RAPE VICTIMS TO MARRY THEIR PERPETRATORS: REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSLIM LEADER AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS

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Abstract*: The way journalists portray social actors in a discourse is one approach to observing the power the media wields in influencing public opinion. Speakers and writers can choose from a wide range of word choices to depict social actors in a particular discourse. These word choices have the power to shape how society views and interprets them, which can lead to the social construction of reality. A favourable portrayal of social actors would lead to a favourable perception within society and vice versa. This study examines how local and international news outlets represented a Malaysian Member of Parliament- a former Shariah court judge, the rape victims, the rapist and underage marriage in 35 headlines on the MP's suggestion to legalise underage marriage, rape victims marrying their perpetrators included. The analysis was guided by van Leeuwen's Social Actor Representation framework and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. The findings show that the Member of Parliament (MP) is represented through functionalisation, objectivation and formalisation. He was portrayed as someone who upholds the male-dominated patriarchal tradition. The victims and the perpetrators were assigned with the relational role of the rapist and their victims. The victims were seen as objects that negatively benefited from the process. Hence, they were advised to marry the perpetrator to have a better future. Although his suggestion was not in any way against Islamic teaching, his view was represented as an outrage in international headlines. The representations constructed in the headlines are consistent with numerous discourses that portray male social actors as more powerful and superior than their female counterparts.*

Keywords*: Child marriage in Islam, News headlines, Rape victims, Representations.*

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Representations in News

Michael Foucault, a philosopher and a literary critic, offered a pioneering view on discourse. He perceived discourse as a system of representation concerned not only with language but rather with language and practice (Hall, 2001). In other words, discourse makes actions meaningful (Hobbs, 2008). In his view, discourse administers the way that a topic can be meaningfully discussed. Discourse also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to control the way others think and behave (Hall, 2001).

As the discourse is not free from its producer's worldview, van Dijk (1987) believed that the link connecting discourse and ideology involves linguistic encoding and decoding processes, which create a continuous cycle of input and output of information (KhosraviNik, 2010). In other words, the media 'encodes' the reality (which is a form of discourse as well) in order to create its contents, and these contents would then be consumed by the public, who would 'decode' the contents presented to them and perceived it as an actual reality. This shows that the media is the intermediary between the reproductions of public discourses (KhosraviNik, 2010).

Ideologically loaded discourses can be propagated by the media, which can greatly influence how a society perceives something or someone. A positive representation of the social actors would result in a positive perception in the mind of the society, and vice versa. The way media represents social actors simultaneously reflects and shapes or further reinforces society's perceptions of them (Duanprakhon, 2012). Once propagated by the media, these perceptions are consumed and mutually shared, forming society's social representations and social practices. The way these discourse participants are represented in the media contributes to shaping how the public sees them. Media discourse greatly impacts not only the readers but also society as it influences the construction of realities. For instance, a comparison made on CNN's coverage of the 2016 Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting vs the 2017 Las Vegas Strip shooting revealed that when the perpetrator is a Muslim, he is often represented through his religious belief. Labelled as a 'Muslim', the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooter was perceived as a jihadist, extremist and terrorist, creating a social representation not only for him but for the Muslim communities at large. The Las Vegas Strip perpetrator, on the other hand, was not associated with his religious beliefs. Thus, his action is seen as an individual act rather than representing the believers of a religion as a whole (Dalam & Ali, 2023).

The news media has the power to influence society through discourse, as it could easily reach a global audience with its massive circularity. Even though it could not directly control the actions of a society, it could control their minds, which in turn would influence their actions (Duanprakhon, 2012). This means that media practitioners have the ability to affect public opinion about a given issue, making it an effective medium to propagate ideologies. These ideologies would then be cognitively and mutually shared by society and are perceived as an actual representation of reality (Duanprakhon, 2012). Consequently, the norms and values of a society are typically reflected through discourse (Duanprakhon, 2012).

In any news content, the headlines are the first thing that readers would potentially notice due to their larger font and position – usually located at the top of the news article. Headlines are an important element in grabbing the interests of readers. Albeit limited words, headlines construct readers' first impression of an issue and could arguably reveal the social and cultural representations that circulate in a society (Develotte & Rechniewski, 2001).

Underage and Rape-victims Marriage in Malaysia

It was reported by the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry in 2016 that there were 2288 cases of child marriages in Malaysia (Ova, 2022). As for rape cases, out of the 1698 rape cases reported in 2016, 340 of the survivors were under 18 years old (Women Aid Organisation, 2023). Following these number of cases of rape and underage marriages, on the 4th of April 2017, Malaysians were shocked by a speech made by a Malaysian politician, which revolved around child marriages and marriages between rapists and their victims. These are universally deemed as sensitive issues as they violate human rights, which consequently generated coverage from both the local (Malaysian) and the international media. The politician, Barisan Nasional's Member of Parliament (MP) from Tasek Gelugor, Shabudin Yahaya, had received instant backlash from the public. The MP had explained his views on child marriage and marriage between rapists and their victims during his debate in the Parliament in refuting Kulai's MP Teo Nie Ching's bid to ban child marriage as part of the Sexual Offences against Children Bill 2017. The banning of child marriage, according to Shabudin Yahaya, a former Shariah court judge, contradicts the Shariah Law (Ghazali, 2017). The bill, which was passed by the Malaysian Parliament, is designated to protect anyone under 18 years old from sexual abuse (Abdullah, Yunus & Harun, 2017).

