

Framing Analyses of Mainstream and Independent Media: Frame Preferences Before and After the Malaysian 15th General Election

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Abstract

The recent changes in the Malaysian political landscape have raised questions about the effectiveness of Malaysian media reform plans. This study investigated the journalistic practices employed by Malaysian mainstream and independent media in reporting political parties before and after the 15th general election. Using a quantitative content analysis approach, an integrative framing analysis was conducted on 863 news articles from English, Malay, and Chinese language online newspapers. The findings revealed both significant differences and similarities in the framing practices used by the media outlets. Notably, both mainstream and independent media heavily relied on morality and responsibility frames, while conflict frame was found to have declined significantly in the post-election period. The media also utilised visual frames to address political issues and convey specific narratives. Furthermore, the news tone was found to strengthen the functions of news frames, with the responsibility frame written in a positive tone, and the morality and conflict frames written in a negative tone. This integrative analysis can deepen the understanding of the framing strategies employed by the different types of media and expand existing knowledge by exploring the connections between various framing approaches.

Keywords: Mainstream Media, Independent Media, Malaysian 15th General Election, News Frames, News Tone

Introduction

The Malaysian 15th general election had proven that the Malaysian citizens were hungry for change and political reform. The election outcome signalled a shift in the electorate's preferences, as they sought to move away from the established political order and embrace a more progressive vision for the country. However, Barisan Nasional (BN)'s hegemonic rule was challenged for the first time in the 12th general election in 2008, when the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) won 5 out of 13 state governments (Mokhtar, 2008). The BN's

hegemony collapsed in the 14th general election in 2018, ending their 60 years rule (Saabar et al., 2017).

This shift in political power has raised fundamental questions about the role and influence of Malaysian media in election coverage. Framing is a key concept in political communication and media studies, as it shapes the public's understanding of political issues and events (Mustafa et al., 2014). The way the media frames a story can significantly influence audience perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. Therefore, this study aims to explore the frame preferences of Malaysian mainstream and independent media before and after the 15th general election. The mainstream media's partisan stance towards the BN coalition before May 2018 was apparent (Baharin et al., 2020), however, in the context of the 15th general election, the mainstream media's framing strategies had shifted in an attempt to regain the trust of voters and counter the coverage provided by independent media outlets.

This study examined the use of generic frames and visual frames in news coverage by three mainstream media outlets and two independent media outlets. The aim was to evaluate the ideologies and cultural variations in their reporting on political parties before and after the 15th general election in 2022. By analysing the texts and visuals in political news coverage, this study can contribute to the existing but limited literature on Malaysian media.

The Political Landscape in Malaysia

Malaysia gained independence from the British in 1957, with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) leading the independence movement. The party later formed a government by leading a coalition of 13 political parties under the BN umbrella. Through this coalition, BN was able to secure a two-thirds majority in parliament which allowed BN to form the government.

It was claimed that BN's dominance and success in elections were associated with manipulations in the electoral process, money, and media control (Chan, 2018; Tee et al., 2018). The media was deeply integrated into BN's operations and served as a propaganda tool through their ownership and legislative control. They systematically depicted opposition parties in a negative and antagonistic way to instill fear among voters about supporting parties without governing experience (Abbott, 2011; Gomez, 2014).

Despite BN's use of media tactics to instill fear, its dominance started waning in the 12th general election in 2008. BN lost its two-thirds majority in parliament, refuting the perception of the party's invincibility (Mokhtar, 2008). Political analysts attributed this setback to the growing momentum of the opposition PR coalition, comprising Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). Additionally, the rising cost of living, economic slowdown, and the influence of new media channels further undermined BN's support (Baharin et al., 2020). The situation worsened for BN in the 14th general election in 2018, as the party lost power for the first time since Malaysia's independence (Suffian, 2018). The 15th general election in 2022 was held amidst political instability and the Covid-19 pandemic, which had severely impacted the Malaysian economy and people's livelihoods.

Given the dramatic political shifts and instability, it is essential to examine the media's strategies to capture public attention before and after the general election. To effectively engage their audience and influence their decision-making during elections, the media needed to employ the appropriate framing approaches in their reporting.

Factors Influencing the News Frames

According to Schwalbe et al (2015), media outlets select, present, and shape news content using frames. These frames simplify complex issues into easily understandable information for readers. Frames can potentially sway readers' considerations, opinions, and judgments. Additionally, visuals have become increasingly influential in shaping public perception in today's media landscape, which can significantly shape how political parties are perceived by the public (Fahmy et al., 2014).

