

“Extra, Extra Read All About it!” Analysing the Element of Sensationalism on Domestic Violence Reporting During the Pandemic

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Abstract

Domestic violence is a pressing and serious issue that affects many individuals, especially women and children. However, some media has the tendency to report domestic violence cases in a sensationalised manner despite having a crucial responsibility of delivering news objectively. Using non-probability sampling, 30 online articles from Malay Mail and 30 online articles from Free Malaysia Today that is related to domestic violence were analysed using qualitative content analysis. This paper discovered four prominent themes that reveals the element of sensationalism such as headlines, emphasising on abusive actions, causes of domestic violence, and victim blaming. The study found that Free Malaysia Today reporting on domestic violence emphasises sensationalism more prominently compared to the Malay Mail. Future studies could expand the duration of the study of sensationalism and include a comparison of other online news media portals.

Keywords: Sensationalism, Media, Headlines, Domestic Violence, Pandemic

Introduction

The media, in its basic principle has a crucial responsibility and plays a critical role in shaping society – such as informing the public about current issues, news, and any social issues happening around the world while also creating awareness to the public, making it an important tool in today’s world (Murray, 2017).

However, the importance of the media has deviated from its original responsibility and role of public education and creation of awareness through news sensationalism. In essence, sensationalism is a strategy used by news media organisations to attract and reach more audiences in order to gain profit through content and headlines that are entertaining, amusing, and exciting. This is supported by Chadha & Harlow (2018) where the authors stated

that sensational content in the news is seen as a revenue-generating tool for the news industry that could lead to audiences' misperceptions of the current situation in the world. Content standards in both printed and online news portal differ which results in news coverages that are less in-depth and more sensationalised (Santana & Dozier, 2019).

In addition, sensationalism is used in news reporting to emphasise and stir audiences' emotions or grab their attention through dramatic and emotive news reporting and is typically used particularly in obscene topics such as crime, disasters, sex, and celebrity stories (Mourão & Robertson, 2019). The authors also warned that as sensationalist reporting aims to elicit strong feelings from audiences through the usage of intense or dramatic language, visual imagery or narratives that promote shock value, sensationalism has the capability of trivialising a complex topic -making them simplified and presented in a tabloid manner.

In the media, social issues and violence are typically eye catching and is often reported in a sensationalised angle. However, this is concerning as media has the ability to mobilise and shape the public's views and reflect public's opinions on various issues such as social, cultural, and political issues (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). Domestic violence, or domestic abuse can be defined as violence between intimate partners such as spouses. According to the United Nations (2022), intimate partner violence or known typically as domestic violence is defined as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner such as their spouse. Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Malaysia that focuses on domestic violence cases in Malaysia by providing shelter, crisis support such as emotional and physical support and counselling to women and also children who experience abuse and violence defines domestic violence as a pattern of violence, abuse or intimidation perpetrated by an intimate partner or spouse to gain or maintain control over the other intimate partner or spouse (Women's Aid Organisation, 2022).

Therefore, as domestic violence is a pressing social issue, mass media has a responsibility and plays a critical role in reporting and bringing forward issues of domestic violence to create awareness, advocate, and providing a platform where victims are aware of their rights and information on where to get help in order to help victims remove themselves from any unsafe situations. Hence, how a domestic violence case is reported in the media is important. Simons & Morgan (2018) stated that in reporting about violence against women, in particular domestic violence should be angled as a social problem instead of individual and private incidences.

In Malaysia, domestic violence cases are also reported in news media organisations hence, for the purpose of this study, two online news portals which are the Malay Mail (MM) and Free Malaysia Today (FMT) were analysed. The first online news portal analysed, the Malay Mail, is an English news platform which started as an English newspaper established in 1896 and it is the oldest newspaper that has evolved fully to digital in 2018 covering local and international news (Malay Mail, 2022). On the growth of the Malay Mail, Chin (2020) added that Malay Mail grew 250 per cent over a seven-day period in March tabulated by the Malaysian Digital Association (MDA). According to Similarweb (2022), the Malay Mail's readers' highest age demographics is 25 to 34 years old with a total of 34.01% and has an audience visit of 11.3million as of December 2022. The second online news portal analysed is Free Malaysia Today (FMT). Established in 2009, FMT is an independent, bilingual news portal that focuses on current affairs happening in Malaysia (Free Malaysia Today, 2022). According to Similarweb (2022a), FMT's highest age demographics consist of 25 to 34 years old with a total of 33.33% and has an audience visit of 17.3million as of December 2022.

