The Emerging Generation: Media Penetration and the Construction of Identity among Young Adults in Malaysia

Samsudin A. Rahim & Latifah Pawanteh

Abstract

The Malaysian young adults, between the ages of 13 and 25 grew up in a socio-economic environment that is different from that of their parents. Theirs is a lifestyle under the blitz of global media penetration and economic growth. As such, this generation which incidentally represents the "emerging generation" that will inherit and lead this nation in the coming millenium experiences economic comfort and opportunities, media access and consumption as well as local political stability that have created in them and for them varied norms and values. As Griffin (1997) mentioned this group is the asset of a nation and thus, who they are, what they do and who they become is of concern for it affects the future societal processes. Bochner (1973) defined the cultural identity of a society as that which is usually defined by its majority group, and that this group is usually quite distinguishable from the others within the socio-cultural environment. Therefore, cultural identity includes a set of attributes that are commonly felt and shared by a group that transcend their individual differences. Furthermore, this cultural identity is reflected and enacted in their everyday activities. The question at hand is one that is related to the continuity of the prevalent cultural identity, that which was enacted by the elders and became the framework upon which these young adults were raised and socialised. The subsequent questions explore the extent and influence of media penetration on these young adults. Has the media in terms of its usage and content created a significant pattern of norms that have the potential to rival and replace the existing norms? What are the features and characteristics of their identities that make them a distinctive group? Will this emerging identity contradict or collide with the desired cultural identity? This paper presents the findings of a current study that delves into several aspects that compile and create the identity profile of these young adults. These aspects include their concept of self, relationship with family, attitude towards the society, leisure and recreational activities as well as their media use, access and availability.

* Samsudin A Rahim, PhD is currently the Dean of the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

Latifah Pawanteh, PhD is currently the Chairperson of the School of Media and Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

Introduction

Youth is often associated with that which is° deemed as young, new, different, unknown and in the future. Youth is also associated with a phase in life where being frivolous, rebellious, contradictory, immature and insecure are common identity traits. More often than not, the perceived threat of social ills in the future as forecasted by the elder generation are tagged onto youth. It is almost as if society forgets that these young people exist within the very social fabric and conditions created by the present generation. Yet, youth as a social category is often cast with blame and aspersions. They have become easy scapegoats for any signs of degeneration and moral decadence that do not have ready explanations. So, what is the story of our local young people today - the generation with whom the future of our nation lies ?

Among the local populace, youth between the ages of 13 and 25 years make up about 20 percent of the society by the year 2000. They are considered by the government as the national asset and the future of the nation. Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), the government has allocated RM2.7 billion for activities related to the development of these young people. Griffin (1997) considered youth "as the key indicator of the state of a nation, it is expected to reflect the cycle of booms and troughs in the economy, shifts in cultural values over sexuality, morality and family life, concepts of nationhood and occupational structure".As it is, Malaysia's economic and social development progress over the past several decades has made it possible for the growth of a sophisticated multi-media landscape comparable to that of any developed nation. The dual success of stable leadership and pragmatic economic policies has resulted in a higher standard of living and thereby, making various forms of media an everyday experience for the common person. Today's local young people between the ages of 13 and 25 were born into the era of economics boom and global connectedness that has presented them with a multi-media haven unlike that of their predecessors.

Malaysia has set the year 2020 as the date by which she will attain developed status. Thus, all policies and institutions are geared towards achieving the goal of Vision 2020 as it is popularly known. To achieve that Vision, there is a need to create an informed and knowledgeable society whilst retaining local values and spirituality . Also there is a need to instill values that are deemed appropriate among the population especially among the youth. Time-aged values such as tolerance of ethnic, religious and diverse socio-economic backgrounds, respect for the elders, discipline, good working ethics and having religious and moral practices need to be sustained and inculcated in the face of newly emerging values. Nonetheless, in the strive for material affluence some moral and social values appears to have been seriously displaced and challenged (Samsudin, 1994; Karthigesu & Ramanathan, 1997)

The question then is : In view of the changing social and economic conditions, what then would be the lifestyle of this generation of future leaders and decision-makers? What would be the attributes and values that make up the composition of their identity?

Will it be a continuity of the existing characteristics or, has the changes in media landscape created a varied lifestyle peculiar to this generation of youth? As it is, the current argument asserts that an increase in media penetration especially those laden with

foreign materials will subsequently create a shift or transformation in local values and lifestyle. Furthermore, the internationalization through globalization makes the maintenance of national sovereignty and identity increasingly difficult as the composition of economic, cultural productions and consumption become increasingly transnational (Collins, Garnham and Lockleys, 1995).

This paper seeks to address these questions and concerns by firstly, assessing the changing media landscape and the patterns of media penetration. Secondly, to compile the attributes, values and leisure activities among the young and thirdly, to identify the emerging patterns of lifestyle as a consequence of multi media usage and in particular the Internet. Data to substantiate the emerging patterns is part of a study of media and cultural identity among the nation's youth. For the survey a total of 1,950 respondents between the ages of 13 and 25 were interviewed nationwide.