The tone used in framing is equally crucial. As argued by de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003), the analysis of the frames would be incomplete if the tone, which indicates polarization between positive and negative elements and implicitly conveys favourable or unfavourable perspectives, was not considered. The inherent tonality of the frames could potentially influence how voters perceive and evaluate political parties and their issues.

In Malaysia, political parties have historically been able to exert control over the media through ownership stakes and legislative measures (Baharin et al., 2017), such as the Printing Press and Publications Act (PPPA) of 1984, the Sedition Act (SA) of 1948, and the Official Secret Act (OSA), allowed the government to exert significant control over the dissemination of information until the rise of independent media platforms like Malaysiakini in 1999 on the internet. The shift in political power in 2018 that ended the BN coalition's 60-year rule raises interesting questions about how the media's framing of political parties has evolved.

Research Question

- RQ1:** What are the differences in the presence of generic frames before and after the 15th general election by the media outlets?
- RQ2:** What are the differences in the presence of visual frames before and after the 15th general election by the media outlets?
- RQ3:** What is the tone employed by the media outlets in political news coverage?

Methods

To achieve the aim of this study, a quantitative content analysis published by mainstream and independent media was conducted.

Sample

Three mainstream media outlets (The Star, Berita Harian, and Sin Chew) and two independent media (Malaysiakini and Free Malaysia Today) were chosen for content analysis guided by framing theory and the concept of news tone. The news articles analysed in this study were obtained from the LexisNexis academic database. The sample collected was spanned from November 5, 2022 to November 26, 2022. This duration was selected to investigate how

media outlets portrayed political news before and after the 15th general election. For all media outlets, the search keywords included “GE 15”, “Pakatan Harapan”, “Barisan Nasional”, and “Perikatan Nasional” and the results were stored. Figure 1 illustrates the process of selecting and excluding news articles for analysis.

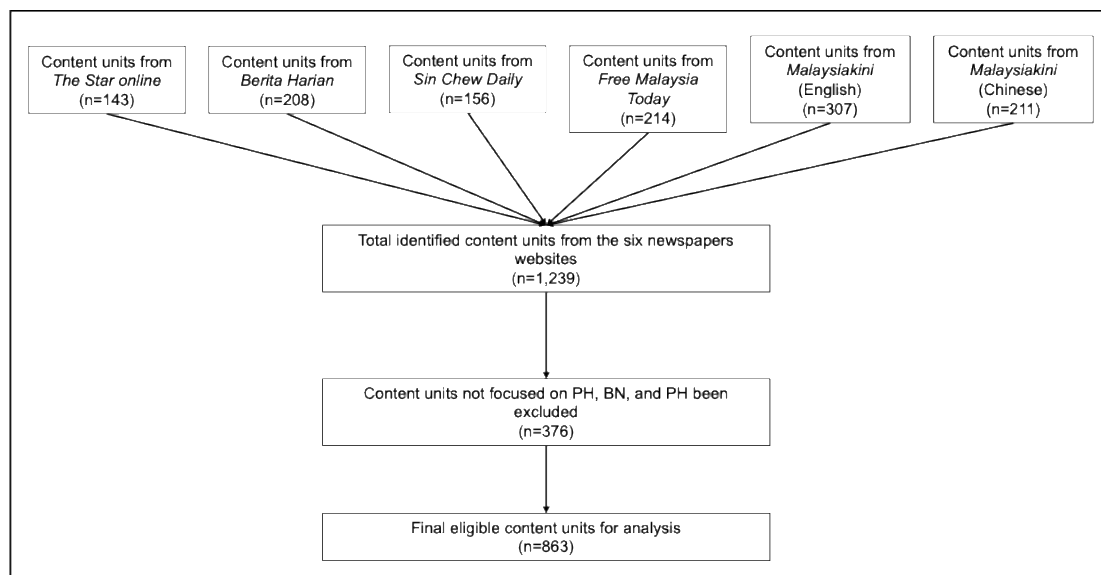


Figure 1. Content Units Selection and Exclusion Process

In total, 863 news articles were collected, with 371 news articles (43%) from mainstream media and 492 news articles (57%) from independent media. The distribution of news articles between the pre- and post-election periods is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Frequency of news coverage

Media outlets	Political news articles	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
The Star	106	12.3
Berita Harian	151	17.5
Sin Chew	114	13.2
Malaysiakini (English)	219	25.4
Malaysiakini (Chinese)	115	13.3
Free Malaysia Today	158	18.3
Total (N)		863

Research Instrument

Two multilingual coders were hired and trained for 17 days to conduct the coding of data from the selected media outlets. The coders were chosen based on their fluency in English, Malay, and Chinese, and their familiarity with the issue being studied by the researcher.

