

Visual Framing Of The By-Election Campaign In Malaysia: An Analysis Of Malay And English Dailies

Dr. Manimegalai Ambikapathy¹, Maizurah Khathu Abdul Hamid²

¹Senior Lecturer, University Teknologi Mara, Malaysia, manimegalai@uitm.edu.my

²Senior Lecturer, INTI International College Subang, Malaysia,
maizurah.hamid@newinti.edu.my

Abstract: *This study examined the visual portrayal of the Semenyih by-election campaign in Malaysia on 2nd March 2019. With the assistance of Rodriguez & Dimitrova (2011) model, two printed mainstream newspapers were selected for this research: 1) Berita Harian; 2) The Star. Main objective of this research is to identify the visual framing of election campaign during the campaign period and it were measured through few variables such as slants of visuals, placement or location of visuals, theme and messages portrayed by visuals, caption focus and the stand of visuals. This study was conducted starting from the nomination day on the 16 February 2019 until the election day. Through content analysis method, each visual from n=88 census, was coded based on mentioned variables. Data was measured through descriptive statistics and inferential analysis. Major finding revealed that most of the visuals were slanted to party and government team in Berita Harian dailies compared to The Star; focused on election information. Findings also figure out few differences between selected two dailies. This study contributes to a several lack of visual framing research during election period.*

Key words : *by-election, content analysis, newspapers, visual Framing*

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a parliamentary democracy where elections are held at periodic intervals as defined in the Constitution circulated at the time of independence of the country (Moten, 2019). According to Rose in 2000, by-election is a subject to all the electoral laws that apply to a general election. The main objective that lead to a by-election are: death or resignation of the incumbent, disqualification of the election result by the court. Semenyih by-election was held on 2nd March 2019 in Malaysia for the Legislative Assembly for Selangor State seat to replace the death of the incumbent assemblyman, Bakhtiar Mohd Nor (The Star, 11 Jan, 2019). Two weeks of campaign period were run from 16 February 2019 until election day on 2 March 2019 and 26 February 2019 for early voting (Malay Mail, 28 February 2019).

On 9 May 2018, the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope or PH) coalition brushed to power in Malaysia, promising to restructuring a new government institution, lowering living costs, tackle corruption, and combating 1MDB (1 Malaysian Development Bank) scandal. The

victory was a remarkable achievement for PH, headed by 92-year old Mahathir Mohamad, which ended 61 years of Barisan Nasional rule. After the huge success in GE14, PH won in four by-elections in Sungai Kandis, state seat in Selangor, Seri Setia, state seat in Selangor, Balakong, state seat in Selangor and Port Dickson, federal parliament seat in Negeri Sembilan. Out of these victories, the first two were won by PH candidates against opposite candidate and Barisan Nasional (BN)'s success can be seen in Cameron Highlands by-election, a parliament seat for Pahang. BN fielded *orang asli* (indigenous people) (Norshahril, 2019). Thus, researcher in this study would like to examine the portrayal of visual framing of by-election for the entire campaign period.

1.1 Objectives of the research

Visual is an important tool in conveying messages due to it require limited cognitive process. Thus, peripheral processing may be activated compare to central processing and receiver may be more likely to accept the visual frame without question (Ferguson, 2013). Textual news consisted with news, headlines and messages to spread information using text form however visual attached with text are important if the news is accompanied with image or video (Arun Raj et al., 2020). Similarly, Subba and Eswara, mentioned that textual analysis is a method when specific text are identifies from the specific visuals. Therefore, visual analysis also indirectly evaluating texture content in any publication.

In addition, when there is a contradictory meaning between textual and visual framing, visual or images may provide many relevant meanings and understanding to us. Therefore, this paper is to discover the visual portrayal of election and election candidates during the 2018 Semenyih by-election campaign period in Malaysia. Overall, this current study is important as an aid to understanding the visual coverage of the mainstream newspapers toward the political parties and how that coverage contributed to the by-election result.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ 1: How many numbers of visuals portrayed of by-election details in selected dailies?

Number of frequency analysis will be calculated to determine how many visuals were portrayed.

RQ 2: How were the by- election details were framed via selected attributes in dailies?

Few selected were identified in examining the visual portrayal such as Slants, Placement, Message or Theme, Caption focus and Stand of visuals.

RQ 3: Is there a difference in the attributions of visuals portrayed of by-election details in selected dailies?