Media penetration and the changing local media landscape

Media penetration is the phenomenon that encompasses three aspects namely, the media environment, use and content by members of society. In the 1990's Malaysians saw the advent and introduction of faster and cheaper computers in the market, facsimiles and photocopy machines that print pages by the seconds, cellular telephones, pagers and multi-speaker telephone lines that allow accessibility beyond the familiar spaces, VCD's, satellite TV as well as the ever popular Internet services that have encouraged and allowed mediated communication to be interactive. These media penetration into the local daily activities naturally have created rituals around which these young people structure their lives (Samsudin and Latiffah, 1999).

In view of the higher concentration of media activities in the lives of today's youth one could attribute their construction of realities as partly and indirectly influenced by media images (Samsudin and Latiffah, 1999a). It is undeniable that the media plays a central role in our understanding of civil society. Media is not only regarded as a space where information is circulated so that persons can be well-informed, but rather as a cultural space where actors and events become typified into more general codes and more generic story forms that resonate with the society's culture. Furthermore, the media events are centrally involved in the construction of common identities and solidarities, and for this reason they are part and parcel of a civil society. And, as such, the media could also provide common rituals, common symbols and cultural grounds for attachment to the "imagined communities" and the "invented traditions". Subsequently, creating new patterns of commonalities and differences in the forms of social experiences that could (re) constitute emerging conceptions of cultural identity among these youths (Libes and Curran, 1998).

As it is, the development of the media industry in Malaysia in the 1990's is reflective of the economic development and the social transformations that occurred within the Malaysian society in general. It is also a consequence of the impending trends in the global communication industry. The Malaysian vision to become an industrialized country and its active participation in international forums has somewhat influenced the development of the media industry especially those in broadcasting and information

technology. Thus, several policies that embody these goals were conceived and implemented in the local media practices. Here, was the beginning of the privatization of the media that has encouraged the growth and expansion of various forms of print and electronic media as well as other supporting industries. In addition, the advancements in communication technology have seen computer-related technologies making inroads into the Malaysian media scene. The inception of the Multi Media Super corridor and the launching of Malaysia's own satellite is part of the overall effort to prepare Malaysia to be an active player in the global arena in the new millennium.

However, it is worth noting that the privatization of the local media industry is a government initiated policy. While it is evident that the government has allowed the establishment of several commercial radio and television stations, nevertheless it will not allow such an important institution to develop without any government say in its management. Other than instituting regulatory controls, the government, through its investment arm, Khazanah Nasional and through various "friendly" companies, has at least a controlling share in the companies that operate the commercial broadcast stations.

Patterns of media penetration: environment, use and orientation

Table 1 presents the distribution of media environment among the various categories of youth. The data indicate that the majority have access to terrestrial television, radio, newspapers, and comic/story books. However, access to satellite and other cable television services is relatively low that is ranging from 8 percent for those in the 13-16 age group to 15 percent among those in the 21-25 age group. On the other hand, access to personal computers at home is lowest among the 13-16 years (21 percent), and highest among the 21-25 years (35 percent).

Table 1: Media Environment

Types of Media	Ownership / Availability		
	13-15 yrs	16-20 yrs	21-25 yrs
Terrestrial TV	96%	98%	98%
Satellite TV	8%	8%	15%
Video player	54%	62%	65%
Personal computer	21%	29%	35%
Video game player	29%	28%	31%
Radio	97%	98%	97%
Cassette player	51%	67%	74%
Newspaper/magazines	96%	96%	95%
Story books/Comics	90%	90%	89%
Music's shop	52%	69%	76%
Video game arcade	34%	47%	54%
Cinema	18%	27%	44%
Computer shop	34%	43%	60%
Cyber café	27%	36%	43%
Newspaper stall/bookstore	80%	89%	90%

Meanwhile, access to personal computers among the 16-21 years is 30 percent. For those who do not have access to personal computers at home, the alternative is in the use of facilities at the cyber cafes. As it is, the current data indicate that there is a trend towards the use of such facilities especially among the older age group with 43 percent in the 21-25 age group as compared to 27 percent among the younger age group of 13-15 years and 36 percent among those in the 16-20 age group.

As for media use, it can be observed the youths spend a considerable number of hours with one media or another. The average time spend with the various media range from 13 to 17 hours per day (refer to table 2). Listening to the radio and watching television programmers seems to be the main preoccupation of today's youth. An emerging trend in media use in Malaysia is the duration of time spend with computers and playing video games. When the duration of time spend with computers is taken collectively, it shows that the duration surpasses both television and radio. Those between the ages of 21-25 years spend the most time, about 26 hours per week utilizing the various software and facilities. The lower age category of 13-15 years spend 13 hours while those between the age of 16-20 years spend 19 hours weekly utilizing the computer.

Table 2: Media Use

Types of media	13-15 yrs	16-20 yrs	21-25 yrs
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Terrestrial TV	13.3	18.2	19.0
Satellite TV	7.8	14.9	11.4
Watching video	8.9	6.8	8.0
Playing video game	6.1	6.3	6.5
Listening to radio	12.7	14.7	19.8
Listening to walkman	8.2	7.2	10.0
Reading newspaper/magazine	7.5	5.4	7.4
Reading short story/novel	7.8	5.3	5.8
Reading comic	7.8	3.7	4.9
Website	4.2	5.6	6.7
E-mail	4.3	7.4	6.6
Other computer uses	4.4	6.7	13.3

Another emerging pattern in media use in Malaysia is the time spend playing video either at the video arcades or with the video game machines in their homes. The average time spend for all age groups is about 6 hours per week. The data in Table 2 further reveals that the trend in media use is higher with the increase in age. The trend is noticeable most with regards to the use of electronic based media. The 21-25 age group spend an average of 19 hours per week watching terrestrial TV as compared to 13 hours among the 13-15 age group. It needs to be pointed put that although the access to satellite TV is relatively limited, yet among those who do have access it shows an increasing use of the media (7 to 11 hours per week).

