

## ARTICLE

# Creating one nation? Ethno-national imaginaries, audiences and the critical reception of TV nation branding messages

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## Abstract

Although we are aware that nation branding features across the media, discussion and debate continue over its perceived influence in peoples' everyday understandings and lives. This paper, by way of a response, examines peoples' reactions to specific government campaign messages of patriotism and unity designed to combat internal ethnic conflict in Malaysia. Malaysia, at this time, provides a unique subject of analysis as it includes an instance where a domestically focused nation branding campaign is being employed to instigate unity among ethnic groups residing within a country with a history of ethnic conflict and social engineering policies. The project introduces several TV campaign story examples, identified for their prevalence in the 1Malaysia nation branding campaign, to representatives from three prominent ethnic groups in Malaysia to map their responses. The paper finds that group representatives interpret the stories using their shared insider views of the nation or 'ethno-national imaginaries'. Their acceptance of, and critical challenges to, the images and narratives of the TV campaign stories are seen therefore to reflect group representatives' wider positions, interests and participation in an ongoing political conflict shaped within the logics of the Malaysian nation.

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**KEYWORDS**

1Malaysia campaign, ethnicity, ethno-national imaginaries, media audiences, nation branding, news journalism, Malaysia

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper explores peoples' interaction with nation branding efforts in Malaysia. It focuses on a national campaign, called 'Satu Malaysia' (1Malaysia), that was enacted by its architect and then Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak between 2009 and 2018. Similar to modern nation branding campaigns (see Aronczyk, 2013), 1Malaysia uses 'publicity and marketing' to encourage identification with preferred images of the nation. Still, as focused on Malaysian citizens, the campaign offers a unique opportunity to observe mediated constructions that are shaped purposefully for domestic (Malaysian), rather than international, consumption. Further, approaching these nation branding efforts with knowledge of recent developments in the study of media and everyday nationalism and knowledge of the Malaysian context encourages an appraisal of their assumed impacts or effects. We know that while people may unquestioningly consume some types of national content (Skey & Antonsich, 2017), they also bring experiences and ideas of their 'place' or absence in the nation to the process of understanding other types of content (Madianou, 2005). Such insights are particularly poignant in the Malaysian context where the observed nation branding efforts are being produced and consumed in context of political and ethnic unease. Of interest to this paper, therefore, is to examine, not the impact of campaign messaging, but the role of Malaysian audiences' ideas of the nation (i.e., as is termed here, their ethno-national imaginaries) in shaping their reception of these TV campaign messages.

### 1.1 | Nation branding and reception

As described, 1Malaysia offers an example of the nation branding process. Nation branding activities, generally use 'publicity and marketing' to promote images of the nation for the purpose of competing in the global marketplace (see Aronczyk, 2013). Governments engage directly with marketing ideas and practices to satiate a perceived global demand for accounts of the values, myths and identity associated with their nations as well as to exercise forms of 'soft power' around the world (Anholt, 2007). In practice, branding helps to sustain or develop a country's image and associated international relationships while projecting it as an attractive proposition for outside investment and visitors (Kania-Lundholm, 2012). However, understood in this context, the 1Malaysia campaign offers an example of nation branding activities that are directed 'internally' to Malaysia rather than 'externally' elsewhere, by contrast and those that create implications for national identities and power relations in this case. Internal branding, as referenced here, is understood therefore as the promotion of discourses that offer a particularised view of the nation and national identity (Kaneva, 2011). This is enacted for the purpose to stimulate economic development (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011) as is reflected in the model that underpins the production of 1Malaysia and preceding policies in Malaysia, as we will hear. However, much of the existing work in this area is directed to analysing those observed campaign discourses and to arguing subsequently about the likely identities and the assumed practices that will be adopted by those who consume them. Overlooked, in the process then, is a sense of how people understand, engage and negotiate with campaign discourses in context of their everyday lives (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008).

Put simply, it is important to recognise that the consumption of reproduced national ideas needs to be understood in terms of '... the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist' (Hobsbawm, 1990: 10). Responses to national ideas then can be seen as emerging out of people's understandings of their social, temporal and geographical contexts (Holland et al., 2001). Grasping those reactions to media images of the nation, it follows, requires a grasp of the connection between the

context (of audiences) and media content (see Madianiou, 2005). In terms of the latter, narratives of the nation are recognised to feature differently within banal everyday forms of media coverage than they do in coverage of national crises, celebrations or campaigns, for instance (Mihelj et al., 2009). Observed in combination with audiences' lived experiences, these moments summon feelings of inclusion and exclusion from the idea of the nation (Madianiou, 2005). Although there is evidence that cultural background is important to how people decode media on occasions (Liebes & Katz, 1990), research reveals that the consumption of banal forms of the nation is a common practice among audiences generally, including ethnic minorities (see Siaper, 2010) to which we will now turn.

