
LOCAL-GLOBAL MEDIA IMAGES, FUTURE LIVES: HYBRID IDENTITIES AMONG RURAL SABAHAN YOUTHS

Haryati Abdul Karim

Universiti Malaysia Sabah
haryatiabdulkarim@gmail.com

Kntayya Mariappan

Universiti Malaysia Sabah
Kntayya@ums.edu.my

Diana Peters

Universiti Malaysia Sabah
dxp4@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper is about globalization, the formation of identity among rural youths in Sabah, and their use of global and local media images in making sense of who they are whilst living in remote areas and in poverty. The findings are based on quantitative and qualitative data collected from 2013 to 2015. Debates on cultural globalization revolve around whether globalization has brought about cultural homogenization through the influence of global cultural products on local audiences, and whether local cultures and values will be diminished by global cultures. However, this is not so with the rural youths in Sabah. The quantitative data on their media consumption pattern shows that media globalization has indeed penetrated into their lives. It was also found that the identity of the rural youths remained largely local. However, certain global media images were used to express their hope for change. Thus, the main issue was not about cultural domination or their resistance to it, but rather the interplay between certain global and local media images, with audiences articulating their desire for emotional fulfillment and an improved socio-economic status due to their living conditions. The identity of rural youths in Sabah was seen to be contradictory, fluid, shifting between wanting to escape from their present lives and to remain there, primarily because their lives are embedded within the context of hardship and tradition.

Keywords: *Identity, youth, hybridity, globalization, rural, cultural products*

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of the media has indeed brought about changes in social identities, specifically among young people, who have been classified as Generation Y. Unlike youths

born before the 1990s, the identity of youths in the global era is said to be plural and hybridized, where the process of appropriating global cultures into local practices often takes place (Nilan & Feixa, 2006).

Hence, the argument that goes on concerning the whole issue of cultural globalization and identity is that local cultures are not displaced by global cultures, nor will there be the emergence of a global and homogeneous culture, purportedly from the West, specifically, America. However, globalization has brought about a much more crucial issue of change among youths, particularly, in this case, among rural youths.

This study is focused on the formation of identity among rural youths in Sabah and the kind of identity that is being shaped by the advent of cultural globalization. Taking into account the geographical location of the rural youths in Sabah, their state of development, together with the prevalence of local cultures such as religion and ethnicity, the question is raised as to the kind of identity that has emerged of rural youths due to globalization. The concepts that are being used in exploring this question lie within the framework of cultural globalization, identity and cultural hybridity.

CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION

The central theme of cultural globalization is whether the omnipresence of globalizing tools, such as new media and satellite television, in local lives will diminish the presence of local cultures. Thus, the discussions on cultural globalization have often revolved around the issue of universality against particularism, the inflow of transnational cultures, also known as “third cultures”, (Featherstone, 1990:1) and cultural imperialism.

Globalization was first viewed as a form of cultural imperialism by scholars, notably Herbert Schiller (1991). The cultural imperialism theory argues that the massive imbalanced flow of international media and cultural products into developing, postcolonial countries has resulted in another form of imperialism, whereby local cultures are seen as being overwhelmed as the world moves towards cultural homogenization. A major source of this form of imperialism is the United States. Such a pessimistic view of cultural globalization has drawn sharp criticism from scholars, who resist the purported hypodermic effect of the media on local audiences.

Nevertheless, the debate on cultural imperialism has since been reinvigorated by David Morley (2006), who urged scholars to reconsider the theory.

“We may live in a globalized world, but in most places global time still ticks to the clock of CNN, and we may do well to recognize the extent to which the Anglo-American media continue to provide, for many people, the constitutive horizons of what has been called the ‘Global Familiar’ of our times,” (Morley, 2006: 41).

Apart from the omnipresence of the American media and their cultural products in almost every part of the world, it is important to consider newer ways for global media corporations to “seduce” local audiences into accepting their values and contents as part of who they are. Juluri’s (2002: 367) study on MTV among young Indian youths showed that active audience reception does not point to resistance but more of “co-optation of global hegemonic forces”.

However, this paradigm was strongly criticized by scholars, who countered it through various empirical audience studies that showed that audiences are not passive but active

and interpretive communities who actively make sense of the meanings within global media texts (Ang, 1985). Straubhaar (1991) criticized the tendency to view the global flow of culture from West to East in a linear fashion when cultural products are being produced from other countries such as Brazil and Mexico as well. Likewise, other cultural powerhouses from within the Asian belt, such as Japan, have found a strong fan base among young Malaysians (Yamato et al., 2011).