The trend for print media is the opposite. Newspaper and magazine use ranges from 5 hours per week among the 16-20 age group to 7 hours per week among 13-15 and 21-25 age groups. In the case short stories and novels, the duration of time spent ranges from

5 to 8 hours per week. In this particular case youths in the age group of 13-15 spend the most amount of time. As for the reading of comic books the 13-15 age group show the highest duration of time spend as compared to the 16-20 age group who spends an estimate of 4 hours a week.

Media orientation, refers to the attention paid to the various programmers /news items/software. Based on the findings, it is found that the youths seemed to have paid considerable attention to entertainment (musical), sitcoms, health and educational based programmes. Talk shows, political news and religious news receive minimal to moderate attention. They also paid considerable attention to sitcoms and least attention is paid to talk show and political programmes. The youths also pay moderate attention to religious programmes/ news in the media.

Table 3: Media Orientation

Programmers/news	13-15 yrs	16-20 yrs	21-25 yrs
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Quiz show	2.4	2.3	2.4
Comedy	2.6	2.6	2.7
Science fiction	2.4	2.5	2.5
Documentary	2.5	2.5	2.6
Religious	2.2	2.2	2.3
Political	1.8	2.0	2.3
Educational	2.6	2.6	2.6
Health	2.6	2.5	2.6
Entertainment	2.7	2.7	2.7
Local singers	2.5	2.3	2.4
Foreign singers	2.6	2.6	2.6
Computer games	2.0	2.0	1.9

Composition of attributes and values

In order to identify the various composition of attributes, disposition and orientations that make up the everyday norms, values and beliefs of the local youth population, the value orientation taxonomy developed by Condon and Yousef's (1975) was used. This taxonomy allowed for the systematic study of the relationship between cultural values and communication behavior whereby the composition for both instrumental and terminal values was categorically classified into self, family, society, human nature, nature and the supernatural (Condon and Yousef, 1975). However, in this study only instrumental values pertaining to three categories namely, the self, family and society were used. A listing of terminal values reveal the prevalent tendencies and aspirations among today's young people.

a. Instrumental values

Personal attributes respected by peers

These young people felt that the values of sincerity, good-heartedness, respectful, friendly and trustworthy were perceived as respected attributes in them by their peers. Trustworthiness is the most highly regarded quality among the older group of youths.

Respected attributes in peers

From the data gathered it was found that the attributes highly regarded in a friend, include trustworthiness, good-hearted, cooperativeness, respectful, friendliness and sincerity. Cooperativeness and friendliness are given more prominence among the 13-15 age group (30%) but declined with the 21-25 age. However, with the 21-25 age group trustworthiness appears to be the attribute most sought by their peers as compared to the 13-15 years (13%).

Family-self

As for their perception as to the most highly regarded attribute in a child-parent relationship, the attributes most notably mentioned include obedience, respectful, honesty, hardworking and success in life and education. The attribute obedience is higher among 13-15 years (30%) and 16-20 years (29%), but not with the 21-25 years age group (16%). On the other hand, respectfulness is considered important by 19 percent of the older age group (21-25 years) as compared to 13% among the 13-15 years

Leadership qualities

The five main qualities that the respondents mentioned that they want their leaders to have are a ability to uphold justice, responsible, charismatic and visionary, transparency, and courageous. Responsibility and upholding justice are the attributes that the 13-15 years age group prefer most but varies as the age group increases. The older age group of 20-25 years old give emphasis to the attributes of being charismatic and visionary.

Table 4: Instrumental Values

All ages	13-15 years	16-20 years	21-25 years
Cars/motorcycles	Cars/motorcycles	Cars/motorcycles	Wealth
Wealth	Knowledge	Knowledge	Luxury homes
Knowledge	Computer/Internet	Wealth	Cars/motorcycles
Luxury homes	Wealth	Happiness	Happiness
Happiness	Luxury homes	Success in life	Happy family
Computer/Internet	Success in life	Luxury homes	Jobs
Success in life	Happiness	Computer/Internet	Success in life

b. Terminal values

From the data a listing of terminal values that refer to the end-states that members desire or "things" to have or achieve" in order of priority includes, car/motorcycles, wealth, education, luxury homes, personal happiness. Ownership of computer and access to Internet, and successful life. However, when the data is analyzed according to age grouping, there is a variation in the order of priority.