In reflecting on belonging and nation branding messages, we can see that ethnicity provides a potential commonality of understanding that "... facilitates the construction of social relationships and a common rhetoric" (Calhoun, 2003: 560). In addition to recognising audiences' everyday consumption practices, existing studies describe audiences as drawing on ethnicity when 'decoding' media content on some occasions. Sometimes ethnic minority audiences, like other types of audience, read media in a 'transparent way' (Michelle, 2007) and subsequently simply accept the included dominant ideas (see Buffington & Fraley, 2008). At times, when audiences do not do this, related studies who observe them identify an interplay between audiences' life experience and media content as important for the evaluations that audiences reach. Differences in audience interpretations come from generational and gender differences most often (Dhoest, 2009; Madianiou, 2005). Still, ethnic minority audiences appear to assess media representations in similar ways when adopting the mode of 'image-based viewing' (Coleman, 2002).

Often, when engaging in this process, ethnic minorities provide 'referential' readings of mainstream media—that is, they compare media content with their life experiences (d'Haenens & Sghiar, 2010). These readings support feelings of being at home in the nation (Ross, 2001) and form part of peoples' general critiques of what journalists produce. Both appear more commonly than does the other activity of simply switching to consume alternative media as has been assumed recently (see Tsagarousianou, 2012). In drawing on their experiences of 'real life', participants provide analytical readings. Relevant studies record instances of recognising positive representations of minorities (Bobo, 1989) alongside representations that include the appropriate complexities common to depicting 'real' people (Mat Rahim, 2017). Further, in participating in what Taylor (1994) calls the process of the 'politics of recognition', audiences are seen to identify stereotypical representations (Ross, 2001), representations that connect their ethnic group to ideas of threat (Harb & Bessaio, 2006), in addition to those ideas that misrepresent or redirect attention away from the real problems or situations that ethnic minorities face (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). As part of judging the "... culturally different social worlds that appear on their TV screens" (Gillespie, 2000: 10–11), audiences identify examples of racism and reasons or motivations behind them (Cooper, 1998), while using relevant media content to reflect on their own life experiences of racism more commonly (de Bruin, 2010). Combined, these insights offer a picture of ethnic minorities both engaging with, and critiquing, discourses and representations of the nation (Abu-Lughod, 2004; Mankekar, 1999). We can reflect on these insights by looking at the Malaysian case in particular, starting with some background on its nation branding process.

## 1.2 | 1Malaysia

The 1Malaysia campaign was instituted in 2009. Its policies sought to instigate greater national unity in context of ongoing polarisation among ethnic groups on issues such as religion, special rights, equal opportunities and political representation (Khattab, 2006; Sankar, 2013). In response, the policy emphasised the importance of 'national spirit' and 'social justice', alongside a need for greater 'acceptance' (rather than the assimilation) of ethnic groups (Salleh et al., 2014). This change is reflected in the words of the then Prime Minister Najib Razak that suggest 'We stand, we think, and we act as Malaysians, and we take actions based on the needs of all ethnic groups in our country' (<http://www.pmo.gov.my/>). The policy seeks to promote a series of values associated with the Malaysian nation and its culture (i.e., perseverance, excellence, acceptance, loyalty, education, humility, integrity and meritocracy) while also providing a plan for enhanced government performance on various significant issues facing Malaysians

(e.g., levels of crime and education and standards of living etc.), marshalled under the slogan—“People first, performance now” (Husin, 2011).

1Malaysia can be seen as the latest in a series of social engineering policies that have been enacted following the formation of Malaysia in 1963, after independence (in 1957) from a period of British colonial rule. Policies have responded to the conditions established during the earlier period of British colonial rule and those seen as underlying the unease and subsequent ethnic riots in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, later in 1969. A focus on achieving unity between Malaysians has been adopted within the national ideology (*Rukunegara*) and the activities of the Department of National Unity developed following these events (Manickam, 2004). Part of the process involved establishing Malaysia's New Economic Policy (1971) that included instituting a strategy of affirmative action with the aim to raise the economic status of Bumiputera (i.e., ethnic Malay and other indigenous people) in contrast to the more economically advanced minorities in Malaysia (Guan, 2000). In reality, this created policies that promoted Islamic and Malay culture in various institutions, produced scholarships and a quota system in the education system (Joseph, 2006) alongside a raft of other measures surrounding the operation of contracts and business practices in favour of ethnic Malay citizens (Noor & Leong, 2013). A focus on maintaining these measures for ethnic Malays, alongside creating a prosperous and progressive nation generally, has been the suggested direction taken by subsequent government efforts, including The Third Outline Perspective Plan (2001–2009) that preceded the policies of 1Malaysia observed here (2009–2018).

Similar to the dissemination strategy of other nation branding campaigns and in context of observed unease among minorities about the general opportunities that these policies produce, the Malaysian government has produced a diverse media programme to communicate 1Malaysia to the ethnically diverse population in Malaysia. This involves the use of a variety of media (electronic, print and online) along with face-to-face communication and a series of cultural activities (e.g., acting and singing performances) (Foong, 2010). As The Information Department of the Malaysian Government explained a year following the campaign launch nonetheless, the focus of the campaign is on “... promoting information and imparting knowledge on the [...] core values of the 1Malaysia concept among young Malaysians ...”, suggesting, in turn, this “... will go a long way towards forging a more united Malaysia over the medium and longer term” (cited in Foong, 2010).