To analyse the news articles, the researchers created a codebook as a guide. The codebook was designed to extract specific information and determine the prominence of frames within the news articles. The first section gathered general details such as coder ID, newspaper, and

date. The second section focused on the relevant headlines and paragraphs to identify the presence of generic frames. The final section was used to gather information on news sources and tone. The last section analysed the visual frames present in the news articles. The information was coded as 1 representing present and 0 representing not present.

Operationalisation

To understand how the media framed political parties in the selected media outlets, three major contesting political parties in the 15th general election have been chosen for this study. First, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition has claimed better youth support, and the growing environmental movement has had a significant impact on Malaysian politics, making the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition important. Lastly, the BN coalition, which was the main player in the prior elections, is also included (Chin, 2023).

The study used the paragraph and visual as the unit of analysis. Each paragraph and visual in a news article served as the mechanism to measure the presence of a particular frame, following the approach suggested by Roberts (1989) and Fan (1988), which is a robust procedure for explaining the presence of frames within media content.

The key variables in the coding of paragraph comprised of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) generic frames (conflict, economic consequences, human-interest, morality, and responsibility frames) while the coding of visual comprised of Rodriguez and Dimitrova visual frames (denotative, connotative, stylistic-linguistic, and ideological frames) as presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Generic frames and visual frames

Frame	Descriptions
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The story refers to winner and losers. - The story focuses on the conflict between two opposing sides rather than presenting a more nuanced portrayal of the various perspectives on the issue.
Economic consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The story emphasizes the financial implications of an event, issue, or problem, highlighting potential gains or losses in the future. - The story emphasises the economic consequences of taking or not taking a particular course of action.
Human interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The story emphasises how the issue, event, or problem affects individuals and groups. - The story dramatizes the news, applying personal descriptions or emotional elements to generate empathy, anger, compassion, or sympathy.
Morality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The story emphasizes moral prescriptions by providing specific guidance on how to behave. - The story places the issue, event, or problem within the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions.
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The story identifies the causes or provides potential solutions to the problem or issue.

	- The story attributes responsibility for the event or issue to an individual, group, party, institution, or government.
Denotative	- Interprets objects and elements that are present in each photo.
Connotative	- Interprets the symbolic and associative meaning of the visual elements.
Stylistic linguistic	- Interprets visual frames depending on camera angles, camera distances and colours, and social distance in the photo. - Assesses the visual style, composition, and technical quality of the photo.
Ideological	- Examines how photos are employed as instruments of power in shaping public consciousness and historical imagination.

Procedure

The coders analysed each paragraph from the news articles individually. They identified the relevant paragraphs that referenced the political parties PH, BN, and PN, and reviewed each of these paragraphs at least twice before filling out the coding sheet.

The coding process involved analysing each relevant paragraph individually. The dominant frame for each paragraph was determined by the frequency of frames present in that paragraph. The coder had to identify the specific frame portrayed in each paragraph, drawing on their prior understanding of the political events described and referring to the definitions provided in the codebook. This same approach was used for the coding of visual elements as well.

The coder was required to identify the tone within each relevant paragraph. As suggested by Guenduez et al. (2016), a positive tone indicates gains, hope, success, and enthusiasm, while a negative tone conveys frustration, disappointment, threat, crisis, and disaster. A neutral tone occurs when the paragraph reflects neither positive nor negative sentiments. The coder had to determine the dominant tone for each relevant paragraph, based on the overall sentiment conveyed in the predicate and the news source's perspective. The predicate refers to the part of the sentence that provides information about the subject, such as what the subject is doing.

Intercoder Reliability

To assess the reliability of the coding, the researchers first conducted coder training, followed by an intercoder reliability test. In this study, two coders randomly coded 10% of the identified news articles to evaluate intercoder reliability using the Cohen kappa reliability test. The intercoder reliability results showed good agreement overall, with an average score of .83 for the generic frames, .87 for the visual frames, and .91 for the tone used in the frames.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analysed using IBM SPSS software (version 29.0). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, were generated through descriptive analysis and chi-square tests. The data analysis incorporated both descriptive and inferential statistics to test hypotheses that needed to meet a statistical significance threshold before they could be applied to a larger population. This study utilised content analysis to investigate

the framing factors that shape how news is framed overall, as well as how political parties are specifically framed using generic and visual frames.