Table 5: Terminal Values

Peer-self	Self-peer	Parents-self	Leaders
Sincerity	Trustworthiness	Obedient	Uphold justice
Good-hearted	Good-hearted	Respectful	Responsible
Respectful	Cooperativeness	Honesty	Charismatic and visionary
Friendly	Respectful	Hardworking	Transparency
Trustworthiness	Sincerity	Successful in life/education	Courageous

It is interesting to note that while the younger age groups are in pursuit of the local social status symbols such as cars and motorcycles, they still regard having knowledge/education as one of their top priorities. The data indicated that the 13-15 years old are interested to own computers and have access to the Internet. This is clearly a reflection of the times, that is, computers and Internet access is a novelty and the "in thing" to have and do. The other age groups have less priority for such ownership. The 21-25 years are into possession of materialistic goods such luxury homes and automobiles.

c. Value orientations

The three groups of youth were asked to respond to 11 items that would reflect their values with regard to family, community and country. The responses were then analyzed to see if there is any differences between those with high and low media use.

In spite of the prevailing liberal attitude towards sex-related issues, a high percentage of the respondents would like the government to censor films that project explicit sexual scenes. An interesting point to note is that, the suggestion for the government to censor explicit sexual scenes in films comes across rather strongly from the older age group. This contrasted with the higher tolerance shown by the older age group 21-25 years in their willingness to accept the gay group as part of the community. If we are to consider that sex related values are anchored in the youth's religious beliefs, this study shows that a higher percentage of the youths still regard religious teaching as an important feature in their life.

With regard to the values toward the country, there is an indication that the youths have a strong sense of patriotism. Across the age groups, more than 90 percent are willing to defend the country if attacked and to protest if foreigners are criticizing the country. Nevertheless, a small percentage of the youth will migrate to other countries given the

opportunity. The desire to migrate is relatively higher among the 13-15 years age group (21%) compared to only 14 percent in the 21-25 age groups. This could be attributed to their exposure to foreign countries through the various media. Their limited personal travel experience naturally will make these foreign countries very desirable to them. The decline in such tendencies among the older age groups indicate greater knowledge and awareness of real living conditions in other countries. Only a small percentage of (7-8%) from all age groups seem to think that their future prospect in the country, in terms of educational and job opportunities are limited.

The family value that is highlighted in this study is the relationship between the youth and their parents. It has been a tradition in the Malaysian society to take care of one's parents when they are old by having them stay with one of the children. Needless to say parents do have a choice and often times they prefer to reside in their own homes. In such instances, affection and appreciation to the parents are shown by the obligatory and customary visits to their parents' homes during religious and cultural celebrations. A high percentage in the 13-15 age group and 21-25 age groups expressed that they do not have any problems in having their parents stay with them. The same is true with regard to visiting the parents. In all the age categories, they still consider visiting their parents in the outskirts of the big cities as an acceptable practice and that it is not an outdated practice.

We now move on to the values that are related to sex-related behavior. Among the youth between 13-15 years, only 52 percent are not afraid of people infected with HIV but the percentage increases with age. The same is true for the possibility of teaching sex education in schools. At the moment there is no policy yet on teaching of sex education in schools in Malaysia. Sex-related lessons are currently taught as part of the science or moral classes. Although only 64 percent of the 13-15 years agree that sex education should be taught in schools, the percentage among those in the higher age is higher with 92 percent among those in the 21-25 years. This could be attributed to the tendency for youth in this age group to begin initiating relationships and courtships. This age group is viewed as the marriageable age especially for young women (Karim, 1992). And thus, it is likely that they realized the necessity of being informed on relationships as well as sexual matters.

Data in Table 6 indicate that not all values are subject to influence by media use. However, several values show that they are subjected to the varying degree of media use. For example, there is a tendency for 16-20 years old who are exposed to low media use are willing to defend the country while those who are on high media use are not. For those in the 21-25 years with high media use are willing to migrate to other countries. With regard to film censorship, the 13-15 years and 16-20 years who considered as high media user will not agree to such censorship. In relation to the sex education, the higher media user in the 16-20 years age group agree that the subject should be thought in schools.

Discussions on media, values and lifestyle have always assumed that a high exposure to media especially if it is loaded with foreign programmes, will influence an individual's values, norms and practices. However, the active government social engineering measures through various policies and safeguards have somewhat thwarted the expected high negative effects of the media.

Table 6: Value Orientation and Media Us

	13-15 years		16-20 years		21-25 years	
	Yes	Chi-sq	Yes	Chi-sq	Yes	Chi-sq
I am willing to defend the country if attacked	91%	.33	94%	.28	96%	.05
I will protest if the country is criticized by foreigners	84%	.59	90%	.01	93%	.10
Given an opportunity. I will migrate to other country	21%	.06	16%		14%	.05
There is no future for education or occupation in the country	8%	.51	7%	.08	8%	.64
I will take my parents to stay with me when they are old	100%	.30	82%	.00	98%	.70
Visiting my parents in the villages is an outdated practice	28%	.57	28%	.65	23%	.44
I am not a afraid of those with HIV and AIDS	52%	.35	78%	.32	82%	.07
Sex education should be thought in schools	64%	.98	82%	.00	92%	.32
The government should censor sexual scene in films	80%	.05	92%	.00	93%	.78
We must accept the gay group as part of the community	69%	.08	72%	.25	77%	.29
Following religious teaching is important for success	98%	.43	99%	.03	99%	.47

Leisure and recreational activities

Leisure and recreational activities can be interpreted in several ways such as fulfilling residual time, activities people choose to participate or performing useful functions to achieve socially desired and approved ends (Haywood, et.al., 1995). Choice of leisure activities is circumscribed by a number acknowledged conditions such as time, money, individual capabilities and personal circumstances. Leisure activity is also related to the ways in which society is structured by social class, gender, age and race.