Another group of intellectuals who oppose the cultural imperialism theory, whose intellectual roots are from the postmodernist strand, suggests that another way of understanding the dynamic interaction of global and local cultures is by understanding globalization as “a process of hybridization” (Pieterse, 1995:45). ‘Hybridization’ has been defined as “the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices” (Rowe and Schelling, 1991:231 in Pieterse, 1995: 49). Sharing a similar view, Nilan & Feixa (2006: 1) went on to view ‘hybridity’ as a form of “cultural creativity”. Certainly, this form of ‘cultural mixing’ between global and local practices and cultures has an impact on the construction of one’s sense of self. There will be a tendency towards an ‘in-between’ identity. Kraidy (1999) demonstrated the construction of hybrid cultural identities among young Maronites in Lebanon, where their identity is a simultaneous mix of Western and Arab.

However, this paper is cautious about the term ‘cultural hybridity’ and ‘hybridized identities’. It rejects the idea that people happily appropriate global cultural practices into local ones to present a new form of local culture without taking into account their social, political and economic conditions. In offering a less than celebratory meaning of ‘hybridity’, Kraidy (2002:317) defined ‘hybridity’ as “a communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, socio-political and economic arrangements”. Advancing his view further, Shim (2006) demonstrated how the process of cultural hybridity by Korean media industries marks an attempt to stave off the domination of global media giants from America by incorporating some of its popular forms to enhance Korea’s own cultural industries. Hence, a hybrid identity can also be viewed as a symbol of resistance against inequality and marginalization.

PERSPECTIVES ON SELF-IDENTITY

This article is aimed at further advancing the concept of ‘hybridity’ by drawing on the post-modernist view of self-identity. One’s identity is not coherent and centred but is connected to others and is contingent on where they are situated. Who they are is very much shaped by the context of their lives. As Steph Lawler (2008:145) aptly put it, “There is no aspect of identity that lies outside social relations”. Indeed, because one’s identity is somehow connected to one’s relation to the environment, be it economic, social or political, down to family and peers’ relations and school, it becomes negotiable, shifting and fluid. In essence, a ‘woman’ is not identified merely by gender, but also by ethnicity, age, social class, biological, sociological and other social identities that intersect with her gender.

One of the most significant changes brought about by globalisation on identity is how one’s sense of self becomes decentred from the core. Giddens (1991) suggested that societies living in high modernity where traditions have collapsed are now being forced to rework their sense of self. Thus, the creation of the self becomes a reflexive project and process (Giddens, 1991; Callero, 2003). In this respect, Giddens (1991) and Thompson (1995) stated that the media plays an important role in the creation of the self by providing a mediated

experience to the individual, interpenetrating their own self-development. People reflect, contrast and negotiate meanings in media images and messages against their own life, and they construct their identity through this mediated experience.

As tradition collapses, life in a modern society becomes intertwined with global and local lifestyles, forcing members to negotiate and contrast the identities and lifestyle choices that are available. In this sense, the global and local media provide the resources for people to rework their sense of self. In essence, global modernity is pushing rural youths to be more reflective of their self-development. The hybrid identity that emerges is largely driven by the interplay of the social, economic and political conditions that they are embedded in, with their mediated experience from global and local media images. Their identity then becomes one that is socially constructed. "Identities are prescribed, resisted, and reconstructed in multiple and dynamic ways by young people, but always in relation to contexts that are complex, multi-scalar, and changing" (Bushin et al, 2007: 77).

GLOBALIZATION, YOUNG PEOPLE, IDENTITY AND THE MEDIA

Young people and their global and local media consumption have given rise to significant findings on the reproduction of their identities. Most point to two issues of identity – local identity, which can never be displaced by global cultures, and youth identity, which tends to be fluid and hybridized. It is the local conditions that they are embedded in and are socialized into when interacting with global media texts that create a hybrid identity. This factor also needs to be looked into, in order to understand the construction of identity among young people in the wake of cultural globalization. A deeper analysis in previous studies showed the complexity of identity formation among local youths. The process of negotiating and contrasting global media images, symbols and messages juxtaposed with the social, political, economic, personal experiences and the local media, shapes a hybrid form of local identity.

In the context of Greenland, young Greenlanders may have a desire for a more global lifestyle, yet they seem to be contented with the lack of alternative lifestyles because they are used to the remote and distant location of Greenland from the rest of the world (Rygaard, 2003). Apart from geographical location, a hybrid identity in Malta has emerged due to the tension between local cultural institutions and the influence of an influx of global television shows (Gritxi, 2006). It has been found that young Maltese, who possess an ambivalent identity of "Maltese by nationality, but not Maltese by culture", are distancing themselves from traditional Maltese attitude and culture (Gritxi, 2006: 111), where they are starting to associate themselves more towards Europe, which they see as 'modern' and 'progressive', as opposed to Malta.