Results

Generic Frames

RQ1 inquired on the differences for the presence of generic frames before and after the 15th general election among the media outlets. The use of conflict frame in the pre-election period was 23.9% ($N = 141$) and decreased to 17.7% ($N = 49$) in the post-election period. In total, it made up of 22% ($N = 190$) of political news coverage in the pre-election and post-election period among media outlets.

The use of economic consequences also pictured a fluctuating trend in the post-election period. It made up a total of only 1.7% ($N = 15$) of political news coverage of both mainstream and independent media in the 15th general election. The use of economic consequences frame in the pre-election period was 1.5% ($N = 13$) drastically decreased to 0.2% ($N = 2$) in the post-election period. Similarly, the use of human-interest frame also fluctuated from 10.7% ($N = 92$) to 4.5% ($N = 39$) during the election period. In total, it made up of 15.2% ($N = 131$) of political news coverage in both mainstream and independent media in the pre-election and post-election period.

The use of morality frame made up 28.3% ($N = 244$) of political news coverage in the election period. The results revealed the frame was widely used by the media during pre-election period with 18.1% ($N = 156$) before it decreased to 10.2% ($N = 88$) during the post-election period. The study found that the use of responsibility frame decreased from 21.4% ($N = 185$) to 11.2% ($N = 97$) during the election period. The responsibility frame recorded 32.7% ($N = 282$) as the highest amount of political news coverage among the other four generic frames.

Results from a Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis as shown in Table 2 demonstrated that the use of conflict frame was significantly more present in the pre-election period ($M = .24$, $SD = .43$) compared to post-election period ($M = .18$, $SD = .38$), $r = -.07$, $p < .05$. In contrast, the use of morality frame ($M = .32$, $SD = .47$) and responsibility frame ($M = .35$, $SD = .48$) were significantly more present in the post-election period.

The findings revealed significant differences in the use of the five generic frames before and after the 15th general election. The economic consequences frame had the lowest media coverage among the generic frames during the election period. Notably, the use of the conflict frame diminished substantially for the media outlets in the post-election period.

Table 2

The presence of generic frames

Generic frames	Pre-election		Post-election		<i>r</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
Conflict	0.24	0.43	0.18	0.38	-.07*
Economic	0.02	0.15	0.01	0.09	-.05
Human interest	0.16	0.36	0.14	0.35	-.02
Morality	0.27	0.44	0.32	0.47	.06
Responsibility	0.31	0.47	0.35	0.48	.04

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

Visual Frames

RQ2 examined the differences in the presence of visual frames before and after the 15th general election among the media outlets. The use of visual frames steadily decreased from the pre-election to the post-election period. The denotative frame made up 63% ($N = 539$) of political news coverage in the pre-election period, but this decreased drastically to 27.4% ($N = 234$) in the post-election period across both mainstream and independent media. In total, the denotative frame accounted for 90.4% ($N = 773$) of political news coverage during the election period. Similarly, the use of the stylistic-linguistic frame decreased from 61.7% ($N = 527$) in the pre-election period to 26.2% ($N = 224$) in the post-election period in both mainstream and independent media coverage. Overall, the stylistic-linguistic frame made up 87.9% ($N = 751$) of political news coverage in the pre-election and post-election period.

The use of the connotative frame steadily decreased from 56.3% ($N = 481$) to 24.6% ($N = 210$) during the election period, accounting for 80.9% ($N = 691$) of political news coverage across mainstream and independent media. In contrast, the use of the ideological frame decreased from 21.3% ($N = 182$) to 8.8% ($N = 75$) during the election period, making up only 30.1% ($N = 257$) of media coverage. The ideological frame recorded the lowest amount of media coverage, while the denotative frame was employed in the majority of political news coverage in the media outlets. The Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis in Table 3 revealed a statistically significant but weak negative relationship between the election period and the stylistic-linguistic frame ($r = -.11$, $p < .01$). Similarly, the correlations between the election period and the denotative, connotative, and ideological frames were also found to be weak and negative. This suggests that the election period had a relatively low influence on these visual frames, indicating that the usage of these frames did not change significantly over time.

Table 3

The presence of visual frames

Visual frames	Pre-election		Post-election		<i>r</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
Denotative	0.93	0.29	0.91	0.47	-.03
Connotative	0.83	0.38	0.77	0.42	-.06
Stylistic-linguistic	0.90	0.30	0.83	0.38	-.11**
Ideological	0.31	0.46	0.28	0.45	-.04

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

News Tone

RQ3 examined the tone used in the media's framing of political parties. As shown in Table 4, a Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between the responsibility frame and positive tone ($r = .22, p < .001$), as well as the morality frame and positive tone ($r = .09, p < .01$). Additionally, the analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between the conflict frame and negative tone ($r = .53, p < .001$), and a significant negative relationship between the responsibility frame and negative tone ($r = -.31, p < .001$).