In response, it has been observed that the state led, and largely ‘rhetorical’, efforts of 1Malaysia (Harris & Han, 2020: 812), sit in complex relation with the ‘institutional stratifications around race, ethnicity and religion’ that Malaysians face daily. For example, surveys that capture the views of ethnic groups during the early part of the 1Malaysia campaign explain participants from Chinese and Indian ethnic groups as feeling deprived relatively to Malays, alongside fear towards the activities of the Malaysian state machinery, and these as considering both economic policies to be unfair and their ethnic groups to lack the power to enact changes in Malaysia (al Ramiah & Ramasamy, 2013: 5). In practice, ethnic groups—other than ethnic Malays—emphasise their identities and knowledge as a response to experiencing the privileging of Islamic and Malay culture and the lived impacts of affirmative action policies. Daniels' (2005) ethnographic work in Malaysia for instance explains how diverse members of Malaysian society, in response to experiencing the explicit ethno-Malay nationalism in the country included within national festivals, construct forms of cultural citizenship with ‘ethnified knowledge’ that allows them to understand their place within the nation. The process, he suggests, demonstrates the importance of recognising the connection between culture and creativity as opposed to simply seeing forms of ‘power’—the cultural power of reproduced ethno-Malay nationalism in this case—as ‘an explanation for everything’ in Malaysia (216).

Likewise, studies of schooling and ethnic groups echo this conclusion. As noted, schoolchildren face a school system dominated by scholarships and a quota system enacted for ethnic Malay children (Salleh et al., 2014). Against this context, studied girls explain the essential characteristics of their differentiated identities (i.e., being of Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic origin) and its importance for these students' self-presentation and their views on their and others' academic performance and the wider school environment (Joseph, 2006). Significant to students' experiences also, Joseph notes, is the recognition of difference among themselves as either Bumiputera (ethnic Malay and indigenous people, 62% of the Malaysian population) and non- Bumiputera (i.e., Chinese 21% or Indian 6% of the

population in this case) in terms of the 'special privileges' that are afforded to the former as part of state policy. Such differences appear in Malaysians' views on government campaigns. Studies interested in their understanding of, and alignment with, the campaign objectives of 1Malaysia, for example, report, on the one hand, that citizens show a clear grasp of its conception of unity and agreement on unity as an appropriate political goal for the country (Ismail & Ahmad, 2014). Clearly reflected on the other hand, however, is disagreement among ethnic groups over the ideas of unity expressed in the campaign images (Zeiny & Yusof, 2013), alongside clear alternative definitions of unity, from them, based on their lived experiences (Tajuddin et al., 2017), and even a variety of criticisms of the campaign as state rhetoric (Chinnasamy et al., 2020; Harris & Han, 2020).

Following the review of ideas about nation branding, media reception and insights into the 1Malaysia campaign above, we notice there are three aspects that are important for the proposed study: First is the idea that media content is significant to audience reactions and feelings of inclusion/exclusion. The type of explicit nation branding produced as part of the 1Malaysia campaign, and the observed connections between ethnic Malay and the constructed nation elsewhere, will likely provide an opportunity to record specific and potentially diverse reactions. Second, audiences appear to engage with, and accept, discourses of the nation in addition to forming critiques of them. If this is witnessed here also, of interest will be to observe how audiences' reactions reflect nationalistic/citizenship logics and the legitimacy of the nation (see Skey, 2017), especially in context of the explicit nationalism common to Malaysia. Finally, the life experiences of ethnic minorities appear as important in the process when they develop interpretations of media content. This point resonates specifically with the Malaysian context and demonstrates a need for ideas that will help to capture audience experiences and the reactions that follow from them.

Hence, although a single and shared national understanding based on ethnicity, that is, Smith's (1991) idea of 'ethnonationalism', does help to grasp the explicit ethno-Malay nationalism present in some policies, it does not explain the potential different and competing views found in Malaysia. Rather more important are the complexities observed in what Shamsul (2005) calls the 'everyday defined' (i.e., ethnic) identity rather than 'authority defined' (i.e., hegemonic national) identity. This departure encourages an analysis of several competing social imaginaries of the nation that makes "... possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (see Taylor, 2002: 106). The concept of the everyday defined social imaginary, with the addition of an emphasis placed on ethnicity, would assist an analysis of the specific experience in the Malaysian nation (and those that shape audiences' engagement with nation branding) in this case. The paper will, therefore, use the term 'ethno-national imaginaries' to explain, from this point onwards, 'the shared understandings among an ethnic group of the conditions they have experienced and continue to experience in context of the policies, practices and dominant discourses of a nation'. In turn, it asks the following question: How do groups' ethno-national imaginaries shape their reactions to 1Malaysia TV campaign stories?

