

The 'Out-Group' and Moral Panic: How the Malay Newspapers and the Construction of Social Narratives?

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ABSTRACT

Given the increasing presence of foreign workers in the Malaysian workforce and society, many Malaysians have voiced doubts and fear over the perceived encroachment of foreign workers into society, especially with the media reporting cases of crimes and news about them in a particularly negative stance. This research studied the five major Malay newspapers in the coverage of foreigners and identified the repeated five themes that were used to frame foreign workers, include: 1. Anti-social behaviour, 2. Sexually connotative language, 3. Labels/slurs 4. Derogatory language and 5. Perceived threat to local resources and business opportunities. Analysis of news headlines published by Malay newspapers from January 2023 until March 2026 was conducted and analysed using discourse analytical approach. Negative themes were found to have framed the portrayal of foreign workers, enhancing out-group representations. One particular concern is the disproportionate and repetitive reportage and labels of anti-social behaviour in a manner that encourages hostility and cultivates a climate of fear by overreporting bad behaviour by a small number of people. Foreign workers are often framed as anti-social deviants, depicted as dangerous, menacing, uncivilised, and prone to engaging in criminal behaviours such as violence, fighting, rule-breaking, and posing a threat to society. Negative portrayals of foreign workers have become so commonplace in Malaysian media that stories about them are predominantly crime-related and focused on unfavourable incidents.

Keywords: Malay newspapers; Framing; Out-group; Narrative; Sensationalism

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the Malaysian population has steadily increased, with a projected increment to 2.6 million within the next 30 years. Along with this increase, there is an increased influx of foreigners into the country, especially with foreign workers generally employed here for jobs deemed undesirable by local Malaysians. In addition, recent reports from The Sun Daily stated that there are 2.1 million registered foreign workers in Malaysia and an unknown number of unregistered foreign workers. Most of these foreign workers originated from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and India (UNICEF, 2014). Further from that, there is also the possibility of refugees from Myanmar and Syria, who have been arriving at Malaysian shores in the recent refugee crises, joining the workforce, regardless of legality.

A 2023 report by the Human Resources Minister V. Sivakumar revealed that a total of 152158 foreign workers are expected to arrive in Malaysia to meet the needs of various local industries, as there are already over 1.83 million foreign workers on temporary employment visa passes 2023. With the increased presence of foreign workers in the local community, many from various quarters of society are voicing their fear and suspicion about this group of people. Research by the International Labour Organization (Tunon & Baruah, 2012) found that Malaysian society has one of the highest displays of mistrust and low support for migrant workers, with 80% of Malaysians surveyed expressing their perception of migrant workers as "criminals". This could also be related to the fact that most of these workers are employed in low-skilled and unskilled jobs, further enhancing the stereotype of these workers as being uneducated and uncouth.

In previous research about the labelling of foreigners by Malay newspapers (Hoh & Mok, 2015), it was found that highly circulated Malay newspapers, in general, use derogatory labels in their reportage. Most labels used are dehumanizing and often frame foreigners as "negative others" in society, further creating racial isolation and xenophobic tendencies in Malaysian society. This kind of practice is counter-productive and contributes to negative societal discourse. Such construction of "negative other" in the vein of van Dijk's ideological square (1998) polarizes the foreign workers as they are constantly being framed as anti-social, crime-ridden and immoral.

Recommendations by the ILO above research and another research by Umar, Noon and Abdullahi (2014) emphasise the media's role in framing societal discourse and the need for positive media engagement for a more inclusive society. By embedding ideology through discourse and language used by newspapers (Sigman & Fry, 1985), media sets the tone of society's interactions with others. Such is the power of media in setting social representations or misrepresentations by consistently framing a specific group of people in a negative light.