Literature Review

History of sensationalism

The term “sensationalism” in news is not a new and foreign concept as it has existed in the early years. According to Grabe et al (2010), the element of sensationalism in news stories existed hundreds of years, dated back in the year 1500s through news books and news ballads in Europe. Printed media, such as newspaper, that were originally catered to wealthy families who were literate in the United States went through changes in the 1830s when development and advances in printing allowed newspapers to be printed at a cheap price which allowed middle-class families to purchase them. During this time, cheap serialised fiction was prominent where romantic tales were narrated in a crude way which were produced by hack writers working in a printing shop who, some of them transitioned to journalism (Wiener, 2011).

Later in the 1890s, the term “yellow journalism” – a term that was used to associate printed newspapers that did not research and present news properly to achieve a high number of circulations emerged as a result of a rivalry between two publishers who competed for the highest sales. This statement is supported by Campbell (2001) who stated the term yellow journalism as frequently associated with the misconduct of newsgathering and through a general consensus by many media historians, was a term coined by Ervind Warman, the editor of the New York Press presumably in the late 1896 during a public rivalry between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer in their competition to acquire the service of Richard Felton Outcault, an artist who drew a colourful and witty cartoon named the Yellow Kid.

It is imperative for media practitioners, especially journalists and news editors to adopt an objective approach in their reporting and have a full awareness of avoiding the use of sensationalism. So, what is sensationalism? What is it defined as? Despite consistently hearing the term “sensationalism,” a specified definition of the term seems to be remained as scarce (Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960). However, the authors in their study stated that sensationalism share common characteristics that essentially invokes emotions of the readers through providing fascinating or morbid thrills and that it has the ability to further shock readers of their moral or aesthetic sensibilities as it arouses “unwholesome emotional responses” and fulfils a person’s insatiable need to hear stories of horror, crimes, disasters, scandals, sex and others.

Despite Tannenbaum & Lynch’s views that many academicians during that time struggle with a specified definition of sensationalism and that the term has many variations, fast forward to the current years, now, sensationalism has generally been accepted and defined by its element of attention-grabbing through news stories and its ability to arouse responses in audiences (Vettehen & Kleemans, 2018). This notion is also supported by Wong & Harraway (2020) who stated that sensationalism has the characteristic that provokes emotional response from audiences and that the important element of sensationalism is crime in media representation.

Domestic violence reporting/news reporting in the media

Domestic violence is a global critical issue that affects many, including women and children. Concerningly, domestic violence is considered as a private family affair and should be kept behind closed doors (Krisvianti & Triastuti, 2020). Taking into account at how critical domestic violence is, the media has a huge responsibility and play a critical role in creating awareness through their reporting. Shah et al (2019) stated that crimes and criminal trials constitute the fourth largest category of stories for newspapers and television, making crime reporting highly

publicised in the media with newspapers providing a more comprehensive reporting such as the context of a story and other details as compared to online news which provided latest reporting but lacked contextual information.

Media representations and reporting of domestic violence are placed of the utmost importance in raising public awareness of social issues in an effort to help survivors of domestic violence report and eventually escape their perpetrators. Hence, domestic violence news must be angled correctly. Randhawa (2019) studied how female journalists on women sections negotiated constraints to provide a positive coverage of the Malaysian Domestic Violence Act (DVA) back in 1994 in a male-dominated newsrooms. The research showed that during the course from January to June 1996, 25 local Malay-language newspapers were studied and found that domestic violence was reported as one of the many issues that women face, in one article studied entitled, "Penderaan seks semakin meningkat (Sexual assault rising)" that was published in Utusan Malaysia on 11 January 1996, the first source quoted was then-politician Tan Sri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil who highlighted the suffering women face but also, blamed women for their predicament as they do not report the violence and abuse they face. In the same article itself, activist Ivy Josiah who was the main spokesperson for the Domestic Violence Act enactment campaign mentioned explicitly to call for the law's enactment. Additionally, other articles that were highlighted in 8 and 19 April 1996, both articles were summarised by their title, "Isteri diam diri tingkatkan kadar dera (Wives' silence increases injury)" with the focus of victims refusing or unwilling to prosecute or divorce their husbands.

Element of sensationalism in domestic violence reporting

News reporting of domestic violence are oftentimes trivialised despite having a crucial responsibility of delivering news objectively. Domestic violence and other misogynist violence are usually regarded as private matters resulting in a disproportionate coverage of sensationalised violence where women are usually treated as sensational phenomena (Metajstojanova, 2017).

Past studies have identified the media's tendency to sensationalise news concerning domestic violence. According to Easteal et al (2018), reporting on domestic violence are usually sensationalised, especially if women have committed violence or even, self-defence and despite an increased attention towards the issue, it was identified that the reporting followed key themes such as lack of reporting of the social context in which the violence occurs; sensationalism through the language choice and making stories fit news values; perpetuation of myths; lacking of blame from male perpetrators and abusers and putting responsibility towards women; and reliance on law enforcement sources rather than abuse centres, non-governmental organisations, victim's advocates and academic researchers who are better positioned to contextualise domestic violence.