The historical, social, economic and political situation in Kuwait points to Kuwaitis as being predominantly Muslim but experiencing rapid Westernization. While they are said to be open to outside cultures, especially American culture, they are careful and selective on which western culture is appropriate for them (Havens, 2000). Elsewhere, if popular local cultural products prove to be better than global cultural products, local youths will tend to prefer the local products, as in the case of Dutch youths. A study by van der Rijt et al. (2000) showed that Dutch youths seem to prefer and identify themselves with the local Dutch music television station, The Music Factory (TMF), rather than America's Music TeleVision (MTV) because TMF is able to represent the local youth subcultures compared to MTV (van der Rijt et al, 2000).

Globalization and identity among young people are further complicated by the question of class and geographical factors. Rural youths are more inclined to turn to local and nationally produced television programmes compared to global shows because these help to reaffirm their cultural identity (Strelitz, 2002). Although their identity remains essentially local, it is no longer authentic in form. One reason for this is the social, economic and political situation that they are embedded in, where rural youths are constantly negotiating and reflexively contrasting global and local cultures in their lives. In an environment where the traditions and ideologies of national culture prevail, rural youths are forced to appropriate global cultures that are aligned to the local culture. The socio-political landscape that rural youths in South Africa are embedded in, along with their consumption of global media, has resulted in a hybrid, yet ambivalent, identity of modern versus traditional, and Western (American) versus local African (Strelitz, 2003).

The cultural appropriation of global and local media texts may well show a more fluid and hybridized rural identity, but this by no means suggests that their attachment to rural life and values is diminished. Having said that, in order to understand the identity that is reproduced in the context of global media penetration into the lives of rural youths in Sabah, this study adopted the post-modernist view of identity and cultural hybridity (Kraidy, 2002) as an analytical tool.

Kraidy's (2002) 'cultural hybridity' theory can be viewed as a bridging theory between cultural imperialism to active audience theory. It argues that while rural youths actively appropriating cultures in global and local media, it tries to link the social condition of the audience with the type of global and local media texts that they choose to consume. The transcultural interaction between global and local cultures through the media is inevitable and, to some extent, it does have an influence on the local audience. Therefore, this article is of the opinion that, as an active audience, rural youths use global and local media texts interchangeably in their lives because the media articulates their idea of self-identity, which is compatible to their social, economic and political condition. The only issue that remains unanswered is if cultural hybridity were indeed a form of communicative practice that is constitutive of and by their social conditions, it would be intriguing to know the context of life that shapes the identity of rural Sabahan youths and what that identity is.

THE CONTEXT OF THE LIVES OF RURAL SABAHAN YOUTHS

Economically, Sabah is recorded as having the highest number of poor and hard-core poor compared to other states in the country. Despite the continued drop in the number of poverty cases from 19.2 percent in 2009, 7.8 percent in 2012 and 3.9 percent in 2014, Sabah still has the highest population of poor in the country (www.epu.gov.my/document).

Table 1: Percentage of incidence of poverty in Malaysia (2012-2014)

States/Year	2012	2014
Peninsular Malaysia	1%	0.3%
Sabah & Labuan	7.8%	3.9%
Sarawak	2.4%	0.9%

(Modified from from the Economic Planning Unit, www.epu.gov.my)

The problems of poverty and hard-core poverty in Sabah have long been recognized by the government, both at Federal and state levels. According to the Sabah Economic Development

and Investment Authority (SEDIA), the main body entrusted with the implementation of the state's development plan – the Sabah Development Corridor (SDC), the high rate of poverty in Sabah is attributed to geographical factors and infrastructural problems (IDS, 2007).