All the mentioned attributes will be compared between English and Malay dailies to show the similarity and differences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Visual framing in media and newspaper

Visual are shifting to a significant and important element in news media. With the rapid changes in technology, media audience behavior changes as well when visual and photos has become a preference among the audiences today. This has created new newsworthiness elements in media (Manor & Crilley, 2018). Visual has transformed as one of media style to

ease up audience understanding on a specific news story and assisting in reducing complexity of the world to a meaningful and usable portion (Jungblut & Zakareviciute, 2019). Visual in media is a compliment to the story expand the understanding of the issue. It carry “excess meaning” to related ideas and thought (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011), and also an integrated part of meaning formation (Sjafiie, Hastjarjo, Muktiyo, & Pawito, 2018). A visual could be a better way to communicate than words alone.

With the trend of finding for fast information, visual is one of the journalist options to hook audience attention and convey message quickly without audience need to go through the whole news article. The sight sense, transmit data more rapidly and efficiently through the nervous system than any other sense (Bucy & Grabe, 2010), thus journalist find visual is a way to grab interest among audience in a news story.

When visual could take hold of attention among audience lead them to have more interest to the story that is accompanied with image and visual, this could also be link to the framing theory. This is because they are less intrusive than words and as such require less cognitive load (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). The facts that visual always been associated with framing in media. Powell et al., 2015, mention how news media assist to define, or frame issues, but less is known about how they influence opinions and behavior. This has become a debate especially when visual is seen as a powerful mode in framing a message. Visualization is not an add-on elements in news story but is part of idea and concept Visualization in media is an integrated part of meaning formation (Manor & Crilley, 2018). In this case it is not only an add on element in the news story but also part of idea and concepts as well. It will be a main indicator in examine the portrayal of visual framing attributes in disseminating information especially election information according to context of this research.

2.2 Framing theory

Media today need to present the information in the most interesting way. With the amount of information available for audience, journalist need to select the most valuable information and photos to published in influencing their readers. Thus, these selection package today is considered as framing to the audience. Framing theory has enjoyed contributions from numerous fields (Manor & Crilley, 2018). The major stand in framing theory state that an issue or subject can be viewed from a variety of perspective can be interpreted with several consequences for consideration (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Framing is continuously perceived as an important tool in press reporting. It is also a way to convey a story within certain time and space constraints, by structuring the material, generating an interpretive framework that allows the understanding of the story (Latina, Social, & Ard, 2018). The selection of materials has created a framing effect. Means journalist decide on and select information based on the constrains, limitation and fondness.

When selection happens, means preference materialized and this could be associated to bias. Entman, (2007) argued bias can be confusing with news slant. He explained that ‘slant characterizes individual news reports and editorials in which the framing favors one side over the other in a current or potential dispute’. Obviously, major newspaper will try to their best to portray the news in the most unbiased way so that it would not be slanted. In the case of visual framing most consider audience frames as mental maps people form to cope with the flood of information to which they are subjected every day (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). However, the emergence of new communication platforms and new communicators necessitates that the study of framing continues to expand, particularly in regard to the framing of contemporary

conflict (Manor & Crilley, 2018). More areas in journalism now could be associated with framing theory.

2.3 Malaysia newspaper and the media coverage

Newspaper is popular medium in imparting knowledge since 400 years ago. It is always known to shape public opinion with the information. With the growth of literacy and technology in Malaysia newspaper has revolutionaries especially in the way audience access news. Even with variety of other alternative media newspaper is considered as the most credible source in finding information. Journalism is still considered as well established profession in adhering highest ethical standards (Mustaffa, Sannusi, Sauffiyan, Hasan, & Zuwairi, 2017). In fact market research firm IPSOS (Global Market and Opinion Research Specialist), Malaysian have more trust in local traditional media as compared to five years ago (Palansamy, 2019).

Since Malaya received its independence in 1957, about a dozen Malay newspapers have appeared on the scene (Lent, 1978). *Berita Harian* is among the first Malay newspaper in Malaysia and was born in 1957. The newspaper was born in 1957 and among the earliest Malay newspaper in *Rumi* (Romanised) script. The Romanised version *Harian* started 10 years earlier than the Romanised version of *Utusan Malaysia* (Jaafar, 2014).