Additionally, cases of domestic violence are usually sensationalised through news articles headlines. Headlines is an important element of a news article as readers read the headlines first before reading the body of the article. According to Ahmad (2022), the headlines is the first section of a news report that readers see while scrolling through their digital devices or other types of media. Therefore, the usage of click baits, eye-catching headlines to entice readers to click on the link of the story to generate profit is common among online news portal (Brown et al., 2018).

Methods

This study uses qualitative content analysis to study the element of sensationalism of domestic violence reporting in MM and FMT. Furthermore, the research also uses the case study approach with content analysis research design that examines many features of a few cases and latent coding, a type of content analysis coding in which the researcher identified subjective meanings such as themes or motives then systematically searches them in a communication medium such as online articles (Djamba & Neuman, 2002). The study also adopted purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in the research.

Sampling technique

The researcher adopted a qualitative method of analysing 60 articles from MM and FMT to collect data and adopted purposive sampling to provide the researcher with specific information required for this research (Esa et al., 2022). Furthermore, the researcher adopted purposive sampling, where the researcher relies on her own judgement when choosing her samples to be analysed in the research (Djamba & Neuman, 2002). Purposive sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling technique that means units have an unequal chance of being included in the sample and are selected for a specific purpose with pre-determined basis of selection (Wolf et al., 2016).

Thus, for content analysis, Riffe & Weng (2010) stated that a nine constructed week sample is sufficient to provide valid findings to the content of a daily newspaper during five years. Therefore, as the research used a qualitative content analysis research design of two online news portals which are the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today, the duration of the online articles chosen are during the pandemic period, starting from the imposition of the Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the spread of Covid-19 by the government which is from 18 March 2020 to 31 March 2022. The samples of the online articles on domestic violence are 30 online articles for Malay Mail in the "Malaysia" section and 30 online articles for FMT in the "News section" which the researcher chose MM and FMT online articles of the same cases to compare, different cases and number of cases of domestic violence in Malaysia.

Qualitative Content Analysis

This research uses qualitative content analysis research design to analyse domestic violence cases reported in the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today. Hsieh & Shannon (2005) stated qualitative content analysis is a research method that interprets the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and the identification of themes or patterns. For this research, the researcher adopts a qualitative content analysis method of examining the online news article in the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today.

The researcher uses thematic analysis of 60 online articles to analyse the coverage of domestic violence in the media. The study compares the reporting of domestic violence in the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today. However, not all articles pertain to the same case as some domestic violence cases are reported in one online news portal, but not the other. To analyse the element of sensationalism in MM and FMT, the researcher uses NVivo 12 to code the articles into themes by extracting paragraphs that reveals elements of sensationalism into four themes: Headlines; Emphasising on abusive actions; Causes of domestic violence; and Victim blaming.

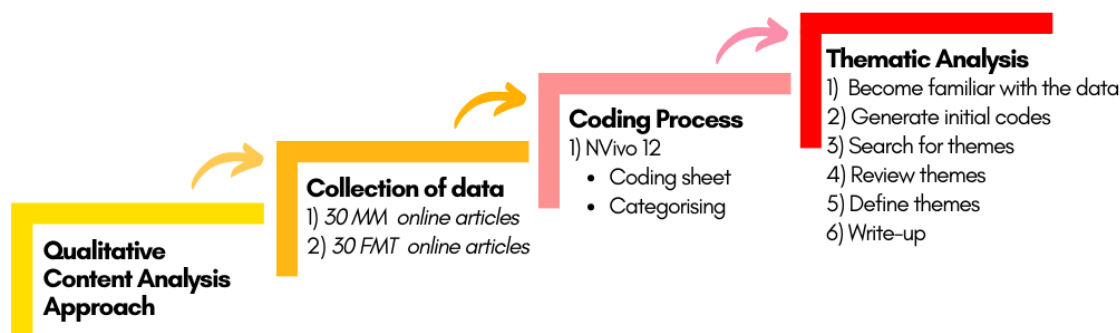


Figure 1
Process of Qualitative Content Analysis

Findings and Discussion

A total of 60 online articles; 30 from Malay Mail and 30 from Free Malaysia Today (FMT) from 8 March 2020 to 31 March 2022 were analysed to discover the element of sensationalism on domestic violence reporting. However, not all online articles analysed featured sensational elements in their reporting.

