

RESEARCH NOTE

Social Cognitive Approach in Responding to Mass Media Contents

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ABSTRACT

Mass media play a very important role in the development of a society. Through symbolic communications, the media influence individual thoughts, affects and actions. Much good has been achieved in the country through the efforts of media, but at the same time, the society is also being served with undesirable messages. The relationship between messages (values, knowledge and appeals) portrayed by the media and the development of any society are also influenced by environmental variables and individual internal dispositions. The failure to learn positive messages has effected the Malay younger generations in negative ways, where more youngsters are seen practicing negative values they learned from mass media. This paper is constructed to describe how environmental factors and personal dispositions of Malay people in Malaysia could influence their response to media. The paper also proposes ways for young people to do self examination when reacting to media information so that they can learn the positive and leave the negative.

Introduction

According to Brown (2002), the world's most powerful mass media are television, radio, internet, music, movies, magazines and newspapers. Many people in third world countries who are restricted from accessing the mass media are left behind in the world main stream development. Interestingly, in Malaysia, the mass media played a very important role in the development of the country as well as for the Malays and other ethnics. Malaysians have been exposed to modern media such as the printed medium "Utusan Melayu" since 1938 and electronic media, that is, radio, since 1921 and television since 1963 (World Association of Newspaper, 2004). Malaysians have

never been restricted from local and global media exposures (except during the Japanese occupation era), especially after the country's independence from British in 1957.

Bandura (1991) states that symbolic communications of media influence individual thoughts, affects and actions. According to Bandura (2001), the symbolic communications of media can be represented in a triangle of relationship between environmental events, individual personal dispositions and the individual's behavioral responses. The media is considered a part of environmental events. This theory is applicable in understanding the relationship between media (as part of environmental events), individual dispositions, and human development among the Malays.

Based on Bandura's theory (Bandura, 1991), other environmental events that can be postulated for the Malays include, the existence of other ethnics (who become their direct social contacts) and models and related messages contained in mass media (that become their indirect social contacts). The existence of these two environmental factors affected the Malays in the process of securing their needs, motivations, accomplishment and resilience to adversity. According to Felson, (1999), people's expectation, beliefs, self-perceptions, goals, and intentions give shape and direction to their behavior, then this behavior will affect their thoughts and emotions. Mass media in Malaysia portray many good and bad values, knowledge, and environmental events. This paper proposes that whatever effect of mass media on the Malays depends largely on their thinking ability, affective values and physical ability.

Mass media influence on young malays

Today, an average Malaysian household has the TV switched on about seven hours a day. For Malaysians, TV becomes the most important source of information, personal identification and identity, education, integration and social interaction, entertainment, and other personal and social interests. TV and other mass media also become a very important platforms for marketers to market and position their products or services. In 2006 alone advertising activities generate income for media industries about RM4.7 billion (World Association of Newspaper, 2007.). Besides exposure to TV, young Malays today are also increasingly turning to internet as a form of escapism, entertainment, social interaction and information seeking.

Violence and sexual explicit programs or shows are popular forms of entertainment in the past until today (Felson, 1996). Decades ago, before the existence of modern forms of media, the popular entertainment among Malay people included cock, bull and man fighting. These traditional forms of entertainment were directly a show of violence and other negative values. On the other hand, other traditional forms of entertainments or folk arts such as traditional storytelling ("wayang kulit"), singing ("dikir barat"), and dancing ("menorah"), especially popular among Kelantan folks, even though appearing to foster good values of social interaction and integration, were also without exception, contained violence, humor and sexual images.

History shows that popular culture, portrayed by the media as western civilizations, has brought about much damage to the Malay society. Back in 1950's and 1960's, Malaysian media introduced young Malays with popular culture from west such as hippies and rock music in 1970's, followed by other sub-cultures such as punk, hip-hop, black metal, rap, and many more. These subcultures have also been related to social ills such as drugs abuse, gangsters, bully, free sex, aggression behaviors even in western countries. Ironically young Malays who embrace these values perceived these subcultures as portrayed by mass media as a modern way of life. Young girls in Malaysia today can be seen wearing short t-shirts showing off their navels like American pop-stars even though they have never met any of the pop-stars but view them from TV, CD's, internets, magazines, etc. This kind of dressing has never been around before and would never be accepted by the Malay culture. Siddiq Fadil (1992) says that Malays should not simply accept western civilization as portrayed in mass media as the foundations for Malay cultural and social development.