The Star was established in 1971 as a regional newspaper in Penang. The *Star* weekday paper is packaged as a 4-in-1 paper, comprising the main paper, *StarBiz*, *Star2* and *Star Metro*. Besides of the newspaper, *The Star* also has online newspaper, e-Paper, and stream TV news now (Ruolan, 2019). The *Star* is the most popular English Dailies in Malaysia according to Audit Bureau of Circulation 2019.

With multi- ethnic and multi religion society the press played an important role in producing trusted information to Malaysian. Hence this is not an easy task for journalist because a wrong coverage will spark tension among the local audience. It has the potential to eradicate wrong impressions and stereotypes (Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2011). Any circulation of news need to be presented in the most appropriate fitting according to Malaysian custom. Ibrahim and Ahmad (2011) agree that local journalists task can accomplish more than the understanding and influencing of public opinion. Thus, this study is to examine the portrayal of by-election coverage in selected local dailies.

2.4 Coverage during Semenyih election

Semenyih election was held on the 2 March 2019 after Bakhtiar Nor, the Semenyih assemblyman seat became vacant due to his death. This election is one of the most important election for both party because the previous election has made a tested ground for both coalitions. The previous Cameron Highland and Rantau election has seen BN- PAS coalition winning the seat (Vellymalay, 2019), Saravanamuttu, 2019). Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition suffered three back-to-back by-election defeats at the hand of the Barisan Nasional (BN) in 2019 in Peninsular Malaysia (Saat, 2019). This has prompt the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition when they grasped that voters are fluctuating to support opposition.

Media has always been seen as an important element in any political campaign. Visual presentation in newspapers during the campaign period created attentiveness among audience to read on election information. The audience will reminisce image and visual more than the text during election media coverage (Bucy & Grabe, 2010). Therefore, journalist and editor will always ensure that new story during these campaign period covers visual to increase their readership. Visuals that was selected, definitely will influence the voter's decision and perceptions towards certain issue.

In the case of the Semenyih by election campaign, both newspapers have used images and visuals to increase influences from their readers. Images are the lingua franca of politics; yet, they remain among the least scrutinized and least understood aspects of political news (Bucy & Grabe, 2010). Candidates and party was continuously conducts events and projects that require photos to be published. Iyengar, 2015 said that throughout any campaign period, reporters will receive a continuous supply of information to be published. News organization will be having a lot of news sources to publish during this period.

Just as other elections, the Semenyih election also proven that even the traditional media are not the sole source but they are still the primary source of information. The traditional media are the one determining the agenda. Visuals in the mainstream media still considered as a reliable source for audience and was reuse by alternative media in their reporting.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Method of the study

Quantitative content analysis method is used by researcher for this study. Media content analysis was introduced as a systematic method to study mass media by Harold Lasswell (1927), initially to study propaganda. Content analysis is found to be the most appropriate method in understanding how a frame in the news to influence publics. Content analysis is used to study a wide range of 'texts' from transcripts of interviews and discussions in clinical and social research to the narrative and form of films, TV programs and the editorial and advertising content of newspapers and magazines (Macnamara, 2006). A widely used definition of content analysis which illustrates the early focus on quantitative analysis was provided by Berelson (1952) who described it as a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (p. 18). Neuman, 1997 said content analysis is "A technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text. The 'content' refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated. The 'text' is anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication" (pp. 272–273). Quantitative content analysis collects data about media content such as topics or issues, volume of mentions, 'messages' determined by key words in context (KWIC), circulation of the media (audience reach) and frequency. Thus, this quantitative content analysis is the suited for this study.

3.2 Unit of analysis

The units of analysis were visuals and visuals with caption collected from the selected dailies which are *Berita Harian* and *The Star* dailies. *Berita Harian* circulated 66,524 copies, for the period Jan-July 2019 and 151,623 copies for *The Star* daily for the period of July-Dec, 2018. Both dailies were selected due to their highest circulation and readership in Malaysia (abcm.org.my, 2019). The timeline for the study was set from the nomination day on the 16 February 2019 until the election day on 2 March 2019. Each visual and visual with caption total 88 census, were coded based on selected variables.

3.3 Research Variables

Five variables were selected in achieving the main objective of this study. Selection of variables are Slants, Placement, Message or Theme, Caption focus and Stand of visuals.