Table 1
Headlines from Selected Online Articles from the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today

The Malay Mail	Free Malaysia Today
Ministry’s MCO advice to women: Wear make-up while working at home, speak to spouse in Doraemon voice and giggle coily <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 31 March 2020	Ministry cancels suspension of hotline for kids, domestic violence victims <i>*208 shares</i> 18 March 2020
Women’s Development Dept says sorry after tips for women amid MCO slammed for sexism <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 31 March 2020	MCO causes spurt in number of calls to helpline for kids, abused <i>*2.1k shares</i> 26 March 2020
WAO urges govt to increase availability of shelters for domestic violence survivors <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 4 May 2020	Selangor domestic violence cases went up during MCO, says exco <i>*60 shares</i> 13 July 2020
Selangor saw spike in domestic violence cases during MCO, state assembly told <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 13 July 2020	Sugu Pavithra’s YouTube channel goes blank <i>*9.5k shares</i> 25 July 2020
Man detained on suspicion of beating pregnant wife in Rawang <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 17 July 2020	YouTube stars Sugu Pavithra give up public life for family’s sake <i>*7.3k shares</i> 26 July 2020
Husband of local food YouTuber remanded over armed attack on wife <i>*Number of shares is not available</i>	Man sentenced to jail for wife abuse falls to his death from Penang courthouse <i>*563 shares</i>

22 July 2020 Bukit Aman: Cases of domestic violence against women dropped during MCO but parental abuse by adult children increased <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 25 August 2020	11 August 2020 Financial issues amid Covid-19 behind domestic violence surge, says lawyer <i>*49 shares</i> 1 September 2020
Minister: Talian Kasih 15999 popular during third wave of Covid-19 <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 1 November 2020	1,900 complaints of domestic violence received since MCO began <i>*120 shares</i> 8 November 2020
Ministry lodged 1,929 complaints on domestic violence since MCO, says Rina <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 8 November 2020	Domestic violence at crisis level months after lockdown <i>*176 shares</i> 25 November 2020
Lawmakers dispute ministry's data on Talian Kasih <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 17 November 2020	Domestic violence got worse during pandemic <i>*277 shares</i> 10 December 2020
Man believed to have stabbed wife, surrenders to police near Baling <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 21 November 2020	Woman dies after fight over husband's TikTok video <i>1.8k shares</i> 10 February 2021
Rina Harun: Domestic violence issues should be responsibility of all ministries <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 25 November 2020	Call for karate lessons to fight domestic abuse 'off tangent', says Wan Azizah <i>*64 shares</i> 8 March 2021
In Petaling Jaya, woman allegedly beaten to death in row over TikTok video <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 10 February 2021	Jealous husband pushed wife off 18th floor, say police <i>*6.1k shares</i> 11 April 2021
WAO urges more analysis into murder cases involving women, says most stem from long periods of domestic violence <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 11 March 2021	900 domestic violence cases reported in first 4 months of 2021 <i>*32 shares</i> 4 May 2021
Domestic violence: Women must not be afraid, ashamed to get help, says Women's Minister <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 13 March 2021	Checklist for survivors of domestic violence who need help <i>*74 shares</i> 12 May 2021
Cook in Penang under murder probe after wife falls 18th floors from home window <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 11 April 2021	Domestic violence main cause of marriage breakdowns in 2020, says SiS <i>*52 shares</i> 27 May 2021
Man in Johor charged with causing grievous hurt to third wife <i>*Number of shares is not available</i>	Cobbler fined RM6,000 for confining, beating lover <i>*141 shares</i>

17 June 2021 Pregnant woman believed beaten by husband in Johor now under family's care in N. Sembilan <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 17 June 2021	1 July 2021 Cops are wrong, I did make 8 reports, says domestic violence victim <i>*1.8k shares</i> 20 July 2021
Perlis sees rise in domestic abuse calls and cases, says exco <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 30 June 2021	Ampang man nabbed for beating up wife <i>*601 shares</i> 8 August 2021
Report: 11,802 calls placed to Women's Ministry Talian Kasih helpline since start of MCO 3.0 on June 1, says Rina Harun <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 4 July 2021	Cops arrest man for assaulting wife, teenage son <i>*108 shares</i> 10 August 2021
Man kills wife before committing suicide in Perai <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 10 July 2021	Man under Covid-19 quarantine beats up wife after being barred from seeing kids <i>*88 shares</i> 13 August 2021
In Kuala Lumpur, cops arrest man for assaulting wife, son <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 10 August 2021	Held – man who beat wife for trying to check his phone <i>*431 shares</i> 18 August 2021
Rina Harun: 9,015 domestic violence cases reported during Covid-19 pandemic <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 23 September 2021	9,000 domestic violence cases since MCO enforced, says Rina <i>*36 shares</i> 23 September 2021
Women, Family and Community Development Ministry to expand transit centres for victims of domestic violence, says minister <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 25 November 2021	RM10mil fund for shelters a boost for domestic violence victims <i>*13 shares</i> 1 December 2021
Domestic violence cases continue to rise in Selangor, says state exco <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 29 November 2021	Focus on perpetrators of domestic violence, media told <i>*57 shares</i> 17 December 2021
Women's groups demand deputy women's minister Siti Zailah step down for 'normalising' domestic violence <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 14 February 2022	Cops nab man for alleged abuse of wife and 9 kids <i>*317 shares</i> 1 January 2022
Concerned about children's safety, Hindu mum Loh Siew Hong quits job as chef <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 3 March 2022	Man claims trial to beating wife, 7 children <i>*212 shares</i> 11 January 2022