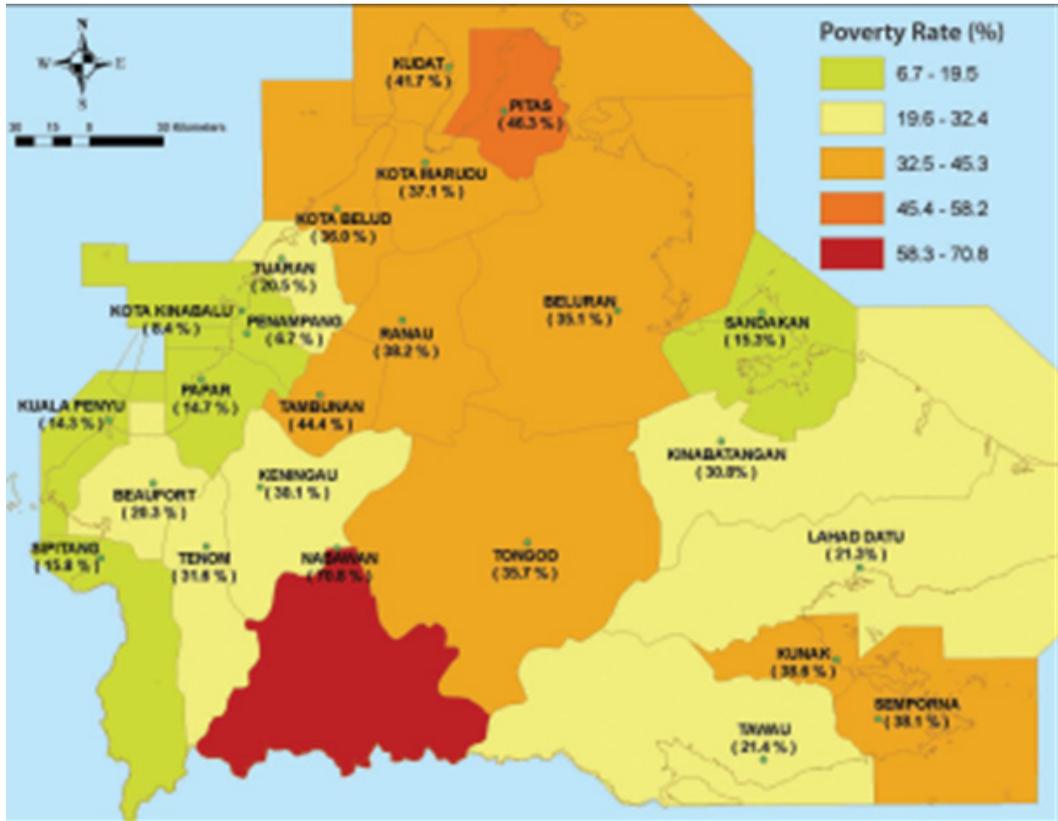


Figure 1: Poverty rates across districts in Sabah (source: Sabah Economic Planning Unit, 2004 in IDS, 2007)

Although there are cases of urban poor and hard-core poor, the main bulk of these cases remain largely in the rural areas. Figure 1 shows that poverty rates of 45 to 70 percent are found in the interior of Sabah, such as in the district of Nabawan, the East Coast districts of Kunak and Semporna and Pitas in the northern part of Sabah. Geographically, these rural areas are hilly and remote, with dense forests, making it inaccessible by road. Most of the communities are involved in small scale farming and fishing.

Both the Federal and state governments have attempted to eradicate poverty in these areas. The SDC has identified and implemented various economic development programmes to support the Federal Government's Transformation Programme (GTP) and Economic Transformation Programme (SEDIA, 2013).

In terms of communication and media facilities, the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission implemented four initiatives under its Universal Service Provider (USP) programmes for rural areas. These programmes are the 1Malaysia Netbook, 1 Malaysia Wireless Village (KTW1M), Cellular Coverage Expansion (Time 3) and 1Malaysia Internet Centre (PI1M) (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, 2013). The 1Malaysia Wireless

Village, in particular, aimed to provide Internet access to rural communities to ensure that there will not be an issue of digital divide, information and knowledge gaps among them. Since most of the rural areas in Sabah are in hilly and remote locations, the majority of the rural folks, such as in the district of Tenom, only have access to public television broadcasts by RTM 1 and RTM 2, and not commercial stations like TV3. To enable them to obtain reception to more television programmes, they need to use satellite dishes, hence, the wide use of the satellite TV, Astro. The print media, such as newspapers and magazines, are largely available in sundry shops in town but not in the outskirts, where the marketing of these does not seem to be economically viable.

Administratively, the rural areas have been divided into 'divisions' (*bahagian*). For this study, five administrative divisions selected being:

- Upper Interior Division: covering the districts of Keningau, Tenom, Tambunan and Nabawan,
- West Coast Division: Ranau, Kota Belud, Pitas, Kota Marudu and Sikuati, Kudat,
- Tawau Division: Semporna, Kunak, Lahad Datu and Tawau,
- Lower Interior Division: Kota Klias, Weston (Beaufort district), Sipitang,
- Sandakan Division: Telupid, Beluran and Pamol.

Given the brief account of the context of the lives of rural youths in Sabah, it became pertinent to explore how these conditions shape their consumption of global and local media.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted for the study on identity, media and rural youths. As there is limited information on media accessibility and consumption patterns among these young people, this study employed a mixed method comprised of a quantitative approach through a survey and a qualitative approach through semi-structured focus group interviews. The following were the research questions:-

1. What kinds of media are available to rural ethnic youths in Sabah?
2. What kinds of identity and lifestyle have been formed through their consumption of the media?
3. Do the media include or exclude rural youths?