Jins Shamsudin (as reported by Utusan Malaysia, March 2 2000), mentioned that the existence of satellite TV station started in 1996 and currently brings more than 60 channels with 99 % foreign contents would negatively effect Malaysian viewers' patriotic spirit. Malaysian politicians and academicians also express their worry about a report by Santha (Asiaweek March 24, 2000) that mentioned most of the imported programs (except for a few documentary, news, educational, and sport channels) are violent, sexually explicit, and portray values against Malaysian cultures, especially the Malay, whose foundation is the Islamic religion. These programs will not only damage moral behaviors of the younger generations but will also disrupt racial harmony. Malaysian Information Ministry (Berita Harian, April 2, 2002) realizes that Malaysian viewers today watch more foreign Astro programs than local programs and this situation could jeopardize sense of nationalism among Malaysian. However many Malaysians would raise the question whether we have enough local programs to replace foreign programs and how good are local programs in promoting social health, desirable moral values, safety, and nationalism to Malaysians?

Economic prosperity has introduced young Malays with accessibility to the latest technology of media such as satellite TV and wideband 3G and GPRS internet. This technology has increased the availability to violent and sexual explicit entertainment among young Malays. Felson (1996) explains that crime cases in America have increased tremendously around 15 years after the introduction of TV in American household in early 1950s. This happened when the first generation of children who had excess to TV was entering adulthood.

Chew (2001) mentioned that rural young Malay who work in towns are more easily influenced by global popular culture portrayed and modeled by mass media. When Malay people move from "traditionalism" to "modernity", they tend to emphasize on "freedom" and "self-autonomy" more than "self-esteem" and "self-worth". Young Malays who are low in self-esteem and self-worth are easily lured into immoral activities such as pre-marital sex, unwed motherhood, abandoned children, illegal abortion, "mat rempit", drug abuse, loitering, and many more social problems.

Many researchers in the West have administered studies about the effect of mass media on human behaviors especially related to health, social and education. Those research focus on how mass media influence sexual behaviors (Brown, 2002; Chapin, 2000; Strouse, 1995), violent, drinking and smoking behavior (Sly, 2001; Felson, 1996), education, general social and AIDS education (Rosin, 2006). Research by Lagerspetz & Viemero (1986) showed that there is no correlation between violent TV program to violent and antisocial behaviors among boys. However, when cognitive and social domain was considered as intermediate variables between stimulus and response and between response and consequences, then correlation occurred. The cognitive and social domains in their research are respondents' "self-identification" to violent or non violent TV characters. Those who identified themselves with violent characters will show violent and antisocial behaviors and those who identified themselves with nonviolent and prosocial behaviors behave in desirable ways.

New media internet is a medium that relates to "information rich" technology. This media will promote life-long learning among Malaysians in every aspect of life. The Internet also has both positive and negative effects to the Malays. Brown (2002) mentioned that the word SEX and its related words are the most popular search term used on the Internet today. We should worry about this phenomenon if Malays are also doing the same thing on their internet activities especially when the Malaysian government has little control of the internet contents. Malaysian Communication Multimedia Commission (MCMC) believes that Malaysians are matured enough to chose internet content which will not jeopardize their thinking, culture and social life. Miler (2002) mentioned that the quality of people especially spiritual and psychological capability will determine the degree to which the bad values portrayed by mass media have the effect on them. In this case, we don't know whether the Malays, especially young and adolescent Malays have sufficient level of spiritual and psychological capability to guide and protect them from the negative effect of media contents.

After doing a meta analysis on the effects of mass media on violent behavior, Felson (1996) concluded that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the effect of exposure to media violent on aggressive and antisocial behavior. Some researchers believe there is an effect and others conclude that causal relationship has not been demonstrated. Miller (2002) mentioned that the relationship between violent media and aggressive behavior cannot be explained in "stimulus – response relationship – consequences" as explained by uses and gratification theory. This is because there are some other "organism" factors involved in the process such as individual personal characteristics, social values, spiritual qualities and other environmental events.

Educational entertainment through media

Media can be very effective educational tools if properly managed. Some countries such as Mexico, Tanzania, China and a few others with the help from "People Communication International" (PCI) developed special entertainment education programs, usually drama genre, for TV and radio to educate their people about health, awareness and values.