Melaka state exco urges abused women urged to be brave, come forward for help <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 6 March 2022	Flak over advice on 'gentle but firm touch' to reprimand wives <i>*4k shares</i> 12 February 2022
Women's minister says aware some cops refuse to accept domestic violence reports, will bring this up with Home Ministry <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 28 March 2022	Bukit Aman must look into Loh's assault complaint, says MP <i>*1.3k shares</i> 24 February 2022
Bukit Aman: Police to act against personnel who refuse to accept reports on domestic violence <i>*Number of shares is not available</i> 30 March 2022	Accept domestic violence reports or face action, CID chief warns cops <i>*71 shares</i> 30 March 2022

The researcher discovered four prominent themes emerged from the analysis that describe the element of sensationalism: Headlines; Emphasising on abusive actions; Causes of domestic violence; and Victim blaming.

Theme 1: Headlines

One of the prominent elements of sensationalism that can be found in this qualitative content analysis is headlines. After analysing 60 articles from MM and FMT, the researcher discovered that headlines play a crucial role in enticing audiences to read the news article. According to Xu et al. (2019), headlines play a critical role in the readership of an article as it captures people's attention, providing irresistible invitation and entices audiences to read the article as compared to a summarisation style headline. The authors further defended this statement by providing examples of "irresistible" headline: "\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Trump" and summarisation style of headline: "Measuring Trump's Media Dominance" and stated that the first headline is more interesting and captures audiences' attention rather than the second headline. This statement corroborates with the researcher's findings that catchy headlines entice more audiences to read and share the article. Below are FMT's top three articles with the highest shares among 60 articles analysed:

Free Malaysia Today, 25 July 2020

"Sugu Pavithra's YouTube channel goes blank" - 9.5k shares

Free Malaysia Today, 26 July 2020

"YouTube stars Sugu Pavithra give up public life for family's sake" - 7.3k shares

Free Malaysia Today, 11 April 2021

"Jealous husband pushed wife off 18th floor, say police" - 6.1k shares

A comparison was made between MM and FMT's headlines regarding a domestic violence case where a husband allegedly beat his wife to death after arguing with his wife regarding a TikTok video he posted:

Malay Mail, 10 February 2021

"In Petaling Jaya, woman allegedly beaten to death in row over TikTok video"

Free Malaysia Today, 10 February 2021:

"Woman dies after fight over husband's TikTok video"

Another domestic violence case that was reported in both the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today regarding a husband who allegedly murdered his wife by pushing her from the 18th floor:

Malay Mail, 11 April 2021:

"Cook in Penang under murder probe after wife falls 18th floors from home window"

Free Malaysia Today, 11 April 2021

"Jealous husband pushed wife off 18th floor, say police"

Other headlines by MM and FMT that do not have similar cases were also analysed:

Malay Mail, 10 July 2021:

"Man kills wife before committing suicide in Perai"

Malay Mail, 21 November 2020:

"Man believed to have stabbed wife, surrenders to police near Baling"

Free Malaysia Today, 11 August 2020

"Man sentenced to jail for wife abuse falls to his death from Penang Courthouse"

Free Malaysia Today, 13 August 2021

"Man under Covid-19 quarantine beats up wife after being barred from seeing kids"

Free Malaysia Today, 17 December 2021

"Focus on perpetrators of domestic violence, media told"

Findings suggest that FMT uses a more sensationalised approach when writing headlines. Comparing to MM who uses words such as "believed" and "alleged" that set the story in a milder tone, FMT however, uses a different approach with more direct headlines, making the headlines more eye-catching and interesting for the readers.

FMT was established in 2009 as an online news portal that mainly generates profit through clicks and engagements (Lee, 2022). For online news portals, headlines are written strategically to increase the number of "click-through rate" (Ahmad, 2022).

From the researcher's observation, this is the strategy that FMT adopts. MM however, while sensationalistic approach can be seen through the headline: *"Man kills wife before committing suicide in Perai,"* they are more inclined to use a milder approach when writing headlines on domestic violence possibly due to their background of being originally a printed newspaper then, transitioning to an online news portal in 2018 and this, have affected the way their headlines are generated.

Theme 2: Emphasising on abusive actions

The second prominent element of sensationalism that is found in both MM and FMT is reporting that emphasises on abusive actions. Crimes and criminal trials are highly publicised in the media as it constitutes the fourth largest category of stories for news and television (Shah et al., 2019). Domestic violence cases provide a shock value to the readers as it evokes strong feelings such as anger, disgust, and overall negative emotions through narratives (Mourão & Robertson, 2019).