This research focused on the themes generally used by the five Malay newspapers (*Berita Harian*, *Harian Metro*, *Utusan*, *Kosmo* and *Sinar Harian*) when reporting news about foreign workers. These themes are repetitively used to frame foreign workers in a very deliberate manner as the cause of all crime in Malaysia and, consequently, slowly but surely cultivate a climate of fear with a disproportionate coverage of crimes by a small number of people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whether old or new, media has always been regarded as an influential force of socialisation and shaping of societal discourse. Power relations that are a product of media ownership hold the power to shape ideology, with which "legitimation and control" (Maneri & ter Wal, 2005) of discourse enabled those who hold power to shape and maintain power inequalities and discrimination. Media content, especially news discourse, is particularly crucial in such situations as news is commonly considered more credible and depicts truth.

Representation and stereotyping of minorities, particularly in news reporting, have long been studied by researchers who are concerned with perception shaping and community discourse. Researchers like Sigman & Fry (1985), van Dijk (1987), Bayard & Young (2002), Aubrun, Emanation & Grady (2005), Silva (2011), Nickels, Thomas, Hickman & Silvestri (2012) have looked at media presentations of race through the use of racial grammar, the discourse about migrant communities, racial labels utilised by media producers and over-reporting of racial violence. Smith (1992) tracked the evolution of African American racial labels, which have changed over the years, to discard previously negative connotations. A particularly noteworthy point by Smith was that African Americans adopted labels not as derogatory stereotypes but as a way to instil self-esteem and worth and boost the feeling of community.

However, the shaping of such discourse results from deliberate media framing by media owners. The basis is that focusing on some aspects of reality while obscuring others (Yang & Md Sidin, 2012) influences how people react and view the heart of the issue. Framing centres around the construction of reality in which media frames simplify and provide schemas for the audience to make sense of the world around them. One of how stereotypical societal discourse emerges is when the media practices bias in reporting.

Even without deliberately twisting facts to benefit one party, content bias, as Entman (2007) explained, will see unequal treatment by favouring one side rather than equivalent treatment in the news. Research by Mohd Muzhafar and Izaham (2013) identified discursive and repetitive political ideologies that "produce specific meanings to political voices of the government in opposition to the 'voiceless' illegal immigrants", which also produces binary oppositions, other research by Yang & Md. Sidin (2012), about framing in Malaysian media, also found a significantly prejudicial discourse "contrary to a spirit of democratic enquiry and openness".

Entman (2007) also defines framing as picking and choosing desired elements of perceived realities to assemble a narrative that can promote a particular interpretation. He stated that frames perform four functions: problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment and remedy promotion to prime audience interpretations and preferences. This relates to the construction of stereotypes in which the initiator, the media or, specifically, in

this research, significant newspapers, by presenting themselves as the voice of reason, embeds ideologies and frames social discourse about specific groups of people.

Like labelling, the statuses framed for the specific group become "master status" (Becker, 1963) by others, and the established status is prioritised in judgment. Hence, a particular race will likely be identified with the master status, i.e. about criminal activity, before any other identification is made. Moreover, consequentially, the construction of binary opposites, the "positive-self" versus the "negative other" (Eissa, 2014), strengthens the strategy of polarisations.

METHODOLOGY

This study conducts a content analysis of news headlines from five Malay newspapers (*Berita Harian*, *Harian Metro*, *Utusan*, *Kosmo*, and *Sinar Harian/ Harian Metro*), specifically focusing on reports about foreign workers. The aim is to examine how these articles frame foreign workers within a negative societal context, thereby shaping public discourse and contributing to a moral panic.

The analysis draws on Maneri and ter Wal's (2005) discourse analytical approach, which views news discourse as both a social and cognitive practice. The approach assumes that negative reporting by dominant media outlets plays a key role in reinforcing ethnic prejudice and racism, ultimately fostering xenophobic attitudes. According to the socio-cognitive discourse theory (van Dijk, 1991), news discourse is shaped by pre-existing beliefs and attitudes towards migrants. When deviant behavior by a few individuals is remembered collectively as part of "social memory," it often leads to stereotypical portrayals in the media.