Entertainment education programs feature characters who model ways to improve their lives in any targeted social values. These programs usually connect viewers with real life in their communities. Rossin (2006) states that entertainment education programs are often more popular than regular dramas. The ultimate goals of this program is to foster viewers "self-efficacy" such as to promote values of female children in China, to encourage environmental responsibility in the Caribbean and to create health awareness about HIV and AIDS in Tanzania.

Empirical studies have shown that entertainment education programs work effectively in creating self-efficacy of desired behaviors. For example, the belief that HIV can be transmitted through mosquitoes and physical contact with the carrier as seen in Tanzania, in 1993, was changed after the implementation of entertainment educational programs. Two years after the program, most of the people who were exposed to the program understand that only unprotected sex could result in HIV infection (Smith, 2002). In 1996, Arvin Singhal, an Ohio University Professor (in Rossin, 2002) did a study on young listeners in a new village on the effects of Indian Radio drama "Tinka Tinka Suth" ("Happiness Lies in Small Pleasures) on aggressive behaviors. One of the respondent says:

"I used to be delinquent, aimless, and a bully, I harassed girls..... After listening to drama, my life underwent a change All my other drawbacks and negative values were transformed"

Malaysian TV and radio stations should move forward to develop such programs to tackle the major young Malay social problems. Entertainment education programs with focus on creating "self efficacy" of desired behaviors are much needed kind of programs in the country. Research by Zuria (2006) found that among the most serious undesirable behaviors of Malay youths are illegal racing ("Mat Rempit"), sexual misconduct, bully, drug and smoking addiction, truancy, pornography viewing, and juvenile delinquents; such as theft, and gangsterism.

Saedjatmoko (see Fadhil Siddiq, 1992) pointed out characteristics of well developed and cultured society, as being; well informed, life-long learning, high self-worth and self-esteem, and the ability to predict uncertainties and opportunities. All of these abilities will not only come to us in direct experience, but mostly, indirect experience through contact with mediated messages such as exposure to television, internet or other media. Due to this reason, young Malays should adapt and equip themselves with the needed self, social, and technology know-how to face new media threats and challenges and exploit advantages from it. Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak (Berita Minggu, 4 March, 2007) points out that Malays should not distance themselves from the new technology of media especially the internet if they don't want to be left out in mainstream development. For him, the new definition of "poor" today is in reference to those who are computer and internet illiterate.

Mass media content and social cognitive capability

Bandura (2001) states that people are self organizing, proactive, self-regulating and self reflecting. All of these human capabilities have made them to be producers as well as products of the social systems. Malays as individuals, their personal psychological and biological characteristics will interact with social structure and environment in determining their thoughts, feelings and actions. And in a bigger scale as a group, Malays will later on determine the structure of culture and societal pattern. According to Midgley (1978), human self development, adaptation and change are totally the product of their direct or observational experience within biological, psychological, and physical limits.

Bandura (2001a) describes that human intrinsic characteristics depend upon neurophysiological structure and mechanism that have developed and evolved over time. This human neural system is very important in processing, retaining, retrieving, and using coded information. These human neuropsychological tasks actually depend on a few human distinct capabilities. In this case, the way Malays response to mass media messages (either in desirable or undesirable ways) and how media content would influence them are mostly dependent on the quality of individual Malay personal traits, skills and knowledge when they interact with their environmental events, culture, social demands and rules, regulations and ethics.

Verbal and non verbal knowledge capability

According to Vygotsky (1978) humans develop and create tools to communicate with social and physical environment such as verbal language and writing as directly or through media. In this modern society, the economic wealth of the country permits Malays to have high quality of education, and enable them to search for optimum level of knowledge. Symbolization capability (language and imagery) provide Malays with powerful tool to understand their environment, creating and regulating environmental events in every aspects of their lives. Mass media is most important to achieving this task. Malays have to understand how to consume the mass media products without being harmed and manipulated. They need to make use of the positive aspect of media to enhance knowledge and societal development.

Mass media effect Malay behaviors through cognitive processes rather than direct stimulus-response-consequences as suggested by classical conditioning and operant conditioning approach. Environmental events portray by the media are sent through symbols of verbal and nonverbal images (Miller, 2002). From symbols, people give meaning, form and relate to their experiences and enhance knowledge development (Jones, 1989). This is in accordance with Felson's (Felson, 2000) view that suggests most of human thoughts are linguistically and imagery based.