Variables were attributes as per below:

Coding categories for slants of visuals were adapted and modified from Kasim & Mohd Sani, 2016 a research on the 2013 general elections via online news portal. Such as:

- a. Positive to candidate
- b. Positive to party
- c. Negative to opposite
- d. Negative to opposite party
- e. Neutral

Coding categories for placement of visuals were coded as:

- a. Front page and supplement
- b. Front page only
- c. Supplement page only
- d. Mid page
- e. Mid page and supplement page
- f. Review/Column

Coding categories for Message or Theme of visuals were adapted and modified from Wong & Lean in examining content analysis of 12th General Election via mainstream newspaper. Such as:

- a. Community
- b. Policy
- c. Environment
- d. Race
- e. Religion
- f. Economy
- g. International
- h. Internal team
- i. Election information
- j. Candidate/Government party
- k. Opposite candidate/Opposite party

Coding categories for caption focus are divided into:

- a. Candidate name
- b. Party name
- c. Community
- d. Nation
- e. Services
- f. Official name

Coding categories for stand of visuals were adapted and modified from Rodriguez and Dimitrova in examining the levels of visual framing. Such as:

- a. Visuals as denotative systems
- b. Visuals as connotative systems

3.4 Coding procedures

Standardized coding sheets were prepared and a coding book was generated for categorizing and inter-coder reliability test. The coding book consisted detailed instructions on how to

codify the variables for analysis. Two coders were selected for data coding. After all of the visuals were coded, the data was entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. A frequency analysis was performed to determine the portrayal number of visuals. Cross-tabulation using Chi-square was performed on all data to determine to answer research questions.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

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4.1 Descriptive results

A frequency analysis was conducted to determine the number of visual portrayed in *Berita Harian* and *The Star* during the study period. Highest number of election visuals were covered in *Berita Harian* for 59% of election visuals compared to *The Star* for 41% visuals.

In examining the frequency of slants of visuals portrayed in both dailies, data revealed that majority of the visuals were slanted in neutral slant for 42%. Meaning that most of the visuals portrayed in both dailies revealed the positive and negative slant of by-election visuals, followed by slanted in positive slants for candidate and others category for both 19.3%. Others categories were examined further during coding process and the main visuals were coded for other category is about revealing background and basic details about candidate. Visual portrayal of negative slant of opposition candidate is in lowest percentage for 1.1%. Researcher concluded that, majority of the visual portrayal were revealing about both candidate content and providing election information for readers to get updates and relevant information about election rather that portraying negative coverage about opposition candidate and party.

In identifying the total percentage of placement of visuals, the majority of the by-election visuals were placed at supplement page for 86.4% followed by front page for 6.8% in both dailies. Least percentage were portrayed in mid page for 1.1%. In both dailies, visuals of by-election appeared in supplement page followed by front page and mid page for *Berita Harian* and for *The Star* daily, visual placement in front page appeared most after the supplement page and another interesting element in *The Star* daily is visuals of by-election were portrayed most in review and column section which is no any visual coverage in *Berita Harian* daily. This can be concluded that, *The Star* daily is concerning about collecting and listening to readers' opinion and comments for the by-election content compare to *Berita Harian* daily.

Messages or themes attached with visual can provide connotation meaning to readers. Therefore, in this research, researcher examine the placement of message appeared with by-election visuals. In exposing the main messages or themes portrayed by- election visuals in both dailies, the highest coverage of visuals focused on the message of providing information regarding community and delivering community services to publics for 29%, followed by educating readers on the content of election details for 27% appeared in both dailies. However, smallest number of visuals revealing about policy content to readers for 2% and information regarding internal team for 3%.

According to Macnamara in 2005, visual with caption are able to influence readers to comprehend and react to the messages of visuals. Majority of the caption focus were focusing on community content for 36%, followed promoting party name appeared in both dailies. Limited caption focus on the services offered to publics for 2%. According to Rodriguez and Dimitrova, types of message whether stand alone or meaning attached with visuals can provide a useful content to readers. This contents are divided into denotative and connotative message. A good visual should be stand alone or know as connotative visual in providing meaning. Thus, in this study, result revealed that majority of the by-election visuals able to stand alone in providing sufficient content to the readers for 69% compared to denotative meaning for 31%.

4.2 Chi-Square analysis

Cross-tabulations were conducted to compare the frequency of visual framing attributes within both selected dailies. A Chi-Square analysis was conducted to determine significance. Researcher followed the convention by using the level of significance or alpha at .05 or 5% to calculate the significance level.