## 2 | METHOD

What follows reports on a study devised to explore audience reactions to the 1Malaysia campaign. Malaysia at this moment provides a unique subject of analysis as it includes an instance where (i) a domestically focused nation branding campaign is (ii) being employed to instigate unity among ethnic groups residing within (iii) a country with a history of ethnic conflict and social engineering policies. This study involved first selecting stories that represented the preferred elements of the campaign. It analysed stories on RTM—'Radio Televisyen Malaysia', a government owned public broadcaster—as this channel had expressed a commitment to introduce and explain the government's concept of 1Malaysia to Malaysian audiences. The study analysed the underlying themes in the 1Malaysia news stories ( $n = 350$ ) and found four loose themes in this coverage, including 'celebration of Malaysia's history', 'widespread acceptance of ethnic difference', 'the productiveness of ethnic groups working together' and 'a collective Malaysian culture that exists between ethnic groups'. Single story examples were then selected to represent each of the recorded themes, and these were used in the focus groups to record understanding, reaction and discussion.

The focus group method was selected to explore reactions to the campaign coverage over other available qualitative methods (i.e., interviews). The focus group is a common choice for studies of media audiences as it is able to capture audience interactions with media content. Further, these interactions reveal the value of group discussions in the interpretation and understanding of media (Madianiou, 2005). This method was selected in full knowledge of the related problems with organising and managing group discussions and issues with the type and character of the data produced. For example, although studying young peoples' reactions to the campaign will likely reflect concerns of their 'life stage' and indeed their levels of education, the study chooses them purposefully as the group that is being targeted as future ambassadors of 1Malaysia policies by the government.

Hence, six focus group discussions (involving 42 participants) took place in three public universities in Malaysia, between 15 and 30 September 2012, based in west Malaysia. Each group included participants of a similar age (degree level students,  $n = 7$ ) and contained a split between males and females. Two focus group discussions were conducted with each of the three ethnic groups to gather sufficient data. Degree level students were selected as participants and identified as appropriate on the basis of (i) their status as a new generation of citizens, alongside (ii) their knowledge of Malaysia's situation and (iii), as outlined above, a population in which was targeted by the Information Department as being potentially open to, and likely influenced by, the campaign's ideas. After the participants provided their written consent to participate and formed the required focus groups, they engaged in 90 min sessions that included the showing of the story examples, participants retelling of the stories' content, followed by group discussions around the aspects or themes they observed. Although moderators prompted discussions at times, they did not interfere with groups arriving at the themed focus of the stories or with respondents developing a series of themed critiques around a sense of histories, acceptance, connectedness and collective culture. Indeed, moderators, who reflected the ethnicity of the included participants, were selected to allow groups to reach conclusions and thereby avoid any potential barriers to capturing full and frank discussions of the issues (Farquhar & Das, 1999). These included two volunteers in addition to one of the authors. Audio recordings were made of each discussion, and these were transcribed following each session. Thereafter, a thematic analysis was conducted of the completed transcripts, and the discussion below draws on the themes that emerged from the groups' discussions of the campaign content based around these participants particular lived experiences of the nation.

### 3 | THE RECEPTION OF 1MALAYSIA

As has been observed in previous studies (Ismail & Ahmad, 2014), the participants demonstrated they were knowledgeable of the 1Malaysia campaign and remained largely positive towards its general aim to unify ethnic groups in the country. But of shared concern, as has been recognised elsewhere (Zeiny & Yusof, 2013), was the use of particular media, and news stories, for addressing such an issue. The TV station broadcasting the included stories, RTM, was introduced as 'controlled by certain political power', for example. Also, participants stressed campaigns should avoid offering 'one-sided reports' that are associated with this media outlet and should move, by contrast, to provide content that introduced 'the truth and what is actually happening in this country'.

Despite groups agreeing on Malaysia's problem of unity and that government sponsored TV provides partial accounts, ethnic groups participants were divided over the particulars of the issue being obscured in the media. Prominent in their thinking, it transpired, were the lived realities that ethnic groups now face (and might face in the future) as explanations for what underpins general disunity among ethnic groups in Malaysia. For ethnic Malays, the issues concerned the politics of unity as expressed in 1Malaysia and its potential impact on their interests as an ethnic group. Chinese Malaysian participants questioned the portrayal offered of the Malaysian nation, by contrast, and Indian Malaysian participants remarked on their perceived absence from the 1Malaysia process. Both, it can be suggested, are engaging in reactions to experiences of perceived inequality (see al Ramiah et al., 2017) alongside those of a dominant ethnic-Malay nationalism (Harris & Han, 2020). More details of the concerns shaped by these 'ethno-national imaginaries' emerge in the group discussions of the portrayal of history observed in the televised stories.

### 3.1 | Contested histories

Participants identified, and discussed, the idea of a shared history for Malaysians from the first 1Malaysia campaign story that portrayed Malaysian history in terms of the country's achievements. Entitled, 'Independence: In the eyes of the Young Generation', the story features a local journalist explaining the meaning of independence for, and from the perspective of, youth. It introduces the rapid economic development in the country following its independence and emphasises the achievement of 'world recognition' for Malaysia, commenting that "In sports, we have many world-class international champions, as well as those in the entertainment industry." The recurring message spoken in the story is "... the success achieved today is impossible to realise without the freedom of independence" and, featuring there, several youth speakers reinforce this message—such as the President of the Youth Movement, who says: "We can strive to achieve what we wish for without barriers and restrictions and this is the meaning of independence—when we can afford to carry out tasks or 'behave' without fear."