In terms of sampling, 21 schools, which had been categorized as 'rural' by the State Education Department, were selected. The main variables in the sampling were the age and gender of the students. Two cohorts were chosen in terms of their age from Form Two and Form Six. The questionnaires were distributed across ethnicity, gender, religion and region, and 900 questionnaires were returned.

Only Form Six students were chosen for the focus group interviews because of their level of maturity to engage in discussions. In addition, when addressing the issue of 'future lives', the decision to select only 18- and 19-year olds was appropriate as they are at an age where they will soon leave school to enter universities, colleges or the workforce.

The focus group interviews were conducted separately in two groups consisting of eight 18- to 19-year old respondents (four girls and four boys) from each school. In total,

80 individuals from 10 focus groups were interviewed. The interviews were conducted by using 38 pictures taken from the Internet. The pictures were categorized into themes in an attempt to capture the various identities and lifestyles in existence.

The respondents were asked to select and discuss five pictures that they felt represented who they were as a group. Realizing that there might be cases where some members would have to conform to the decision of the group when they would probably have preferred other pictures, they were then asked to pick one picture that represented who they were individually. Altogether nine pictures were selected. However, in the event that there was no picture that they felt represented them, they would be asked to share with the researchers what those missing pictures were.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Before proceeding to address the issue of identity, globalization and media consumption among rural youths, it was necessary to begin by unveiling the demographic background of the respondents. Of the 900 respondents, 522 (58 percent) were girls and 375 (41.7 percent) were boys. The breakdown, according to age, comprised 404 or 44.9 percent who were 14 years old, 240 (26.7 percent) were aged 18 years and 255 (28.3 percent) were 19 years old.

In terms of religion, the majority of the respondents, i.e. 565 (62.8 percent) were Muslims, while 326 or about 36.2 percent of the respondents were Christians. Only 0.8 percent or seven respondents were Buddhists. There were 18 ethnic groups in this study. The Kadazandusuns, who are the dominant ethnic group in Sabah, formed the largest number of respondents in terms of ethnicity. There were 304 Kadazandusun (33.8 percent) respondents, followed by the Bajaus (169 or 18.8 percent), Muruts (109 or 12.1 percent), and 108 respondents (12 percent) from the Malay/Brunei Malay group.

About 61.6 percent (554) of the respondents had parents who were earning less than RM 1,000 a month, 220 respondents (24.4 percent) said their parents earned between RM 1001-RM 2,500, and only 10 percent had parents earning RM 2,501 and above. The socio-economic profile of the respondents reflected the actual socio-economic status of the rural communities, which largely fell under the hard-core poor category.

Media Consumption Patterns, Access & Availability

With such a socio-economic background, one wonders whether this affects their access to the media if availability is an issue. At the outset, it appears that although they are living in the rural areas where the majority of the people are very poor, the data showed that their socio-economic background does not hamper their active usage of the media.

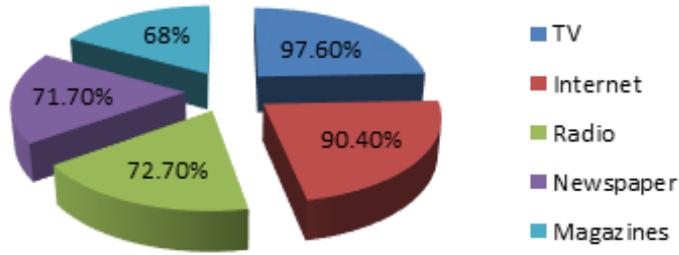


Figure 2: Percentage of media being used by rural youths in Sabah (2015) (N=900)

Figure 2 shows the pattern of media consumption among rural youths. Among all the types of media available, television is the most widely used media, followed by the Internet. With the usage ranging between 90 to over 97 percent, it appears that television and the Internet are the most important media for them.

The 'Global' Rural Youth

Their wide use of television enabled them to appropriate the global-local culture. This was evident by the dialectic relations between the consumption of global and local television programmes among them. The global programmes were very popular for their drama and musical shows, but the news was the most popular local television show.

Aside from the news programmes, this finding showed that the taste of the rural youths for drama, film and musical programmes was more global than local.

