefore, having a consistent level of understanding

between the audience and the producers is essential so that it can be channelled to the audience especially to the youth today.

Media literacy is also enforced to clarify the 'abilities to read media text'. Hobbs (1996) states that media literacy is the skill in assessing, analysing, evaluating and communicating with messages coming in various forms. This interpretation is constructed by the audience or the media users through the framework of knowledge. In order to develop the framework of knowledge, skills and information from the media and the real world are essential. Media literacy is also defined as learning about one's ability to construct one's own meaning on a daily basis from the visual and verbal symbols of television, ads, films and digital media. This learning allows learners to record information. In order for them to grasp the media culture that circulates around them, they need critical thinking.

Messaris (2001) states that critical thinking that a person has will improve his or her efficacy to interpret the media texts although they have no knowledge on media production. Analogical reasoning, spatial intelligence, and attention to contextual knowledge are three types of effectiveness components he incorporates in the understanding of nonverbal actions. Analogical thinking refers to the public's knowledge and experience and this enables them to interpret the formal convention used in the visual. Spatial intelligence is the cognitive skill one possesses to identify three dimensional space in the visual although it only exposes a limited view of an object. Meanwhile, sensitivity to the contextual information in interpreting the nonverbal behaviour refers to one's skill to identify the interpretation of the meaning in the video showing the nonverbal behaviour. The use of the audio and visual in documentary films an aesthetic principles in constructing meaning from the producer and director of the documentary films. Aesthetics codes in documentary films require the viewers to interpret them so that they can build the meaning that is to be delivered by the director or the producer. Zettl's (1998) Media Aesthetics has five domains, including lighting/colour, two-dimensional space, three-dimensional space, time/movement and sound as well. Every field of Media Aesthetics constructs certain meanings to the visual in the video or film.

### **3. Research Questions**

Based on the problem statement, the research questions have been set as below:

- Is there a difference between controlled group and treatment group among the Sarawak youth toward ideology interpretation of The Malayan Emergency (2010) documentary film?
- Does critical thinking and aesthetic media predict ideology interpretation of The Malayan Emergency (2010) documentary film among controlled group and treatment group?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This study aim to examine the media literacy among Sarawak youth toward the historical documentary films. As above statement shown that the important of documentary film for the new government of Malaysia. Thus, the perception and interpretation of the audience is parallel to the ideology that the government intends to promote in order to prevent misinterpretation of information.

## 5. Research Methods

This research uses the experimental approach to examine the interpretation of the documentary film *The Malayan Emergency* among Sarawak youth in the public higher education institutions in both the control and treatment groups (2010). This research uses the non-probability sampling method which is purposive sampling. The students from the Public Higher Learning Institutions (IPTA) in Sarawak were the sample for the experimental process. There were 60 sample involved in the experimental process in this research. The pre-test was undertaken by showing seven video clips, then they had to answer to the pre-experimental test. There are concerns about fundamental media aesthetics in the film, such as lighting and color, two-dimensional space, three-dimensional space, time and movement, sound as well. Then the students were divided into control and treatment groups from both courses that were deemed eligible.

First, the post-experiment was encountered by the students from both classes. They watched *The Malayan Emergency* (2010) documentary film. The control group was subjected to the first version of the documentary film *The Malayan Emergency* (2010) that was not manipulated, while the second version of the documentary film *The Malayan Emergency* (2010) that had been manipulated was shown to the treatment group. The elements been manipulated included the critical thinking and media aesthetic in the documentary film. After watching the video, students from both groups were expected to respond to the post-experiment test form. The outcome of the analysis obtained from the data provided to the youth was seen as the result of the tested stimulation.

## 6. Findings

The above discussion explains that the media products like historical documentary films have become a very important political tool in developing the nation and persuading the people. With Sarawak currently fighting for separating Borneo from the Peninsula, historical documentaries manifest themselves as a great tool of propaganda for these very purposes. Youth make the best beacon of hope in spurring change and fabricating the development of the country in years to come. These young voters can influence the pattern of support and voting in Sarawak especially in the next General Election. Thus, the level of media literacy among the youth in Sarawak should be weighed upon to execute the right strategies through the mass media.

Historical documentary films like *The Malayan Emergency* (2010) are some of the best political tool that can help change and persuade the people like the Sarawakians. The research using the experiment as the methodology on the youth in higher learning institution Malaysia (IPTA) in Sarawak has shown that the student interpretation on the ideology in the documentary film *The Malayan Emergency* (2010) has a significant difference between youth in the controlled group and youth in the treatment group as in Table 01.

**Table 1.** Ideological interpretation of documentary film The Malayan Emergency (2010) among youth (controlled group and treatment group)

<b>Ideological Interpretation of Youth Controlled Group and Treatment Group</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>T Value</b>	<b>Significant Level</b>
Controlled group	30	3.8303	.49892	.463	.026
Treatment group	30	3.7788	.34980		
Total	60				

Significant level determined 0.05

Based on Table 01 it is found that the t-value for ideological interpretation in the documentary film The Malayan Emergency (2010) among Sarawakian youth in the controlled and treatment groups is 0.455 and the significant level  $p=0.026$ . This significant level is smaller than 0.05 ( $p<0.05$ ). Thus, there is a significant difference in the ideological interpretation of Sarawak youth between the two groups. The mean score of the ideological interpretation of documentary film The Malayan Emergency (2010) for the youth in the controlled group (mean 3.833) is greater than the youth in the treatment group (mean = 3.7788).