Thus, this research focuses on how media power shapes ideologies and identities by constructing out-groups representation. The analysis will examine headlines and recurring topics, identifying key elements of news structure that reflect the representation of foreign workers as a central figure in these narratives.

In this study of news discourse, several themes were identified to explore how the newspapers framed foreign workers. These themes include: 1. Anti-social behaviour, 2. Sexually connotative language, 3. Labels/ slurs 4. Derogatory language and 5. Perceived threat to local resources and business opportunities. By examining these recurring themes on headlines, it becomes possible to analyse how newspapers construct and reinforce negative representations of out-groups, particularly foreign workers.

The study analysed news articles published between January 2023 to March 2026 from five widely circulated local Malay newspapers. Compared to newspapers in other languages, Malay-language newspapers have a larger readership, thus exerting a greater influence on the Malaysian public.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the articles in which foreign workers were the central focus revealed that the headlines and topics generally aligned with the five identified themes. The findings indicated that more than half of the articles framed foreign workers as deviants, uncivilised, portraying them as engaging in anti-social behaviors or posing a threat to locals by taking away jobs and business opportunities, largely due to their increasing numbers.

Table 1: Theme – Anti-social Behaviour

Examples of News Headlines	Newspaper	Date
a. Warga Asing <i>Ceroboh</i> Hutan Simpan (Foreigners Trespass into Forest Reserve)	<i>Sinar Harian</i>	9/5/2024
b. Ada Warga Asing <i>Terlalu Kurang Ajar</i> (Some Foreigners Are Extremely Rude)	<i>Kosmo</i>	30/10/2023
c. <i>Rohinya Aktif Cereboh Negara</i> (Rohingya Actively Encroaching on Malaysia)	<i>Utusan</i>	5/1/2023

d. Warga Asing <i>Pikat Warga Emas</i> Untuk Menetap Lama di Malaysia. (Foreigners Lure Senior Citizens to Stay Longer in Malaysia)	<i>Utusan</i>	18/10/2023
e. <i>Pelacuran Bakal Bernyawa Kembali</i> (Prostitution Set to Make a Comeback)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	10/10/2023
f. Warga Asing <i>Jual Ayam Seksi</i> di Klang (Foreigners Selling Sexy Sex Worker in Klang)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	3/2/2024
g. <i>Jual Wanita Asing</i> RM1200 (Foreign Women Sold for RM1,200)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	7/5/2025
h. Bilik Karaoke RM16000 <i>Tawar Layanan Super VVIP</i> (Karaoke Room for RM16,000 Offers Super VVIP Services)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	10/8/2024
i. <i>Wanita Termahal</i> Dapat Kalungan Harga RM5K (Most Expensive Woman Priced at RM5K)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	11/11/2024

Foreign workers are often framed as anti-social deviants, depicted as dangerous, menacing, stubborn, aggressive, uncivilized, and prone to engaging in criminal behaviors such as violence, fighting, rule-breaking, and posing a threat to society. Headlines like "Warga Asing Jual Ayam Seksi di Klang", "Warga Asing Ceroboh Hutan Simpan" and "Rohinya Aktif Ceroboh Negara" reflect this trend. Negative portrayals of foreign workers have become so commonplace in Malaysian media that stories about them are predominantly crime-related and focused on unfavourable incidents.