In this study, leisure is associated with the young people's use of public spaces and involvement in leisure activities. With regard to public spaces, the majority of youth (more than 90 percent) spent their time at shopping malls and food outlets such as fast food restaurants, hawkers stalls and to a lesser extend at open spaces such as public parks, playgrounds etc.

The other three public spaces are associated with entertainment. The cinema, which has been the traditional entertainment outlet for young people is no longer a popular place for today's youth to spend their free time. Slightly more than 50 percent of those in the 13-15 years age group frequent the cinemas as compared to 65 percent in the 21-25 years age group. The possible reasons for the lack of enthusiasm in going to the cinemas is probably due to the increase in ticket prices and the availability of VCD and videos with the latest titles in the market. Furthermore, these items are easily available and cheaper in cost.

The Karaoke lounge and pubs are the other entertainment public spaces frequented by the youth in Malaysia. While pubs and discos have been around since the 1980s, the karaoke lounge is a recent phenomenon. The government has imposed restrictions on the age requirement to enter these premises. As such we see only a small portion of the youth in the lower age groups who claimed to have been to such places. Yet, in the 21-25 years age group, 31 percent of them admitted to have been to such places during the last one month.

The video arcades and cyber cafes are prominent features in the urban and suburban areas. These places have been the target of criticism by parents as its clientele among students have resulted in higher incidences of truancy at these places. Meanwhile the Cyber cafes as the name implies is in line with the government policies to encourage computer literacy and creating an IT culture among the young. There is an increasing trend to frequent such places where 54 percent in the 16-20 years age group frequent such places compared to 48 percent in the 13-15 years age group and 46 percent in the 21-25 years age group.

The other aspect of leisure is the involvement in organized activities such as self-defense (e.g. karate, tae kwan do, silat), uniformed bodies (e.g.Red Crescent, Girl Guides and Boy Scouts), and environmental and conservation activities. The involvement in the activities organized by uniformed bodies are more popular among the younger age groups (75 percent) but gradually lessening among the 21-25 years age group (36 percent). A similar pattern is also evident in leisure activity involving self-defense. While there is a substantial involvement in such activities, nevertheless it declines as the age increases. Approximately 38 percent between the ages of 13-15 years are involved, and it dwindles to 26 percent among those in the 20-25 years. On the other hand, there is a growing awareness among the youths in Malaysia on environmental issues. Participation in conservation and environmental activities are becoming increasingly popular. About 47 percent of the 13-15 years age group are involved in such activities. The percentage increased to 54 percent among the 20-25 years age group.

Table 7: Leisure and Recreational Activities and Media Use

Leisure activity	13-15 years		16-20 years		21-25 years	
	Yes (%)	Chi-sq	Yes (%)	Chi-sq	Yes (%)	Chi-sq
Shopping complex	94	.31	93	.00	97	.17
Cinema	53	.30	58	.01	65	.15
Place of worship	89	.16	84	.64	89	.83
Restaurant	95	.21	95	.00	97	.08
Self-defense	38	.08	36	.40	26	.68
Uniformed organization	75	.42	62	.07	34	.18
Concert/theater	47	.03	51	.06	54	.36
Religious activities	79	.43	78	.09	79	.49
Charity work	76	.10	68	.57	63	.53
Karaoke/pub/disco	71	.70	54	.00	75	.08
Video center/cyber café	48	.16	54	.00	46	.18

In spite of the rapid development and industrialization in Malaysia, the interest in religious activities is still strong among these youths. This is in line with the national philosophy, Rukun Negara, which among other things emphasizes the belief in God as its lead tenet. Involvement in religious activities is high, that is around 80 percent regardless of age groups. The high involvement in voluntary activities are also high but reveals a decline with the increase in age. The involvement of the 13-15 years age group is 76 percent and dwindles to 69 percent for those between 16-20 years and percent among those in the 21-25 years.

It is to be assumed that the youths will develop their political consciousness as their age matures. The government policies of not encouraging students in high schools and universities to be involved with partisan politics somewhat hinders their interest in political activities. This is evident in the high proportion of more than 80 percent of the youths who have never participated in political activities. The case is even notable among the 21-25 years where only 14% of them have participated in political activities.

Media Penetration: Discussions and Implications

The data on instrumental and terminal values reveal that the attributes that are reflected consistently throughout the three categories of self, family and society in all age groups are honesty, respectfulness and cooperativeness. Admittedly, these are traditionally inherent values that make up the backbone structure of existing local values. These values are practiced in the homes and in everyday interaction. These are the values that every local born child is introduced to as his/her initiation into the local society through the various rituals, rules, taboos and language games that exist in the local social marketplace. As it is, these values have been strategically inserted and played and out in the various public campaigns as reflected by the promotion activities towards the sustenance of a caring society, Mesra (Warmth), Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa (Language is the soul of a Race), Malaysia Boleh ! (Malaysia Can), and the IT Campaign just to name a few. Thus, the lexicographic ordering of those values in the hierarchy of their priority reveals a continuation of the prevalent value orientations among the young.