Self-efficacy of satisfaction, motivation & performance

Humans regulate their motivations, emotions, affections and behaviors internally in reaction to their own behaviors and external stimulus such as mass media content, cultural and moral demands and other environmental events (Bandura, 1999). Self satisfaction can be achieved by fulfilling the valued standards, served as incentive for motivation and by evaluative self investment and by positive or negative reaction by others. Humans should strive to reduce disparity between adopted standard and perceived performance.

According to Bandura (2001), forethoughts capability is part of self-regulatory efforts regarding events and outcomes (looking for desired outcome and avoiding undesired outcome which is governed by moral and religious values). Young people usually lacking in this capability could be led to lost directions, coherence and meaning of life. This category of young people is easily influenced by negative aspects of media. Malay adults need to teach the younger generation about this awareness and capability because it could protect them from vulnerable aspects of mass media while also contributing to the continuity of the culture.

In the Malay culture, primary internal valued standards are related to moral and religious values (serve as adopted standards) and they are more stable than secondary internal standard such as life styles. Humans motivate and guide their actions by setting goals, and then mobilizing sources, skills, and efforts to fulfill them. Usually secondary internal standards will be altered if media successfully diffuse model, knowledge and skills required for the change. If young Malays could adopt their original cultural and religion values as the new standards (high self-efficacy of adopted standards) against foreign negative values, then they are saved from negative effects of media.

Self-examination of reasoning capability

Self-examination (reasoning capability) is one of the major factors that determine human response to mass media content (Bandura 2001). Self-examination means human cognitive ability to distinguish between accurate and faulty thinking portrayed by the media. Young Malays who have high self-examiner capability will generate desirable ideas or cognitive response while being exposed to media contents (regardless of positive or negative values content), and act on them based on predicted consequences on their valued standard. Then if the accuracy of their thoughts contradicts the valued standards, they will change them accordingly. The validity and values of their thoughts depend on how well their thoughts match with indicant of reality.

There are four ways of how young Malays could carry out their reasoning process when they are exposed to various types of foreign programs. First, by comparing their thoughts and beliefs with their self emotion and physical behaviors in relation to their social environment. Good match approves and accepts thoughts while miss match disapprove thoughts. Second, through symbolic modeling; that is by observing others

or models in the media interact with others and the consequences from the interaction. They need to use their own judgments to compare the results of the modeled interaction with their own thinking correctness. Again mismatch rejects and match accepts. Third, they need to check the soundness of their own thoughts with the views of their elders, authorities, or parents. Mismatch rejects and match accepts. Finally, they can check the logic of their thought in term of their fallacies (myth or misleading) by comparing with the local existing knowledge, beliefs, values, norms and facts regarding the phenomena portrayed by mass media. Again, match will diffuse and mismatch rejects.

According to Bandura (2001) verification of thoughts by comparing the distorted media messages and social reality of viewers can create misconception of places, people and things. Social verification can create bizarre views of reality if subjects were encapsulated from societies and influences but exposed to other influences (group or media) or be in groups who have the same views. Human's level of self-efficacy in doing accurate reasoning determines their level of functioning and their socio-psychological well being.

Media portray human nature, social relations and human beliefs, values and norms. Many misconception or faulty thoughts about certain norms, life styles, and cultures can be portrayed through the media. This includes the portrayal of popular lifestyle as the real lifestyle of the West, or the portrayal of Islam as an aggressive religion. In other words, the mass media tend to pick certain parts of lifestyles and depict them in ways that will influence others in various ways. Mass media audience, especially TV viewers must use self examination abilities to analyze programs served to them. This paper has discussed how young Malays in Malaysia can apply the self examination abilities in TV viewing. As members of a modern people, Malays should not and cannot avoid themselves from facing the mainstream and influential media. They must be able to utilize the media as tutors, motivators, inhibitors, dis-inhibitors, social prompters, emotional arousers, and shapers of good values and conception of reality. The young Malays especially should learn how to consume media content in a safer way besides exploiting all the positive influences of the media and also learn to avoid the negative influences. The government must also improve the quality of the content in media by serving entertainment education programs to inculcate good social characteristics in our younger generation.

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