Following what we know about the acceptance of banal forms of national ideas and accepted views about the Malaysian nation (Daniels, 2005), it is unsurprising that participants do not contest the importance of independence or the notion of Malaysia's achievements and, indeed, they remark positively on seeing the presence of significant Indian and Chinese Malaysians as depicted as part of them. But more details emerge from their retelling of the contents of the news item. Groups, it followed, questioned the preferred and sanitised view of the history of Malaysia's development presented and the story's use of the voices of young Malaysians to offer an impression of a national consensus among Malaysians. Obscured, it was agreed, was the ethnic conflict and the disunity that is significant to Malaysia's development and the production of the 1Malaysia campaign. Of the groups differing experiences of ethnic conflict, the ethnic Malays make the strongest claim of being victims of disunity, and that the origins of their present experiences stem back historically to the real colonial perpetrators, as the participant from Group 1 explains below:

Respondent 3: My understanding of the angry feelings between races is that they began with the policy of "divide and rule" introduced by the British. Their colonial policy divided and broke us. The outcomes are still around today, and these make it difficult to form cooperation between us. There is the issue of racism that undermines any cooperation. In my experience of working at a company where its management is dominated by Chinese people, I find that Malays are often discriminated against.

Here, the participant articulates the background history behind subsequent affirmative action policies for the indigenous population. The activities of the British to restrict indigenous peoples from certain economic activities during colonial rule are well documented (see Lee, 2004). A view of these generalising conditions as evolving and perpetuating modern racism towards indigenous people is part of a modern interpretation. Supported by the speaker's personalised experience, the comments suggest racism undermines the cooperation between Malays and other ethnic groups. What is gently sidestepped in the explanation is the affirmative action ('special privileges') policies that have been in operation to redress the historical injustices. These have become the source of contention among groups. Unsurprisingly, special privileges become the focus of others' comments on their experiences of the nation as we will hear.

### 3.2 | Contested acceptance

During the focus groups, the participants engaged with the idea of the 'acceptance' of other ethnic minorities following their viewing of the second story, called 'Ethnic and Religious Diversity: Malaysia's Uniqueness'. Participants watched as the story argued for the privilege of Malaysians to be able to live among widespread acceptance of general ethnic diversity in contrast to other countries and lesser forms of acceptance. While invoking a historical perspective, the story argues this diversity is a core strength of Malaysian society, expressing this as "History has proven that its diversity has never been considered a weakness or the cause of tension. On the other hand, its

existence becomes the central strength built on unity'. Strength, of course, is demonstrated at this time with projected assumptions about acceptance and greater unity to which we will discuss shortly. Thereafter, the story concludes with voices of ethnically diverse young people expressing the 'strength through diversity' message, including the following from a young man named, Pragash A/L Muthurajan—"We are lucky, we can live together in a multiracial society. I enjoy living in a culturally diverse nation. It makes my life livelier ... including a variety of clothes, food, traditional games and festivals, and we can even have more public holidays in the calendar." However, in their retelling of this news story, the participants focused their attention on the story's portrayal of acceptance—as is reflected elsewhere (see Tajuddin et al., 2017)—and, in turn, provided their own grounded accounts of these relationships.

In response, the ethnic Malay participants offered a particularised view of the 'acceptance' found in the 1Malaysia story that reflects their concerns over the Malaysian nation, as is outlined in this example from Group 1:

Respondent 5: I think that 1Malaysia television reports will create greater awareness of the importance of the need to come together and unite. But I always worry about how the process will affect the Malays' special privileges. If we try to combine and make everybody equal, the non-Malays will insist our privileges are taken away - an outcome on which I do not agree. From our—Malays—perspective, even if we unite that does not change the fact that the original people of this country are the Malay and the country is still our country, originally. Therefore, for me, it's ok to merge, but nobody should touch or change the special rights of the Malays.

The participant views the television reports as impactful and likely to instigate changes to the present preferred levels of acceptance and unity in Malaysia. Such changes, it follows, are connected to participants' deep-seated fear about inevitable alterations to the circumstances of the Malay and provoke here a restating of Malay 'rights' as indigenous people to 'our country'. A more agreeable view of acceptance emerges, therefore, as one of the 'recognition of existence' of the other ethnic groups and of the prevailing political conditions, in contrast to that of greater cohesion leading towards change in Malaysia. To reinforce the point, the Malay group caution against the motivations of the other ethnic groups, who welcome 1Malaysia, by suggesting: "I do not think the other races are sincere in their desire to unite and in fact that they just want to compete with us. It is not fair to take our quotas from us" (Respondent 1, Group 1). A competitive struggle with other ethnic groups to maintain their special privileges appears to shape the ethnic Malay view of 1Malaysia and its projected idea of acceptance.