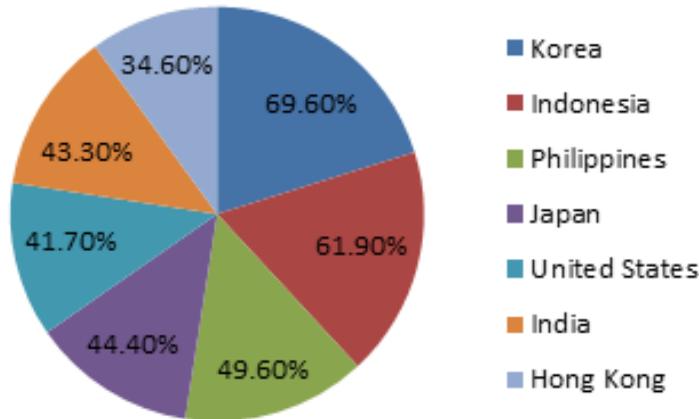


Figure 3: Percentage of global dramas being watched by rural youths (N=900)

Among all the entertainment programmes, the serial dramas appeared to be the most popular television programmes among the rural youths and in this case, Korean serial dramas seemed to be the most popular shows with 626 respondents admitting to watching Korean dramas. This was followed by 557 or 61.9 percent of the respondents preferring Indonesian dramas. Based on the data shown in Figure 3, what constituted the 'global' identity among rural youths was more of an Asian rather than an American global identity. Serial dramas from the

United States only came in fifth compared to those from other Asian countries. This proved that the rural youths' definition of 'global' identity was more Asian rather than Western.

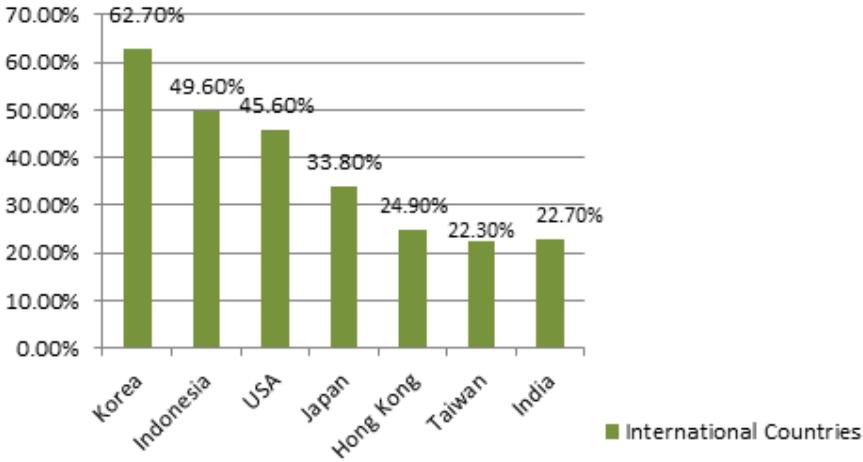


Figure 4: Trend of consumption for global musical programmes on television (N=900)

The popularity of Korean popular culture was once again evident when 62.7 percent (564 respondents) cited their preference for Korean entertainment and musical shows, suggesting that Korean pop (K-pop) has spread into the rural areas of Sabah. Despite failing to understand the Korean language compared to English and Indonesian, the appeal of Korean artistes far outweighed the appeal of Indonesian and American popular cultures.

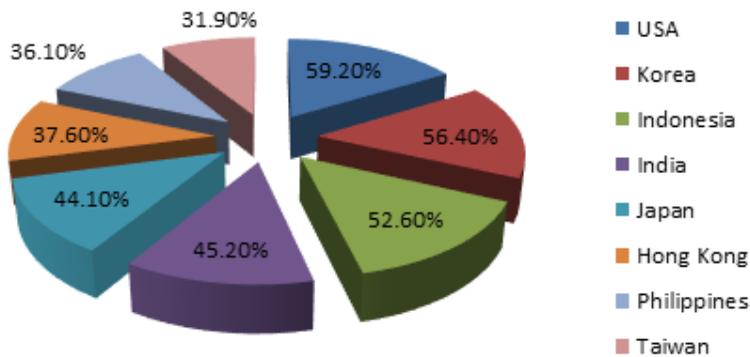


Figure 5: Percentage of global films being watched by rural youths (N=900)

It is only in films that Hollywood reigns supreme over Korea and Indonesia because of its diverse genres, excellent cinematography and long-time reputation as a major film producer in the world.

Various Meanings of “Success”

However, the qualitative data in this study did not support the cultural domination theory suggested in the quantitative data. During the focus group interviews, when the 80 respondents were asked to choose nine out of the 38 pictures representing various identities, only one girl chose the picture of an all-girl Korean pop group.

Out of 38 media images, most of the respondents picked four local media pictures coded as ‘Education’, ‘Future Career’, ‘Future Family’ and ‘Dream Home’. However, there were differences in identity at the group and individual levels. As a collective identity, images of ‘Education’, which depicted a group of young people tossing their mortar boards after their graduation ceremony, was frequently selected nine times by the respondents, while images of ‘Future Career’ was chosen four times over others as an individual identity. The images of ‘Education’ were not found at individual level. For the global media images, it was intriguing to note that the media images of ‘Japan’ and ‘Disneyland’ were selected at individual level and not as a group, with the exception of US President Barack Obama and the ‘Eiffel Tower’, where two groups singled out these pictures as part of their group identity. What this implied was that improving their lives is a common concern and is their main priority compared to travelling to global holiday destinations. This article focused only on the top choices of the global and local media images at the group and individual levels. To identify the gender of the respondents, the male respondents were coded as ‘M1’, referring to the first male respondent, and ‘F1’, meaning the first female respondent.