Table 2: Theme – Sexually Connotative Language

Examples of News Headlines	Newspaper	Date
a. Siang Jadi Amah, Malam <i>Layan Lelaki</i> (Maid by Day, Serves Men at Night)	<i>Kosmo</i>	5/8/2025
b. <i>Wanita Seksi</i> Bertempiaran Lari, Cuba Menyorok (Sexy Women Scatter and Run, Trying to Hide)	<i>Kosmo</i>	5/6/2025
c. GRO <i>Seksi Hanya Pakai Baju Tidur</i> (Sexy GRO Only Wearing Nightwear)	<i>Kosmo</i>	11/11/2024
d. <i>Jururawat Thailand</i> Pelaris Pusat Hiburan (Thai Nurse Becomes Attraction at Entertainment Outlet)	<i>Kosmo</i>	28/9/2024
e. GRO <i>Seksi</i> Menyorok Bawah Sinki (Sexy GRO Hides Under the Sink)	<i>Kosmo</i>	3/11/2024
f. 29 GRO Thailand Laos <i>Putih Gebu</i> Ditahan (29 Fair-Skinned Thai and Laotian GROs Arrested)	<i>Kosmo</i>	25/4/2025
g. GRO <i>Seksi</i> Dapat Upah RM3,000 Daripada ‘Bos’ (Sexy GRO Received RM3000 Allowance From a Boss)	<i>Kosmo</i>	10/10/2023
h. <i>Baju Setonton</i> Nak Sambut Hari Lahir (A Wardrobe Full of Clothes to Celebrate a Birthday)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	17/6/2025
i. <i>Lari Berseluar Dalam</i> (Ran While Wearing Only Underwear)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	25/2/2025
j. GRO Vietnam ‘ <i>Mandi Peluh</i> ’ Sembunyi Dalam Bilik Rahsia (Vietnamese GROs Sweating and Hiding in a Secret Room)	<i>Utusan</i>	9/6/2024

There are also many instances of framing female foreign workers within a sexually connotative frame. This particular segment of the foreign worker population is often depicted as being involved in the sex trade or

insinuated as using sex and their female wiles as a tool, further portraying the females as immoral and sinful, such as "GRO Seksi Hanya Pakai Baju Tidur" and "Lari Berseluar Dalam".

Table 3: Theme – Labels/ Slurs

Examples of News Headlines	Newspaper	Date
a. Enam GRO <i>Pondan</i> Dicekup (Six Transgender GROs Arrested)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	17/10/2023
b. <i>Awang Hitam</i> Bergelut Dengan Polis (Black Man Struggles with Police)	<i>Sinar Harian</i>	22/4/2024
	<i>Utusan</i>	29/4/2024
c. <i>Awang Hitam</i> Edar Dadah Dihukum Penjara 30 Tahun, 12 Sebatan (Black Man Jailed 30 Years and Given 12 Strokes for Drug Trafficking)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	19/10/2023
d. GRO <i>Ala Bollywood</i> (Bollywood-Style GROs)		

Labels like "*Awang Hitam*" and "*Pondan*" are commonly used by Malay newspapers to describe foreign workers. "*Awang Hitam*", for instance, refers to their dark skin color. "*Hitam*" (Black) being associated with negative connotations such as rebellion, evil, and aggression. Similarly, term like "*Pondan*" is offensive labels used to describe transgenders. These labels not only reinforce negative stereotypes but also shape how Malaysian society perceives and responds to foreign workers. The consistent use of such labels, which often carry harmful and insulting connotations, is deeply troubling. This practice raises serious concerns about the role of media in perpetuating prejudice and marginalisation on the out-groups.

Table 4: Theme – Derogatory Language

Examples of News Headlines	Newspaper	Date
a. PATI Ditangkap Ketika <i>Berseronok</i> (Illegal Immigrants Arrested While Having Fun)	<i>Kosmo</i>	12/1/2025
	<i>Kosmo</i>	2/11/2024
b. <i>Sanggup Mengemis</i> Kerana Raih RM12000 (Willing to Beg to Earn RM12,000)	<i>Kosmo</i>	14/11/2023
c. Rupa Rupanya <i>Kerja Warga Asing</i> (Turns Out It Was the Work of Foreigners)	<i>Kosmo</i>	15/10/2023
d. Pati <i>Lari Lintang Pukang</i> Tempat Tinggal Digembur Imigresen (Illegal Immigrants Flee in Panic as Immigration Raids Their Residence)	<i>Utusan</i>	7/11/2023
e. 71 Pati Peghuni <i>Kediaman Kotor Busuk</i> Ditahan Imigresen (71 Illegal Immigrants Living in Dirty and Smelling Housing Detained by Immigration)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	22/4/2024
	<i>Ahad Metro</i>	3/11/2024
f. Warga Asing <i>Naik Tocang</i> (Foreigners Raised Their Braids)		
g. Pendamping <i>Bawah Sinki</i> (Companion Hiding Under the Sink)		