The excerpts below compare the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today's reporting regarding YouTube sensation star, Pavithra who rose to fame during the Movement Control Order (MCO) for her cooking videos. It was reported in July 2020 that her husband, Sugu was arrested for domestic abuse:

Malay Mail, 22 July 2020

Headline: Husband of local food YouTuber remanded over armed attack on wife

"It was alleged that the man, an ex-plantation worker, attacked his wife with a sickle at the Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun (HRPB) delivery ward at around 6pm yesterday." (5th paragraph – last paragraph)

Free Malaysia Today, 26 July 2020

Headline: YouTube stars Sugu Pavithra give up public life for family's sake

"The former plantation labourer was accused of hitting 28-year-old Pavithra using a handphone and a sickle which caused injuries to her lips, left cheek and right arm." (5th paragraph, 10 paragraphs in total)

Online news articles that mentioned abusive actions can also be found in the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today when reporting about Loh Siew Hong, the mother who was separated from her three children when her husband unilaterally converted their three children to Islam. The article mentioned that Loh's former husband abused her until she was hospitalised:

Malay Mail, 3 March 2022

Headline: Concerned about children's safety, Hindu mum Loh Siew Hong quits job as chef

"Loh's children were taken away from her in 2019 while she was hospitalised with injuries she claimed were inflicted by her former husband, Nagashwaran Muniandy, who converted to Islam and subsequently converted the couple's three children in secret. He has been reported to be currently in prison for drug offences." (12th paragraph, 15 paragraphs in total)

Free Malaysia Today, 24 February 2022

Headline: Bukit Aman must look into Loh's assault complaint, says MP

"Loh had earlier alleged that the abuse she got from her then-husband was so bad at times that she ended up in a hospital twice, including for a fractured wrist and foot in 2017 and a broken ankle joint two years later. (8th paragraph, 11 paragraphs in total)

The 34-year-old said on one occasion, she was struck on the head and it caused a gash that required 27 stitches. (9th paragraph)

In the 2019 incident, Loh alleged she was kicked multiple times and hit with a piece of iron and a hammer." (10th paragraph)

These excerpts revealed that FMT emphasised more on both Pavithra and Loh Siew Hong's injuries. For example, in the first case, FMT wrote Pavithra suffered "*injuries to her lips, left cheek and right arm.*" FMT also did not spare writing graphic details of Loh Siew Hong's abuse by writing three paragraphs of her injuries and using words such as, "*...fractured wrist and foot in 2017 and a broken ankle joint two years later,*" "*...caused a gash that required 27 stitches*" and "*...kicked multiple times and hit with a piece of iron and a hammer.*"

This angle of reporting, from the researcher's observation, is to provide a "shock value" and evoke negative emotions to the readers such as fear and pain. The details given by FMT regarding Pavithra and Loh Siew Hong's injuries together with the weapons they were allegedly attacked with – *sickle, iron, and hammer*, allow readers to construct a mental imagery of the abuse itself, their physical states, and their facial expressions – battered, defeated, and scared.

The researcher also observed the arrangement of Pavithra's injuries in the online news article which is situated in the 5th paragraph that has a total of 10 paragraphs. This is different from MM's online news article on Pavithra's injuries. MM only stated in brief of the alleged attack but omitted the injuries and only mentioned the alleged weapons used at the end of the online news article.

FMT featured Loh Siew Hong's injuries in the 8th, 9th and 10th paragraph from the total 11 paragraphs as compared to MM's who merely mentioned that she was allegedly abused by her former husband towards the end of the article, at the 12th paragraph out of the 15th paragraphs of the online news article.

FMT's sensationalised approach in reporting domestic violence cases is aligned with Cullen et al (2019) who stated the stories that gain most traction from audiences focus more on severe forms of physical violence. As an online news portal, both MM and FMT value clicks and engagement from audience. However, considering FMT's original form of online news portal, it is suggested that FMT is inclined to use a more sensationalised approach in reporting domestic violence cases as compared to MM, who had only transformed to online in 2018 after being a printed newspaper for 122 years. It is also suggested that Malay Mail still holds its original value of giving the public news as it happens (Malay Mail, 2022).

Theme 3: Causes of domestic violence

The third element of sensationalism discovered that can be seen in both MM and FMT is causes of domestic violence. Sensationalism in the news is purposely used by media practitioners to attract more readers' attention thus, resulting in media organisations to use shocking and exaggerating words (Vanacore, 2021). Therefore, causes of domestic violence are usually highlighted in news articles on domestic violence cases.