Local Images: ‘Education’ – Key to a Better Life (Group Identity)

The rural youths in this study hold the view that education is the key to a better life, a means to move out of their present lives. Getting a degree symbolizes ‘success’ because they believe it will help them get a regular job with a steady income, which then will enable them to help their family. As most of them will inherit the low socio-economic status of the family, the rural youths here do not wish to continue living in poverty like their parents.

“At present, our parents’ lives are difficult (and poor) and so, one day, when we have become successful, like getting a degree, we will have a steady job, then we will be able to help our family.” (M1, 19-year old, SMK Kemabong, Tenom)

“Now our parents are self-employed. They are often tired, live a hard life, sometimes the crop production does not commensurate with the hard labour they put in. But if we have education, it is easy for us to get a job, and if it is a good job, our lives will not be hard.” (M2, 19-year old, SMK Kemabong, Tenom)

“I see these are pictures of success. I do wish to be part of this (media images). Going to the U to continue my studies is most important (to me) because only education can change our lives. Like me, I’ve got no land, so life is hard. I can only hope through education.” (M3, 19-year old, SMK Desa Wawasan, Tambunan)

Their present socio-economic conditions have drawn them the most to the media images of ‘Education’, where images of happiness and triumph radiate in the faces of the young people in the picture. Contrasting those images with their present life, they sensed an acute

need to get out of their existing socio-economic status. In their opinion, they are already disadvantaged by the lack of wealth, influence, proximity and other forms of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984), and the only way to be successful is to be better educated.

Local Images 2: 'Future Career' – Future Lives (Individual Identity)

While most of the respondents opted for middle-class professions, like teachers, some secretly harboured dreams of entering the corporate world. The image of 'Future Career' here depicted a group of young professionals in business suits and ties, exuding confidence and vigour to conquer the world. The appeal of these images was once again tied to the fact that they desire to help their families financially.

They believe that the corporate world will ensure that they and their families will enjoy long-term financial security, aside from the fact that it indicates that they have successfully lifted themselves and their families out of poverty and hardship. Entering into the corporate world by no means implies that rural youths have become materialistic. Rather, they long to do so for a collective reason – to be financially able to provide for and protect their parents and their own family from being deprived of all the good things in life.

“Ever since I was small, I have always liked this kind of job (professional)...but what I really hoped...is that I will get a regular job and I can help my parents.” (F1, 19-year old, SMK Nabawan)

“I choose this picture because they are professionals, working people. So, I thought, I want to be a professional, someone who has a career one day. Why? Because I have always wanted to be a career person and people respect us for that. Because we got a job. Because I also want to improve my family's life.” (M4, 19-year old, SMK Beluran)

The problem with their understanding of those media images that they selected is that they equate financial security to emotional security. Financially secure people are also successful people, who are, in turn, 'happy' people. This simplistic deduction of an ideal life for rural youths suggests that being the key to happiness is to be financially secure.

Global Media Images – Transformation, Hopes and Dreams

While the local media images mediated the conventional meaning of a 'successful life', the global media images mediated a more abstract meaning of it where the ingredients to success were hopes, dreams and change.

The local media images tended to set a conventional path to a greater life, but the global media images mediated the idea that 'success' comes from change. 'Success', through Barack Obama, means the breakdown of racial discrimination towards rural people in Sabah as 'low' and 'inferior'. 'Success', through the Eiffel Tower, Japan and Disneyland, implies that as rural folks, they have the ability to overcome any challenges and attain global success.

Global Media Images (Group Identity): Barack Obama - Symbol of Hope

Among the reasons why images of Barack Obama appeal to them is that he symbolizes hope and change, particularly in issues pertaining to ethnic relations that afflict the country.