In comparing both dailies for the portrayal of visual slants of by-election news, result revealed that there is a significant difference in portrayal of slants of visuals among two dailies with the value of ($P < .05$). In comparing further, most and the highest slants of visuals appeared in *Berita Harian* portrayed on neutral slants, favoring neither party and candidate followed by coverage on positive slants on candidate and party as well but for *The Star* daily, the highest visual slants appeared highest coverage in other category. When researcher coded manually the other category, data revealed that *The Star* focused on providing background and election information visuals, followed by neutral slants of visuals.

For the analysis of placement of by-election visuals portrayed in both dailies data showed that there is a differences in both dailies. The significant value is .033, ($P < .05$). In examining the differences between two dailies, majority of the by-election visuals news appeared in supplement page in both dailies as the highest but for the second highest of coverage, front page and supplement, mid page and review page equally but for *The Star* daily, the second highest after the placement in supplement page is in front page. Thus, in comparing the differences, *The Star* daily give more importance for the Semenyih by-election news through visual placement compared to *Berita Harian* daily. This is proven by Saunders (2006), said that the front page of newspapers is more useful in influencing readers.

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Caption focus is defined as how the media attached visual with text labelled to describe further the attached visuals to provide meaningful information (Filimonov, Russmann, & Svensson, 2016). In supporting with Filimonov and Svensson definition, researcher examined the comparison in caption focus attached with by-election visuals. In comparing the caption focus in both dailies, significant value showed no significant difference between *Berita Harian* and *The Star* with the P value of .116, ($P > .05$). This indicate that selection and usage of the caption

focus are similar in both dailies. Highest caption focuses were on the coverage attached with candidate name, party name and community services caption focused and for the standing of visuals, selected visuals attached in both dailies able to express the direct meaning without any interpretation from text. Both dailies having similarity in providing connotative meaning which means meaning can express via visuals without the assistance of textual message.

5. CONCLUSION

With the assistance of quantitative content analysis, this study is to examine the portrayal of visual framing on Semenyih by-election news coverage during the campaign period from the nomination day until the voting day. Two mainstream newspapers were selected for study period which are *Berita Harian* and *The Star* daily. In examining the visual framing, few independent variables were constructed by researcher such as slants of visuals news, placement of visuals, message/theme of visuals, caption focus of visuals and stand of visuals. Selected variables were used in finding comparison between the selected dailies. Results revealed that majority of the by-election visuals news appeared most in *Berita Harian*, and majority of the visuals were slanted in neutral slant followed by slanted in positive slants for candidate and visual portrayal of negative slant of opposition candidate is in lowest percentage. In identifying the placement of visuals, the majority of the by-election visuals were placed at supplement page. For the theme and messages portrayed by visuals, the message of providing information regarding community and delivering community services to publics covered most followed by educating readers on the content of election details. majority of the caption focus were focusing on community content, followed by promoting party name appeared in both dailies and mostly providing connotative meaning. For the comparison between dailies, *Berita Harian's* visuals portrayed on neutral slants, favoring neither party and candidate followed by coverage on positive slants on candidate and party as well but for *The Star* daily, the highest visual slants appeared highest coverage in other category such as visuals on providing background and election information visuals. For the placement of by-election visuals portrayed in both dailies data showed that there is a differences in both dailies because majority of the by-election visuals news appeared in supplement page in both dailies as the highest but for the second highest of coverage, front page and supplement, mid page and review page equally but for *The Star* daily, the second highest after the placement in supplement page is in front page and for the theme or messages portrayed by by-election visuals, the main focus of visual message portrayed in *Berita Harian* focused on information regarding community services information but for *The Star*, focused equally between community services and election information. The second highest of visual message covered in *Berita Harian* is on educating readers about election information but for *The Star*, focusing on the team or party of opposite.

Both dailies providing equal selection and portrayal of caption focus in covering by-election visuals and for the stand alone visual category, both dailies having similarity in providing connotative meaning which means meaning can express via visuals without the assistance of textual message. As a conclusion, researcher concluded that both dailies are differed in covering the by-election framing via different method and categories but they do have few similarities such as caption focus and stand - alone visuals. This study will be guidelines for future visual framing for any other different fields in providing effective content for newspapers readers. This study also can be benchmark in using framing attributes for different types of media in disseminating news.

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