Furthermore, in line with the study by the East Asian Pacific Affairs Division (Villegas, 1997), even though there may be some values such as hard work, loyalty, closeness to family ties and frugality that are universally well regarded, without a doubt this study has shown that they are attributes and values that are unique and common to this generation of youth in Malaysia. The findings also show that there is a greater media penetration as a consequence of governmental policies that are aimed at promoting the media and IT industry. These policies have considerable implications on the living patterns of these young people as indicated by their media use, recreational and leisure activities.

Internet usage among adolescents

In an effort to further understand media related activities especially the growing use and significance of the Internet as a feature in a lifestyle that is emerging among the youth, a focus group was held with 12 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16. In this study

"lifestyle" is taken to mean ways of living a life and in this case it would encompass aspects of events in everyday life such as what, when and with whom situated acts takes place. It would also include the local meanings of those situated acts to the persons concerned. As such, issues of everyday routines, self-concept, relationship whether it is personal, social, cultural or virtual, get played out in the context of an emerging lifestyle.

The focus group comprised six young men and six young women from three ethnic groups namely, Malays, Chinese and Indians. The conversations were then organized according to the contexts in the theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce and Cronen, 1980). It is felt that this contextual schema provides an insight into the patterns of lived experiences. Two sessions of the focus group were held with the 12 adolescents and the interpretations below provides an insight into the local meanings within the context of media penetration.

Episodes: These are communicative routines which the participants view as distinct wholes and are characterized by special rules of speech and non-verbal behavior and often distinguished by opening or closing sequence.

The discussions revealed that these adolescents have personal computers in their homes and that the computers were mostly used for schoolwork and playing games. When it comes to Internet use, they tend to do so at the cyber cafes which they frequent at least three times a week. The most popular and common web sites shared by these groups of adolescents include the IRC, music, sports and games. They were introduced to these sites by their friends. E-mail is another popular use.

Steven : I like it a lot at the cybercafés, more friends, try out more things...

Chin : Me too, can try out new things, don't feel so dumb, can smokelah, play pool

Vasanthi : I do use it at home but I like it at the X Café, lots of friends
Amai : We use the IRC together, fun this way, e-mail also

KL : It's casual and good music videos at the cyber cafes

Samad : I download a lot of stuff, mostly games, songs

Anand : Me too, new software also

The cybercafés have become a place to meet other friends, listen to music since these places have very good stereo systems, watch MTV and VHS on the television and to play pool. It is also a place to socialize without any inhibitions since they are mostly among their peers. Admittedly, it is also the place for them to "smoke freely". A few of them did mention that they have "stumbled" onto pornographic sites but this is not a site that they frequent. They have protested that at times their on-line chat is interrupted by some form of pornography or other which they found most irritating. The focus group discussions further revealed that these adolescents are on the Internet on a daily basis for at least 2 hours per day. They regard the times spent on the Internet as their "break time" or "filler times" for if it is not the Net then they will be on the phone.

Relationship: It is the story that is implicit and makes the collective "we" in a communication episode. The relationship context enacts the moral framework in which that relationship occurs and informs what is allowed, prohibited, privileged or obligated in any given interaction.

They admitted that on-line chatting is additive and that they chat to make new virtual friends. These virtual friendships then become the topic of conversations with real friends off-line. Five of them revealed that they have met their virtual friends of the opposite gender out of curiosity. A few remarked that they seem to carry out a "short-lived invisible romance with someone out there". To those involved these relationship are fun and fill up their time. Topics of discussions with on-line friends include school related activities, music, boyfriends related issues, parents, fashion and the sharing of jokes. Relationship on the Net seem to have a playful flavor rather than a seriousness. Perhaps, this is a reflection of the age group where adolescence is a time for exploring and experimenting rather than grounding oneself in lifelong commitments.

> *Amai : Found a guy once, 2 months' long marathon chat, everyday till my sister told my mom*

> *Samad : Dissappointing-lah, when I met her, Tak best !*

> *Jun : Some are nuts, just nuts, weirdos, like old people....*

> *KL : Can't stop once you get on, there's always something to tell*

> *SMini : Never use my own name so I can pretend to be someone else, I like it Everybody's like that, only playing*

> *Shanti : Must use cool names or nobody will know you*

> *Anand : Nope. Parents not into this, at home I surf for info. At Y café I do anything...right, you all?*

> *Samad : It's like bonding-you do this with your group only, like at the Mall*

> *Sara : Replaces X Mall, we hang out at X Cafes, everybody's there Meet cool guys schools there, local guys... boring*

As for their parents, they all laughed when asked if their parents share in these conversations. An affirmative "no" was the response to parents knowing about the topics on-line and another affirmative "no" when it comes to revealing their on-line nicknames. They do share this nickname information with their peers. This group of adolescents admitted that they have met several weirdos and perverts on-line but they were quick to break-off the chat. They have also encountered rascist remarks such as being referred to as 'blackies' and told to leave a particular chatroom.

Autobiography: It represents the stories that a person knows about himself/herself that was the consequence of interaction with others. It is composed of all the actions and abilities that make up one's self-concept. It is not fixed or finished but rather continuously evolving with each interaction.