While celebrating acceptance signifies worries about encroaching changes from the ethnic Malays, such concerns do not register in the readings of the other ethnic group participants. By contrast, the story's projected view of 'acceptance' becomes questioned directly. For the Chinese Malaysian participants, who make up the second largest majority in Malaysia and those seen to have benefited economically from colonial rule historically, this story offers an embellished view of the relationship between ethnic groups in Malaysia and one that differs from their lived experience, as is illustrated here (in Group 2):

Respondent 2: I think what the video shows is a fiction. Inside Malaysian society there is a different story about a problem that needs to be voiced.

Respondent 4: I agree, the images are not real. For me, it does not seem like people would recognise this view. Some political parties are not being sincere.

Respondent 7: What is missing in the videos is that they do not show the true condition in Malaysia. Yes, they promote the idea that we have to be proud to be Malaysian and yes, I'm proud to be Malaysian. But, the video does not show the real situation.

Respondent 3: They have promoted the idea very strongly. But the truth is that it is different in real life. This is just a show on television.

The discussion reveals the groups' concern with the media fictions being produced as part of the 1Malaysia TV campaign and these becoming a stumbling block towards enacting 'real' positive changes to ethnic relations in Malaysia. What is ignored in the TV report is the true nature of ethnic relations that are built around Malay claims to indigenous nationhood, however, to which the Chinese cannot avoid. The historical relationship of the Chinese Malaysians aside, their experience of a perceived lesser position to the Malays within the nation, informs their view of the depicted acceptance. In sum, they see this as ignoring the 'true' relationships between ethnic groups and the problems that underlie those relationships. Disquiet is also reflected, in part, by Indian Malaysian participants.

The Indian Malaysian participants question the TV report's view of acceptance. Nevertheless, as the smallest minority included here, they make clear the issues their ethnic group experience as part of the nation and those that need to be addressed before moving towards unity, as this discussion from Group 2 shows:

Respondent 6: How can we unite together when we are still being discriminated against?

Respondent 2: We will unite only when we are all the same. Until that happens 1Malaysia will just be another rhetoric campaign.

Respondent 5: Some acceptance exists, but not as much as portrayed by TV. It is only presented at certain times, you know. Like now, for example, it is presented for independence celebrations.

What emerges from the discussion is their experience of the consumption of this preferred view of ethnic relations. This is mobilised in the campaign, and at other times, for political purposes and serves only to overlook their experiences of discrimination as an ethnic group. The frustration of Indian Malaysian participants lies, it appears, in both their experiences of being ignored and in having to consume a preferred view of the nation and unity rhetoric as part of 1Malaysia.

Above then, we see groups react differently to the TV news coverage of 1Malaysia. Although united in challenging the campaign representations as fictions, groups bring their interests and experiences to bear as part of their analysis. Reacting in this way, respondents explain the representation of 'acceptance' as either producing a potential undesirable social change or serving to mask the real lived experiences associated with occupying an unequal form of citizenship or those of outright discrimination in the nation. As such, these representations ignore those 'real' conditions that would allow for appropriate social changes to be justified and enacted. The ethno-national imaginaries on which these judgements are based are underpinned by views of privilege and discrimination in this case and, as we will see, these allow for challenges to these TV news accounts according to groups' preferred histories and experiences.

### 3.3 | Contested connectedness

The represented value of connectedness among Malaysians emerges from the participants' discussions of the next 1Malaysia promotional media story—'Malaysia 1 Big Family'. The promotional story offers a constructed scenario that focuses on a dialogue between a Malaysian boy and an English boy while they journey through a farmer's market ('Pasar Tani'). While walking through the market and following from several encounters with others, the ethnic Malay boy explains the interconnectedness and the cooperation between Malaysians. The market appears as ethnically diverse which allows the Malay boy to explain the everyday relations in the nation as 'family-like'. This dialogue begins with the Malay boy's greeting of another boy as 'abang'—'brother':

English Boy: '... I know 'abang' means brother, but he is not your brother, right?

Malay boy: '... Yup, he is not my brother'.

Later, the depicted Malay boy describes the practice to greet others, who are not direct relatives, as uncle or aunty. In line with the campaign, the story example stresses a need to build on the foundations of the big family such as can be seen when Malaysians celebrate nationhood.

The depicted notion of 'connectedness' of the ethnic community is challenged in the groups' retelling of the story, however. Noted is how this idealised depiction is generally absent from their everyday experiences of Malaysian society. For Malays, the promotional media story stands out as an example of efforts to manipulate the population into believing that these levels of cooperation exist or should exist and that the nation can be considered to be a family as is outlined in a discussion from Group 2 here:

Respondent 4: I cannot really see that it's trying to convey 1Malaysia message. I'm only seeing this now because the election is around the corner. We can see that every time an election comes that they will try to raise the issue of racial unity ... I do believe 1Malaysia wants to create unity, but it looks more like it is there to fulfil certain political goals.

On reflecting on the 'promotional' nature of this story, the comments not only question the success of the constructed story message but these also suggest how the communicated view of cooperation and unity among ethnic groups, appears to purposefully chime with the electorate at the coming elections in Malaysia. This fits, as noted, with the considerable fear that underpins the Malay cynicism towards the 'political goals' of the campaign.