The manipulation of the variables (Critical Thinking and Media Aesthetics) influences the ideological perception of the respondents on the basis of the above findings. The correlation test has run to test the relationship of critical thinking and media aesthetic towards the ideological interpretation of documentary. Thus, the factors manipulated namely critical thinking and media aesthetics have a significant positive relationship towards the ideological interpretation by Sarawakian youth from both controlled and treatment groups. However, factors of critical thinking and media aesthetics do not contribute to the influence on the ideological interpretation of documentary film that is characteristically historical among youth in both the controlled and treatment groups. Based on the data obtained from the research from Table 02, critical thinking and media aesthetics do not have any significant influence for the ideological interpretation towards historical documentary films among Sarawak youth in both the said groups.

**Table 2.** The Influence of Critical Thinking and Media Aesthetics on the ideological interpretation in the documentary film The Malayan Emergency (2010) among youth in both controlled and treatment groups.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Independent Variable</b>	<b>Significant</b>
Controlled group	Critical Thinking	.085
	Media Aesthetics	.068
Treatment group	Critical Thinking	.292
	Media Aesthetics	.065

The significant level determined is 0.05

Previous research has shown that external factors, such as Internet exposure, impact one's media literacy. Study from scholars such as Shahizan Ali & Lydon (2015) and Kim et al. (2014) prove that the use of information from the Internet and literacy has changed the way media viewers view the video or film they are exposed to. The rapid development of the technology today, has led to the burst of technology in the Internet. These pieces of information have become references to youth today who are literate towards the communication technology when they are exposed to something uncertain. The capacity of young people to access, interpret, evaluate and also create online content is known as high Internet literacy. (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). Therefore, those who have high Internet literacy are seen to also have high media literacy in interpreting and building the meaning of the media text. Despite this, this research outcome shows that the Internet exposure for the Sarawakian youth does not have any link and effect to ideological Interpretation of Documentary Film *The Malayan Emergency* (2010). The high level of Internet literacy owned by the youth does not influence them in ideologizing the interpretation of Documentary Film. The documentary film *The Malayan Emergency* (2010) is seen as information that has high credibility and that does not argue over the facts represented in this documentary film by Sarawak youth.

In sum, the individual factor (Critical Thinking) and the factor of media text (Media Aesthetics) are regarded as factors that have a relationship in ideologising the interpretation of historical documentary films by Sarawak youth. However, both these factors do not contribute to the influence of the ideological interpretation of historical documentary films for Sarawak youth. Next, the external factor (Internet exposure) does not have the relationship and influence on the ideological interpretation of historical documentary films by Sarawak youth. Thus, historical documentary films in mainstream media like *The Malayan Emergency* (2010) have a strong influence on the political tool in convincing and changing the attitude of the youth in Sarawak.

## **7. Conclusion**

In the communication process, the precise understanding, perception and interpretation of the media text is very critical. Documentary films as a mass media medium play a very important role in the dissemination of information and also serve as a medium for the dissemination and strengthening of the reputation of the respective organisations by the Ministry, Department and Government Agency (Sarji et al., 2009) especially documentary films with historical elements or orientation. Thus, The ruling party has used the benefit of documentary films that record truth in the film genre (Buckland, 2003) as a propaganda weapon (Loh et al., 2019; Sarji et al. 1996) in order to improve their place in society. Thus, the dominant political party in Sarawak was proposed to use historical documentary films as a tool of propaganda to stabilise the political turmoil in Sarawak.

This is because historical documentary films involve those ideologies woven with audio-visual content to persuade their target audience (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2011). The research shows that the individual factor which is Critical Thinking and the text media factor which is Media Aesthetics are seen as the factors that have the relationship in interpreting and understanding the ideology of a historical documentary film for the youth of Sarawak. However, both the factors do not leave any effect or influence the interpretation or understanding of the ideology of the historical documentary film for them.

The resource factor which is the mainstream media in this case is seen to give more effect and influence to the youth in Sarawak especially for those residing in suburban areas. This statement is supported by research outcome that shows that the external factor, exposure to the Internet does not have any relationship and effect to the interpretation or understanding of the ideology of the documentary film. Thus, historical documentary films play an important role in the political development and stability in Sarawak especially in the political situation that is influenced by the spread of SSKM vision that has received great responses from the youth of Sabah and Sarawak. The new government are advice to consider this by using historical documentary films in changing the attitude and convincing the people of Sarawak. Although there is an overflow of information that gives a negative impact to the current government, the credibility of the media resources from the mainstream media still becomes the choice of the Sarawakians especially the youth.

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