Further analysis was made between the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today on the news where a husband was arrested for allegedly assaulting his wife and son:

Malay Mail, 10 August 2021:

Headline: In Kuala Lumpur, cops arrest man for assaulting wife, son

"He said investigation showed that the problem started at 11.30am yesterday when the man scolded his 44-year-old wife for allegedly taking his money. (3rd paragraph, 5 paragraphs in total)

"Not wanting to aggravate the situation, she just kept silent but this enraged her husband who then attacked her and their son who tried to intervene," he said in a statement today." (4th

paragraph)

Free Malaysia Today, 10 August 2021

Headline: Cops arrest man for assaulting wife, teenage son

"Ashari said upon investigation, police found out that the fight took place at around 11.30am when the suspect scolded and accused his wife of stealing his money. (4th paragraph, 9 paragraphs in total)

He added that the wife, who did not want to escalate the situation, kept quiet and this had angered the suspect further, resulting in the man allegedly assaulting her and their son who was trying to come in between them to stop the fight. (5th paragraph)

"After it was over, the victim's son uploaded the fight on Twitter and it went viral. This was noticed by the suspect at 1.27pm and caused the suspect to once again beat up the boy," he said." (6th paragraph)

The usage of words is crucial when reporting on critical issues as it may evoke different emotions in different context as stated by Mohammad & Turney (2010). From the excerpts, it is suggested that FMT uses a more sensationalised approach with words that invoke negative emotions such as *"stealing"* as compared to MM who uses a softer approach to explain the situation by using *"taken."*

The excerpts also revealed that FMT explained more on the assault by the husband towards their son in two paragraphs by writing in the 5th paragraph, *"...and this had angered the suspect further, resulting in the man allegedly assaulting her and their son who was trying to come in between them to stop the fight."* And 6th paragraph, *"...the victim's son uploaded the fight on Twitter and it went viral. This was noticed by the suspect at 1.27pm and caused the suspect to once again beat up the boy"*.

This differs from MM who merely mentioned on the assault by the man towards his wife and son in one paragraph, *"...this enraged her husband who then attacked her and their son who tried to intervene."*

From these excerpts, FMT is shown to write in detail the attack by the husband towards the wife and son by firstly mentioning the time of the fight and why the fight happened between him and his wife. Then, FMT continued to write that the husband assaulted his wife and his son after the son tried to stop him from attacking his wife. FMT continued again to write about the husband's actions of attacking his son after his son uploaded the fight on a social media platform. This is different than MM's reporting where they only reported on the husband's attack towards his wife and son in one paragraph and not providing details of the attack.

Theme 4: Victim blaming

Victim blaming is one of the elements of sensationalism and can be found in both the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today. These excerpts from the Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today do not show a comparison of the same case but from different stories with the element of victim blaming.

On 25 August 2020, Malay Mail featured a comprehensive news article on domestic violence cases entitled, *"Bukit Aman: Cases of domestic violence against women dropped during MCO but parental abuse by adult children increased"* where the online news media had a special interview with Superintendent Siti Kamsiah Hassan, Bukit Aman sexual, women and

child investigation division principal assistant director on domestic violence cases in Malaysia. The news article spoke mainly about the department's study findings that domestic violence cases are not on the rise but, parental abuse by adult children. In the article, Superintendent Kamsiah mentioned that most abuse cases reported were caused by husbands' suspicion of their wives' affair but, during the MCO, where movements were restricted, husbands were not able to do that. The Superintendent further mentioned that during the MCO caused another issue where both husbands and wives were homebound that led to fights (Jayamanogaran, 2020). Generally, the article is not written in a sensationalised manner however, the article shows victim blaming from Superintendent Siti Kamsiah's quote:

"The perception of our statistics being low when it comes to domestic violence cases because victims are scared to come out or because of any roadblocks during the MCO is not true as you can always tell a cop at the roadblock that you are heading to the police station because you got assaulted and of course they would let you proceed. (20th paragraph, 44 paragraphs in total)

"So to say that the MCO period saw a rise in domestic violence cases because one couldn't move around is inaccurate. (21st paragraph)

"Victims who fear their abusers or of being locked up, could have reached out to their close ones to reach out to us. Of course the police will be at their doorstep," she said. (22nd paragraph)

The quote displays victim blaming as it assumes that all victims have the means to escape their abusers and go to the police station to make a report.

Free Malaysia Today has also displayed a more sensationalised lead in the news article of a domestic violence case in Petaling Jaya where a husband assaulted his wife when she was trying to check his phone in the article, *"Held – man who beat wife for trying to check his phone"* on 18 August 2021:

"PETALING JAYA: A 19-year-old woman decided to check on her 21-year-old husband's mobile phone while they were talking about their family finances. (Lead paragraph, 12 paragraphs in total)

It turned out to be a bad call." (2nd paragraph)

Domestic violence cases are presented in a superficial manner as actual presentation and risk factors of domestic violence are frequently skewed by the media through the way domestic violence is portrayed such as, the tendency to side with the abuser, oftentimes a man and blamed the victim, oftentimes a woman by portraying them to be disloyal, nagging or annoying and failing to be accommodating to the partner (Razali et al., 2018). FMT's online news article corroborates with the authors' statement as the excerpt may indicate victim blaming where FMT wrote that the woman was abused by her husband because she checked on her husband's phone.