The regression analysis results indicated a significant relationship between the responsibility frame and positive tone ($r = .22, \beta = .22, p < .001$), with an R^2 of .15. This suggests that there is a 22% likelihood of a positive tone occurring for every instance of the responsibility frame. Additionally, the results showed a significant association between the conflict frame and negative tone ($r = .53, \beta = .77, p < .001$), with an R^2 of .20, implying a 77% chance of a negative tone being present for every portrayal of the conflict frame in political news articles.

Table 4

The correlation between generic frames and tone

Frames	Positive	Negative	Neutral
	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>
Conflict	-.37***	.53***	.14
Economic	.08	.07	.02
Human interest	.02	.08	.11
Morality	.09**	.07*	.03
Responsibility	.22***	-.31***	.08

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to test the significant differences in the utilisation of frames by the mainstream and independent media outlets in political news coverage. In light of this aim, the study discovered that there were differences in the news coverage before and after the 15th general election by the media outlets. The study discovered that the conflict frame was the most notable frame that demonstrated significant difference which reduced significantly in news coverage during the 15th general election. This did not support the work of previous scholars, which noted the use of conflict frame identified as dominant in political news coverage (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2015). Correspondingly, the study demonstrates that media outlets relied heavily on morality and responsibility frames, which aligns with recent studies of Ahmad et al. (2020) and Baharin et al. (2020). Additionally, the use of visual frames steadily decreased from the pre-election to the post-election period, with the denotative frame being the most prominent. Interestingly, the study did not find any significant differences in the usage of visual frames by the media outlets before and after the 15th general election.

The findings suggest that the low presence of conflict frames in Malaysian media coverage may point to the state of democracy and the level of press freedom and balance in the country. Conflict frames are often used in political news to highlight criticism, attacks, and the representation of divergent viewpoints. This can provide a more balanced and objective

depiction of a story (McManus, 1994). However, in countries like Malaysia that have historically employed a development model of journalism, the routine of balancing competing perspectives may not be as firmly established (Neuman et al., 1992). Additionally, the level of conflict framing can suggest the degree to which journalists are involved in the news production and framing process. A low level of conflict framing may indicate that journalists are taking a more passive approach, simply relaying information rather than actively shaping the narrative.

The decrease in the use of visual frames over time may also indicate a shift in media practices and the prioritization of textual content over visual elements in political news coverage. This could be due to various factors, such as changes in editorial policies, technological advancements, or evolving audience preferences.

The findings on the relationship between media frames and news tone provide insights into how the media may be shaping public perceptions of political issues. The significant positive relationship between the responsibility frame and positive tone, as well as the morality frame and positive tone, suggests that the media may be using these frames to portray political parties and issues in a more favourable light. Conversely, the significant positive relationship between the conflict frame and negative tone indicates that the media may be using the conflict frame to cast a negative light on political actors and issues. This finding is significant because the tone of the news coverage can reveal positive or negative aspects inherent in the media frames (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003). It is possible that the mainstream media often used attack the opposition parties while the independent media used to criticise the government, which contribute to the understanding of the complex interplay between media framing and news tone in the context of Malaysian political reporting.

This study, like many empirical studies, faced several limitations. Firstly, the researchers' access to news archives was often restricted, requiring them to subscribe to the newspapers. Secondly, the process of separating news articles into paragraphs during coding potentially led to a loss of context within the sentences. Thirdly, some of the coded news articles were in Malay and Chinese, which may have influenced the identification of normative roles due to cultural, linguistic, or contextual factors.

Despite these limitations, the study indicates that journalistic practices, organisational influences, cultural factors, and constraints stemming from media outlets' political leanings are key factors shaping the frames used in news coverage during the 15th general election. Future research could strengthen the understanding of framing effects by conducting interviews with journalists to explore their perspectives on frames and news tone. Additionally, subsequent studies should further validate these factors when examining the visual frames in news coverage.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the study offers a comparative analysis of the framing strategies employed by mainstream and independent media outlets in Malaysia during the 15th general election. The findings suggest significant differences in the use of frames and news tone between the mainstream and independent media, which reflect the complex interplay between media framing and political reporting. The study emphasizes the

importance of examining both textual and visual framing in political news coverage, especially in transitional democracies like Malaysia. This enhances the understanding of media organizations' agendas, limitations, and strengths, and the implications for democratic processes in Malaysia.

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