Other ethnic groups' discussions do not ignore the political context to the campaign. Rather, Chinese and Indian Malaysian participants raise specific concerns. For the Chinese Malaysian participants, who appear to embrace the focus of the 1Malaysia policy in general, they discuss the government's failure to implement the reality depicted in the promotional media story by contrast. A respondent reflects this in their comment that 'somebody here is playing around with the issue of unity' (Respondent 3) and Group 1 members respond with:

Respondent 6: I agree, the impact is not real. It seems like some people are not being sincere with this concept.

Respondent 7: They (the government) promoted the idea (1Malaysia) very strongly. But in reality, the concept is not being implemented on the ground level - it's just like a show on television.

Again, the Chinese Malaysian participants appear invested in assessing the 1Malaysia claims—of connectedness in this instance—against their place in, and experience of, the nation. This leads them to discuss the imaginary construction of the farmers market in the promotional story. In contrast to this pseudo portrayal, these respondents argue for a more authentic view of a Malaysian market that would "... look at the view of people in the villages" (Respondent 3), to which another participant adds "Yes, go get people's opinion randomly not only in a planned programme" (Respondent 1). In sum, Chinese Malaysian respondents' frustration is directed at the simplistic depictions of ethnic relations in Malaysia, certainly those of the Chinese Malaysians, which do little, it is felt, to tackle issues and move forward to meet the objectives of a unified Malaysian nation.

The Indian Malaysian participants, drawing on their view of the nation, focus their discussion on specific representations, by contrast. Their comments ignore the constructed nature of the ethnically diverse market to which the boys travel and, indeed, the Chinese Malaysian participants' claims about the authenticity of the portrayed connectedness observed above. Instead, the Indian Malaysian groups are focused on exploring instances of their representation in the story. Beginning with 'Yes, there are multiracial elements, but I do not see any Indian people in that video' (Respondent 5), the conversation in Group 2 continues:

Respondent 3: I know it is written that Malaysia is a multiracial country, but that's not quite visible in these pictures, I think.

Respondent 1: It is talking about Malaysia - that's fine, but I do not think this fully represents me as an Indian Malaysian.

This discussion reflects the Indian Malaysian participants' perceived position in the nation as the smallest of the three included ethnic groups. As a small population, their concern appears to be directed to the visibility of their ethnic group in instances where an ethnically diverse Malaysia is being represented on TV. Perhaps unsurprisingly the

stories are found wanting in this regard. Moreover, as is illustrated by the last comment, dissatisfaction with representations goes beyond simply observing levels of visibility that are less than expected. At issue also is when representations of Indian Malaysians feature, their character and content do not meet the expectation of the individual and their understanding of 'me as an Indian Malaysian'. These understandings are further developed in the final section on contested collective culture.

### 3.4 | Contested collective culture

The rehearsed idea of Malaysians' having a collective culture is observed in the final 1Malaysia campaign story and is discussed by the participants. Called 'Malaysia Day Celebration: Success of 1Malaysia', the story represents different ethnic groups participating in 'Independence Day' celebrations. The focus and meaning of the depicted celebrations form around the presence of the Prime Minister in the story, who the story explains, "... makes a ground visit to meet all the participants personally, making this year event more meaningful to all participants." Following interspersed shots of the involvement of thousands of young Malaysians gathering in Independence Square in the capital, the story builds to a section of the Prime Minister's speech, the content of which fuses the potential of youth with the future of the country:

Today I can see the strong independence spirit in the young generation. The future of Malaysia lies in your hands who will navigate our country. If this is the face of Malaysian future, there is no doubt that Malaysia will InshaAllah (God willing) continue to succeed because of all of you. So, let us join me and shout loud 1Malaysia, 1Malaysia, 1Malaysia and Merdeka, Merdeka, Merdeka.

The theme of 1Malaysia's success as resting on the collective culture of youth features in the groups' retelling of the story. This theme becomes the subject of group critique and takes a place alongside the previously observed reactions to the adjudged 'fictions' found in the TV accounts of history, acceptance and connectedness. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the previous discussions, collective culture appears to be decoded as a controversial part of the mediated campaign and one that provokes wider reflection on the participants' lives (as seen previously—de Bruin, 2010). The idea of common culture inspires group discussion of the differences experienced in Malaysia as are outlined below by Group 1:

- Respondent 1: I think basically we are united from the surface. But when it comes to personal benefits, we all will still stick within our own race ... during General Elections we still prefer to vote for our own races, when it comes to new policies we do not focus on the whole Malaysia, but just on our own races.
- Respondent 2: I think generally we are united. But the culture and the language are not the same ... some people cannot accept other peoples' language, culture and religious views.

Here, participants' contrast their experience of a surface-level unity with the lives and experiences of those observed in the story. The voiced example of voting and political party preferences illustrates the politics that underpins Malaysian life and the related conflict over privileges between the ethnic Malays and other groups. The included note on intolerance towards language, culture and religion serves further to reinforce a sense of the strength of these divisions. Reflecting on these recent experiences in context of their life stage, the participants in Group 2 talked about schools and social life as segregated by ethnicity, for example:

- Respondent 4: I can say as students our relationship is ok ... when we were given group assignments the Chinese, Indian, Malay students will work in the same group. But, after regular classes, we only mix with our own colleagues, our own ethnic group. The government might try to make us close to each other, but we will still go separate ways most of the time.