This group of adolescents reside in the suburbs and represent the growing middle class with two working parents and no more than four siblings in each household. From the discussions it was found that there is a range of between 2 months to 3 years in Internet usage.

KL : I knew Amai at X café and Samad also

Amai : Jadi gempaklah

Anand : Before and after tuition...just hanglah

Chin : No, we don't cut class

Jami : I know a lot of girls who say that they know everything on IRC, and they lie but it's okay, the other person is also lying I think. I know because I say I'm fair and can sing and all when I'm not !

Maggie : talk about exams, teacher, parents, boys, problems......

They all agree that being on the Internet and hanging out at particular cybercafés makes them one of the "in" people, the "happening kids", the "gempak" and to be "cool". To them, their on-line nicknames are fun names that they pick for themselves and most felt that they are names would never get their parents' approval. Several names border on blatant sexuality while others reveal a super-ego personality. They admitted to having changed their nicknames at least more than twice just to get a different response.

Several of the informants revealed that they have created a different personality on-line. However, they do not regard this act as deception or insincerity but just "good fun". It is all about being creative, freedom from parental control, comments and checks and about exploring what could be. Often, the on-line personalities possess characteristics that they like in others but that they feel they do not possess. Girls aspire to be slim, fair complexion, pretty and popular while the boys all want to have more money, to stand at 5'9" or 5'10", heavenly bodied (?) and to be popular.

Cultural patterns: They are essentially broad patterns of social order and the relationship of people to that order. They obligate, legitimize and prefigure certain ways of doing and acting in various situations for a group of people. Often times, what is thought of as common sense and taken for granted are cultural patterns.

It is interesting to note that the most popular media among this "cool" young people is the radio and television (in particular MTV and Channel V) for they all agree they like having music in the background all the time.

Jami : Like opening a book where one has to focus unlike the radio. You can switch it on, not pay attention to it, do other things and it still makes you happy.

Shanti : I still prefer the radio and MTV

Smini : Me too

Chin : Nothing beats the radio-there all the time

Anand : Parents should let us use the Net more often, it's entertainment but can still learn from it too

Sara : I'm still the same with my parents, like the TVlah, same only

KL : I'll let my kid's use the net Early, it's good look at Bill Gates He's smart. Everything about Internet is smart. It's good for us

Maggie : If not IRC then I talk on the phone...I have time, plenty

Zul : There's everything on the Net, religion is there too, nothing bad You mean those naked women? Only once......

Anand : I still follow the house rules, watch TV and I'm still Indian but I'm Cyber Chief elsewhere....

Maggie : No, it's okay to fantasize on the IRC, it's not like it's real

Zul : With real friends, it's bad to lie but IRC...that's different

Anand : Yea, a little make up story, who's to know

In as much as they do marvel at what the Internet offers them in terms of navigating for preferred information, they still cannot be without the other media especially their radios. To these young people the Internet is an entertainment media and that parents should encourage them to use it more. It is just another media and they do not understand the hype about it.

As for their daily living patterns, the times spent at the cyber cafes are "empty times" and "filler times". Those hours would have been spent either watching television, playing computer games or chatting on the phone. It is not time taken away from their family activities since their parents are at work during those hours. A few did admit that they have skipped tuition to visit the cyber cafes. Also, they are not keen for parental involvement with their Internet activities since the computers are small and require everyone to "zoom" into a small space. Unlike the television where viewing is in the family room and they can lounge around.

Internet usage : Consequences on lifestyle

What are the implications of additional new media such as the Internet on the lifestyles of these young people? The Internet is a high-involvement media that demands attention and particular skills. It is unlike the radio that is a low-involvement media. Nevertheless, despite the adolescents seeming preference for the radio the Internet continues to hold their interest as indicated by the increase in usage. This growing interest in a high-involvement medium that requires particular skills will ultimately benefit them in the long run.

As revealed Internet usage is a social event that is shared with peers and the preferred common venue is the local cyber cafes. Thus, this newly established commercial entity has now become the haunt of local adolescents. It is a place to be "oneself" free from all constraints, a sort of moral support group with a common generational interest. The IRCs have become a place to explore all creativity with regards to identities and relationships. It is also the place to find friends of the opposite sex, talk about problems, share jokes and interests.

Then, there's the issue of names, nicknames and created personas on the Internet? Does it matter if one changes it from time to time? A person's name is a marker that defines the physical as well as the emotional entity. One's name though given at infancy encompasses all of a person's characteristics over the years. At the mention of the name, immediately we conjure up some traits. As it is, these adolescents have found the Internet to be the avenue to create and give themselves new names. It is the opportunity to present a persona that is interesting, powerful, beautiful, sexual or super intelligent just so as to get responses. They will not use their own names for fear of rejection, criticism and privacy. A rather smart act by such young people for at such a tender age of between 13 to 16 they seem to know the desired attributes in society.

In addition, there is no sense of wrong doing or insincerity in assuming a false name or identity or in their term "created identity" since "everybody is doing it". This is surely an interesting notion of collective redefining of a situated act in this case "lying" or "making up stories" that is otherwise deemed as wrong into one that is "playful" and is acceptable by the group. Hence, virtual friendships are separated from real life by an interpretation of its playful nature that is supported by a different moral order. And they seem to move in and out of these moral orders without much difficulties or constraints for they regard all that exist in cyberspace as entertainment.