“This is what happens to us here. Sometimes, the rural people in Sabah are often taunted as *pindik-pindik tagap* (short and stout). We feel challenged in a positive way. Indian people in Malaysia are often viewed as violent just because some are involved in gangsterism, but a large number of them are successful. As for us, it does not mean that (since) we are short, we are weak and easily oppressed. Everybody is the same. God created us the same, everyone has hands and brains.” (M5, 19-year old, SMK Nabawan)

“There are so many things I have learned about Obama. He is my role model, a leader that I am proud of, okay? Because he made history in the world (by) becoming the first African American to become the world’s most powerful man on the planet. It shows that nothing is impossible, right? And, it also shows that it doesn’t matter what is the colour of your skin, (or) what is your ethnicity, we can lead the people and we can lead the world.” (M6, 19-year old, SMK Tambunan)

Asked if he was hoping that a similar social transformation as in the United States would occur in Malaysia, he had this to say:

“Yes, I’m hoping, because in Malaysia, I’m not being racist, but there is discrimination, especially towards the Sabahans. They (Peninsula Malaysia) see Sabahans as low like the White Americans see the African Americans.” (M6, 19-year old, SMK Tambunan)

Western global media images not only inspire them to desire for change as a means to achieve success, they also inspire them that it is possible to lift themselves out of ‘poverty’ to become globally successful. These images inspire them to believe that everybody has an equal opportunity to become globally successful. The American dream, where everybody has the right to succeed and there is hope for institutional and structural changes, appeals to these young people, as articulated in their choice of Obama.

Global Media Images (Individual Identity): Japan & Disneyland – Unique Visions of Success

The significant meaning of the images of Japan and Disneyland is that both convey the idea that one needs only to believe in oneself in order to succeed. Disneyland had a specific meaning to one respondent. The image was chosen not because of the cartoon but because this youth was inspired by the ingenuity of the creator of Disneyland - Walt Disney.

“I focused on this (Disney). I’ve long been interested since I was small. I am interested not because he (Disney) created the cartoon. I’m interested in his idea, the way his ideas can entertain the whole world, like Mickey Mouse. Because of a cartoon, he can entertain the whole world. So, if I *could*, I want to be like him (Disney). Not to entertain, but to be a visionary, as people said.” (M7, 19-year old, SMK Keningau II)

Some of the rural youths were drawn to the images of Japan because of their dual quality of balancing between the modern and the traditional. Through their usage of the media, they learned that Japan is a uniquely developed nation with such a quality.

“Japan... although they are modern but there is still a lot of trees there. And their culture is beautiful. I read a lot about (Japan), I’ve read it on Wiki(pedia) that Japan...

is very modern but they still maintained their (local) culture. So, it's very balanced".
(M7, 19-year old, SMK Keningau II)

This resonated well with their idea of a 'successful' life, where one can achieve global success without sacrificing one's cultural identity. This indicated that they possess a strong sense of attachment to their locality and roots.

Hybridized Identity of Rural Sabahan Youths

Previous studies on globalization and identity have shown that the identity of youths is not dis-embedded from their locality. While a similar pattern was found in this study, the issue was far more than that. Based on the media images that they chose, it was evident that their identity remained largely local in terms of their vision and motives concerning a successful life. Even though they have their dreams and knowledge about the outside world, yet the media images that they choose are often those that aligned to their local culture.

All these were attributable to the context of their lives, which caused their identity to be somewhat 'fluid', but still 'local' in outlook, with a limited self-reflexive process. Coming from a low-income family background, living in places with limited economic and infrastructural development as well as limited exposure to other kinds of youth lifestyles, their social lives revolve mainly around their school, family and local village activities.

With the exception of the group of male respondents from SMK Nabawan, one male respondent from SMK Tambunan and another from SMK Keningau II, who appropriated the values of global personalities, such as Obama and Walt Disney, into their future lives, the majority of the respondents had little aspirations about going beyond their locality.

Two major reasons for this were poverty and a strong attachment to their own family. The need to be financially secure was their strongest motive for choosing 'Education' as their most meaningful media image. They aspired to do so, not just for themselves but also for their parents. Limited self-reflexivity was also found in Nilan's (2008) study on Muslim youths in Indonesia and Malaysia. Nilan cited some flaws in Giddens' (1991) notion of 'self-reflexivity', which lay in the marked difference of values between Western and non-Western societies. Incidentally, a similar pattern of conflict between collective and individual values was found in this study as well.

The rural youths may have aspirations to own a bigger house and be somebody, but it is not solely for their individual self, but is rather as an expression of love for their family. However, to suggest that the identity of rural Sabahan youths is authentically 'local' and 'rural' is equally problematic. Their taste for popular culture is 'global' and so are their political views. At best, the identity of the rural Sabahan youths can be viewed as a hybrid of collectivism-individualism and local-global subjects.

CONCLUSION

The direction for future research on rural youths and media has to focus on the context of their lives, as it informs a more complex and ideological use of the media. Local media images articulate their immediate need for financial security. However, global media images evoke a more political meaning for their future lives, where they are socially included to question the general perception of Sabahans as being less developed people. Ultimately, their worldview is no longer 'rural' but has gone 'global'.

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