Although whom with which to socialise is put forward as a matter of preference by this Malay participant, an Indian participant from Group 1, reflecting their view of the nation, directs the focus back to inequalities:

Respondent 3: I went to the National School and have lots of Malay friends and even some Chinese friends. We are close as friends, but it is difficult sometimes to understand why we do not get to enjoy certain privileges that our Malay friends have. I am not racist, but it is just not fair sometimes.

Further, the Malay participants acknowledge this situation. One described their experience of how ethnic Malay students had only to get scores of 4A to obtain a university place although their other non-Malay friends were turned away from the same university despite achieving a score of 7A. Chinese participants who traditionally do well in the education system (see Joseph, 2006) recognised the experience of segregation among students also but not in terms of inequality. Similarly, as is represented below in these final remarks from Group 2, there are limits shown to the sympathy for inequalities among Malay participants, and these are clearly shaped by the Malay view of their place in the nation.

Respondent 6: I do feel sympathetic, but only on certain issues. Maybe, if I was a non-Malay, I would be dissatisfied as to why a certain group has advantages over others. However, that's how things have been until now - it is the special rights we have as Malays. I hope they can accept these just like other countries that have their own policies and laws accepted. So, they will just have to accept it.

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has helped to develop our understanding of peoples' engagement with nation branding. It has provided a much-needed audience perspective on the process of nation branding, which hitherto often included assumptions about nation branding effects. In particular, it demonstrates the detailed interaction between audiences and the discourses promoted through media at such times. Outlined is how views of national unity, expressed in campaign discourses, become the focus of challenge. The exclusionary and simplistic nature of national imagery observed here reflects observations of nation branding campaigns generally and, in this case, these are seen to arouse reactions from the participants based on the ideas and experiences that are formed in their everyday defined Malaysian identities, as Shamsul (2005) notes. Noticed in the paper is how participants draw on ideas from their perceived place within the nation and use these 'ethno-national imaginaries' to engage with hegemonic views presented on state-run media.

The paper finds that this engagement is complex as is echoed elsewhere in the literature on peoples' engagement with nationalism (Skey & Antonsich, 2017). In this case, participants are observed to consume the inclusionary and banal aspects in the TV campaign that focus on Malaysia's achievements alongside the national goal of creating greater unity and, in turn, they reinforce aspects of constructed citizenship that Daniels (2005) observes are found as part of Malaysian ethnic groups responses to national celebrations. At the same time, they openly challenge other aspects of the hegemonic view of Malaysia, and, as is observed by Madianiou (2005) previously, they respond to the feelings of exclusion or division that campaign discourses and representations induce. But the real insight comes from studying these features alongside the understandings of privilege, social position and inequalities that groups use in their evaluations. This paper highlights the dynamics between the recorded imaginaries and the TV campaign readings.

In this way, the paper provides a contribution to our understanding of how ordinary citizens engage with nation branding under these conditions. Reflecting interests in studying national ideas in everyday life (Skey, 2017), it has stressed the importance of context and real-world interaction in groups' engagement with media representations. Types of media content that possess the potential to exclude or divide are a prerequisite for these reactions, as we have heard. Yet, revealed here is the importance of understanding the context that informs the connection with

these forms of content. Exploring groups' 'ethno-national imaginaries' and their combined views stimulate various readings of the campaign messages.

Implicit views of groups as citizens, for example, inform 'transparent readings' of, and thus an identification with, national appeals to progress and unity (as is observed elsewhere, see Daniels, 2005). Still, at play here are differences among Malays' version of 'present unity' in contrast to other groups' reconstructed and future facing view of unity. Other readings reflect the general literature on critiques of national media (e.g., Ross, 2001). But more is witnessed than the stereotypes, misinformation or misdirection explained previously. Participants' imaginaries, and their informing positions in the nation, underpin the observed readings of the political motivations and preferred outcomes that shape the TV coverage. Malays, for instance, seek to direct sources of ethnic conflict to a historical past, show unease at unity based on equality of opportunity and record defiance at challenges to their privilege based on heritage. In turn, Chinese Malaysian participants critique 1Malaysia, based on their social position in Malaysia, for its unchallenged assumptions about the ethnic Malay claims to nationhood and their related privileges. The critique offered by Indian Malaysian participants, by contrast, is focused on the absence in campaign stories of details of the inequalities they face alongside the ethnic based politics that could seek to address them.

In sum, this study has highlighted the importance of the dynamics between ethnic groups in a nation for understanding their engagement with nation branding. Thus, while developing on the static category of 'ethnicity' often reproduced in western scholarship, it purposefully demonstrates the moments when meanings associated with a perceived place within the nation inform a critical engagement with national hegemony. Although ethnic identities are already observed as important in Malaysia (see Daniels, 2005) and among young Malaysians (see Joseph, 2006), these help us to further reflect on the complexities underpinning any potential impacts of nation branding and any wider identifications with nationalism and citizenship found elsewhere.

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