As mentioned earlier the Internet to this group of adolescents is more about entertainment rather than educational. Thus, one can say that for this group of adolescents Internet usage gives them a sense of empowerment, freedom and collective belonging to a group and place (the cyber cafes). It is a cyber venue that is shared with peers and not parents except when it is at home. Furthermore, a lot of the learning about Internet usage comes from peers rather than parents. Thus, there appears to be a growing support group among the adolescents when it comes to the Internet. Nevertheless, this pattern of separation in use that was uncommon before since television is a "family" entertainment medium must be looked into. Since, 13 to 16 years of age is relatively young by our local standards (after all voting is only at 21 and driving at 18), thus parents need

to know and show an interest in what their adolescents do on the Internet. After all, for that age group parents do take a keen interest in their academic learning and so why not extend it to Internet usage? In addition, this separation in use will ultimately create a possible breach in parent-adolescent relationship if allowed to persist unchecked.

Conclusion

The everyday life of our local youths is one that exist within a spectrum of media penetration : both global and local. The media both "old" (print and electronic) and new (computers and the Internet) have become part and parcel of their everyday lives. Today, the Internet has most certainly made inroads that rivals the usage of both forms of "old" media. It is evident that this generation of youths have been shaped by the social engineering process of the government. All policies created and implemented were an off-shoot of the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1970. This Policy with its economic growth and restructuring of society as a thrust has been the mainstay for almost 29 years. This present group of youth (13 to 25) were born into the socio-economic conditions that developed as a consequent of that master plan. Without a doubt, their lifestyle, education, attributes and values were created either directly or indirectly by all that is made available or absent by the superordinate Policy.

The challenge facing this generation is of course the growing interconnectedness and globalization of the media, education and economic systems that may create tensions in their existing priorities and call for a reordering. Nevertheless, the society especially the youth are not expected to engage in the global media and IT age unprotected. Since the development and progress in the media and IT industry is a government sponsored project, there are already safeguards in place to minimize and brace for possible negative side effects. There is a call to all sectors involved to inculcate and nurture local traditional values and societal structures among the young for it is these values that can be the buffer against possible encroachment. Thus, the imagined (and yet possible) phobias of cultural imperialism, loss of sovereignty and cultural identity are observed and checked through a concerted effort by the government and all supporting institutions.

References

Adler, P.S. (1975). Beyond cultural identity: Reflections on cultural and multicultural man. In Samovar, L.A. and Porter R.E. (Eds) *Intercultural communication: A reader.* 4 ed. Belmont: Wadsworth

Berger, P. (1963). *Invitation to sociology: A humanistic perspective.* Garden City: Anchor.

Bochner, S. (1973). "The mediating man and cultural diversity", *Topics in Culture Learning,*1, 23-37.

Condon, J.C. & Yousef, F. (1975) *An introduction to intercultural communication.* Indianapolis: Merril-Bob.

Cronen, Vernon E. & Pearce, William Barnett (1992): Grammars of identity and their implications for discursive practices in and out of Academe: A comparison of Davies and Harre's views to coordinated management of meaning theory, *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 23, 1-40.

Griffin, C (1997) 'Representation of the Young' in J. Roche and S. Tucker (eds) *Youth in Society.* London: Sage Publications.

Hall, Stuart & du Gay, Paul (1996). *Question of cultural identity.* London: Sage.

Ibrahim, Zawawi (1996). Mediating identities in a changing Malaysia: An introduction. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 34 (3), 4-7.

Karthigesu, Ranggasamy & Sankaran, Ramanathan (1997). Asian global values and Liberalism: Attuning state policies to the convergence of telecommunications Technologies in Malaysia, *Asian Journal of Communication,* 7(2),

Karim, J. (1992): *Women and culture: Between Malay adat and Islam*. Boulderr: Westview Press.

Haywood, L., Keo, F. Bramhan, P. Spink, J. Copenerhurst, J., and Henry, J. (1995) *Understanding Leisure. Cheltenham. Standley Thomas Ltd.*

Liebes, R. & Curran, J. (1998). *Media, ritual and identity.* London: Routledge.

Morley, D. & Robin, K. (1995), *Spaces and identity: Global media, electronic Landscape and cultural boundaries.* London: Routledge.

Samsudin A. Rahim. (1994). *Tingkah laku lepak remaja masa kini* (loafing in public spaces among youth). Research report submitted to the Malyasian's Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Samsudin A.Rahim & Latiffah Pawanteh (1999). *Media penetration and cultural Metamophosis: A society in transition,* Paper presented at the Asia Pacific Conference Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 26-29 April.

Samsudin A.Rahim & Latiffah Pawanteh (1999a). *Media penetration, cultural identity and young adults in Malaysia.* Paper presented at the 15th Biennial Conference of the World Communication Association, 28 June -2 July 2003, Kuala Lumpur.

Shamsul, A.B. (1996). Debating about identity in Malaysia: A discourse analysis. *Southeast Asian Studies,* 34(3), 8-31.

Sussman, G. *Communication technology and politics in the information age.* London: Sage

Villegas, Bernando M (1997). Social impact of new communication technologies, *Media Asia,* 24, 2, 183-205.