Additionally, it is also interesting to note that FMT uses the line: *"It turned out to be a bad call"* in the second paragraph. In news writing, journalists use the inverted pyramid format where important information are placed at the top of the article to make readers feel intrigued

with the article (Hyland et al., 2021). Following this statement, it is suggested that FMT placed the line at the top of the article to intentionally hook the readers to read about this case. This may indicate that FMT uses sensationalistic approach in their writings.

Through the excerpts, MM's writing may indicate a lesser sensationalised approach as the article discusses mainly on Bukit Aman sexual, women and child investigation division's study findings that domestic violence cases are not on the rise and included the interviewee's quotes that suggest victim blaming in the 20th paragraph: *"...because victims are scared to come out or because of any roadblocks during the MCO is not true as you can always tell a cop at the roadblock that you are heading to the police station because you got assaulted and of course they would let you proceed."* This quote suggests that victims of domestic violence are always able to escape their abusers easily even at the roadblocks without mentioning the possibilities of why victims do not voice out to the police even at the roadblocks, putting full responsibility of escaping their abusers towards the victims hence suggesting victim blaming. In simpler words, it is the victims' fault for not telling the police at the roadblock that they are abused. This quote is disconnected to the reasons why victims stay. According to Wiener et al (2022), victims of domestic violence face complex feelings which makes it a challenge for them to leave such as fear and control; low confidence and feeling guilty for removing their children from their abusers and home; financial and accommodation constraints; stigma and shame; and a complex feeling of love and guilt towards their abusers.

Victim blaming in the media, as indicated in both MM and FMT leaves many negative impacts to the public and also to domestic violence victims. This corroborates with von Sikorski & Saumer (2021)'s statement that victim blaming causes the public to have higher negative attitudes and lower levels of compassion towards the victims, making the public feel that the victims "deserved it." As for the victims, victim blaming will leave them feeling scared to come forward to report the abuse as they experience higher levels of self-blame and feelings of deep shame (Whiting et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Sensationalism is present in both the MM and FMT's reporting of domestic violence cases. Through the qualitative content analysis, it is suggested that FMT uses a more sensationalised approach when reporting on domestic violence cases as compared to MM. Sensationalism, while it may present as being "all bad" and having negative effects towards the society, it could also have positive consequences to society. This statement is supported by Uzuegbunam (2013) who stated that sensationalised stories, while some may find it trivial, it could also be important to other audiences as it brings forward stories to educate and create awareness. This is in line with FMT's audience visit of 17.3million, a higher amount as compared to MM who has an audience visit of 11.3million as of December 2022 suggesting that public awareness of critical issues, such as domestic violence is wider in FMT.

Furthermore, the researcher noted that while FMT does adopt a more sensationalised approach as compared to MM who adopts a milder approach of sensationalism, however, the term "yellow journalism" in FMT could not be used as "yellow journalism" is associated with news that are not researched and presented properly to the public. The qualitative content analysis revealed that FMT's reports of domestic violence cases are factually right however, FMT's headlines, the usage of words, positioning of the paragraphs that reports the element of sensationalism and the details of the abuse indicate a more sensationalised approach as compared to MM.

The researcher also noted that while conducting the qualitative content analysis, FMT provides the total number of shares of the specific online news article while MM does not. Out of the 30 articles that FMT has written, it is revealed that the highest number of shares for Sugu Pavithra's story with the headline: "Sugu Pavithra's YouTube channel goes blank" has 9.5k shares suggesting that FMT prioritises readership.

Moreover, the researcher noted that sensationalism in reporting is needed to create awareness and increase readership however, it must be ethical. This means that reporting of critical issues, specifically domestic violence must be factually right and free from victim blaming as it leaves many negative impacts towards the victims and society. Therefore, a few suggestions can be done in order to improve the reporting of domestic violence. Cullen et al. (2019) in their research has suggested that journalists could engage more with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to improve reporting of domestic violence cases as they would have additional information on critical incidences. Furthermore, providing a strong support system and training for journalists who write complex issues such as domestic violence. This is important as media outlets, especially online news portals are pressured to be the first to report on issues, making journalists, especially the ones who do not have the expertise to write on domestic violence feel pressured to produce online articles on domestic violence.

The qualitative content analysis focused on articles during the pandemic from 8 March 2020 to 31 March 2022 and while the research does reveal findings from the comparison between the two online news media, however it is suggested that further studies could expand the duration of the study of sensationalism. Additionally, it is also suggested that it could expand to comparison of other online news media as well.

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