Malay newspapers often employ derogatory language, including labels that dehumanize, distort, and display bias. Labeling is closely linked to the concept of stereotyping, with influential media outlets, particularly newspapers playing a key role in imposing these labels. Such labels are often used to distinguish between "deviant" and "non-deviant" individuals; in-groups and out-groups, and they can target out-groups such as foreign sex workers, foreign transgender individuals, foreign psychiatric patients, and general foreign workers.

Table 5: Theme – Threat to Local Resources and Business Opportunities

Examples of News Headlines	Newspaper	Date
a. Warga Asing Mampu Jadi Pengurus Kelab (Foreigners Able to Become Club Managers)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	17/10/2023
b. Pusat Hiburan Dikuasai Warga Asing (Entertainment Centre Dominated by Foreigners)	<i>Sinar Harian</i>	17/10/2023
c. Klang Sentral Sepi Dikuasai Warga Asing (Klang Sentral Dominated by Foreigners)	<i>Utusan</i>	20/10/2023
d. Mini Dhaka Masih Lagi Beroperasi (Mini Dhaka Still Operating)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	03/11/2024
e. Kampung Tradisi Ramai Warga Asing (Traditional Villages Crowded with Foreigners)	<i>Kosmo</i>	20/11/2024
f. Mereka Ini Tauke Bukan Pekerja Kedai (These are Business Owners, Not Shop Workers)	<i>Harian Metro</i>	24/09/2024
g. Ada Bazar Ramadan Dikoloni Warga Asing (Some Ramadan Bazaars Taken Over by Foreigners)	<i>Kosmo</i>	27/02/2026

The headlines and stories also utilised an accusatory tone to frame foreign workers as a threat to locals for stealing jobs, monopolising businesses such as Bazaar Ramadan and entertainment outlet, occupied housing areas and villages, and towards the end, they are living a luxurious life in Malaysia for being business owners.

Throughout the study of the news headlines published in the five major Malay newspapers, it is apparent that there is a firm construction of negative frames when the main character of the news is centred on foreign workers. With the stance taken by publications firmly in depicting foreign workers as invaders and encroachers who are immoral and criminal, it is not surprising that there is a strong sense of fear and distrust by the Malaysian public.

The reinforcement of foreign workers as the "out-group" builds up societal discourse about them being in direct conflict with the general well-being of the public. In the same vein, the overreporting of crimes perpetrated by a few foreign workers leads the general population to tar the rest of the group with the same jaundiced view.

CONCLUSION

Given the glaringly harmful framing practices by the newspapers involved, it can be concluded that such promotion of negative headlines and possibly xenophobic societal discourse should be discouraged. Representations of in-groups and out-groups sorely need further scrutiny from the audience as the marginalised and stigmatised group has no voice in the societal discourse. They have no power to challenge the negative representation that is continuously pushed onto them. Newsmakers must realise the implications of such practice, which could lead to a closed-minded and hostile society.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research should expand its scope beyond print newspapers by incorporating multiple forms of media practices, including online news platforms and social media discourse. Examining these diverse media platforms would provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how foreign workers are represented in Malaysian society. In particular, digital and online media platforms allow for more interactive discourse, which may reveal broader societal attitudes, and perceptions that are not always reflected in traditional media coverage.

By adopting a cross-media comparative approach, future studies could better capture the complexity of new media representation and its influence on public opinion and social attitudes toward foreign workers in Malaysia, as well as an investigation into the ethical conviction of media owners and news producers, should shed additional light on the state of the industry.

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