Current Studies

The current research aims to study the representations constructed by the media for the Malaysian Member of Parliament, a former Shariah court judge, the rape victims, the rapists, and the underage- marriage in the 35 local and international news headlines. This is following the MP's view that a rape victim as young as nine-year-old should be allowed to marry their rapist. The representations are presented following van Leeuwen's representations of the social actor framework.

van Leeuwen's Representation of Social Actors

Representations may include or exclude social actors, depending on the purpose that they serve in the text or in relation to the readers for whom they are intended (van Leeuwen, 1996). In exclusion, social actors are omitted from the text as they are assumed to be already known by the readers or are simply irrelevant to be mentioned. Exclusion may even serve as ideological propaganda set up by the speaker or the writer. On the other hand, in inclusion, social actors are mentioned in the text. The inclusion framework can be divided into activation/passivation and personalisation/impersonalisation. Under each of these two main categories, there are many branches that help to identify how a social actor is specifically represented.

Activation involves the representation of discourse participants as active agents in a process (van Leeuwen, 1996; Sahragard & Davatgarzadeh, 2010). The activation of discourse participants can be realised through participation, circumstantialisation or possessivation. *Participation* occurs when then they presume active roles in the action, while in *circumstantialisation*, they are represented through prepositional circumstantials, such as the words *by* or *from* (Carter, Lillis & Parkins, 2009; Fernandez, Kaur & Ng, 2016). In *possessivation*, possessive pronouns such as *their*, *my*, *mine*, *his* or *her* are used. In *passivisation*, a participant is *subjected* when he or she is represented as undergoing a process or is *beneficiaries* when he or she becomes the recipient of it (Carter, Lillis & Parkins, 2009). When they are subjected, they are treated as objects, and when beneficialised, they are described as either positively or negatively benefitting from the process or action (van Leeuwen, 1996; Sahragard & Davatgarzadeh, 2010; Davari & Moini, 2016).

Discourse participants can also be personalized, in which they are represented personally or individually as human beings, or impersonalized, in which their human characteristics are rid away of (Davari & Moini, 2016). *Impersonalisation* can be further divided into abstraction and objectivation. *Abstraction* occurs when abstract or concrete nouns that do not semantically denote 'human' are used, such as *reform* or *change*, to represent the participants (Post, 2009). Meanwhile, in objectivation, they are referred in reference to a place or a thing closely associated with them or with the activity that they are engaged in in the discourse (Post, 2009; Davari & Moini, 2016). *Personalisation* has the most number of branches under it, and each will be explained in the following paragraph.

One of the branches under personalisation is determination. *Determination* occurs when the identity of the discourse participants is specified in a way, while *indetermination* happens when they are made anonymous and are represented as non-specific individuals or groups (Bortoluzzi, 2010; Sahragard & Davatgarzadeh, 2010). Determination can be classified into categorisation and nomination, which will be further explained below.

When a discourse participant is represented in terms of identities and functions that they share with other people, he or she is being categorized (van Leeuwen, 1996). *Categorisation* can be further divided into functionalisation and identification. *Functionalisation* represents social actors based on the activities and the things that they do, such as their occupations or roles (Post, 2009). Social actors with a high status, such as government officials or experts and professionals are always functionalized (van Leeuwen, 1996; Post, 2009). Examples include *president*, *mayor*, *musician*, *police officers*, *teacher*, *student*, *monk* and *mufti*.

Identification, on the other hand, represents social actors based on what they unavoidably and inexorably are, more or less permanently (van Leeuwen, 1996; Post, 2009). It can be further divided into three categories which are classification, relational identification and physical identification. In *classification*, social actors are represented based on the major social categories that they belong to in a given society (Post, 2009; Duanprakhon, 2012). The aspects include "age, gender, provenance, class, wealth, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on" (van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 54). *Relational identification* represents them through their relationship with others, which includes personal, kinship or work relations, with the use of words such as *wife*, *fiancée*, *father*, *mother*, *friend*, or *colleague* (Post, 2009; Duanprakhon, 2012). Its use typically includes possessivation by means of a possessive pronoun, e.g. their supervisor, my sister; or a genitive (the -'s clitic), e.g. the children's mother; or a post modifying prepositional phrase with 'of', e.g. *a father of six* (van Leeuwen, 1996). The last category under *identification* is *physical identification*, and just like the name suggests, it uses the participants' unique physical traits to differentiate them within a context (Post, 2009; Duanprakhon, 2012). It uses nouns that denote physical characteristics such as *redhead* or *cripple*; or adjectives, e.g. tattooed, muscular, lanky, bearded; or realized with a prepositional phrase with or without that modifies a generalized classification, i.e. man, woman, girl, boy, e.g. *the man with the tattoos*, *the girl with freckles*.

On the other hand, the second category determination, which is *nomination*, happens when the participants are represented in terms of their unique identities or names (van Leeuwen, 1996; Post, 2009). It can be realized by using proper nouns and can be further categorized into *informalisation*, in which his or her given name is used, *semi-informalisation*, which uses his or her given name along with the surname, and *formalisation*, in which the participant's surname is used, with or without honorifics (Davari & Moini, 2016).

Genericisation and specification are subcategories that fall both under personalisation and impersonalisation. *Genericisation* occurs when social actors are represented as classes, while in *specification*, they are represented as identifiable individuals (Fernandez, Kaur & Ng, 2016). An example of genericisation is, "A boy found dead due to drowning, further increasing the nation's drowning rates," while an example of specification is, "Timmy Harding, a 5-year-old toddler was found dead due to drowning, in his backyard pool." Specification can be further categorized into *individualization*, which is realized by singularity, and assimilation, realized by plurality or by noun or a mass noun that denotes a group of people, e.g. *this nation*, *the society* (van Leeuwen, 1996).
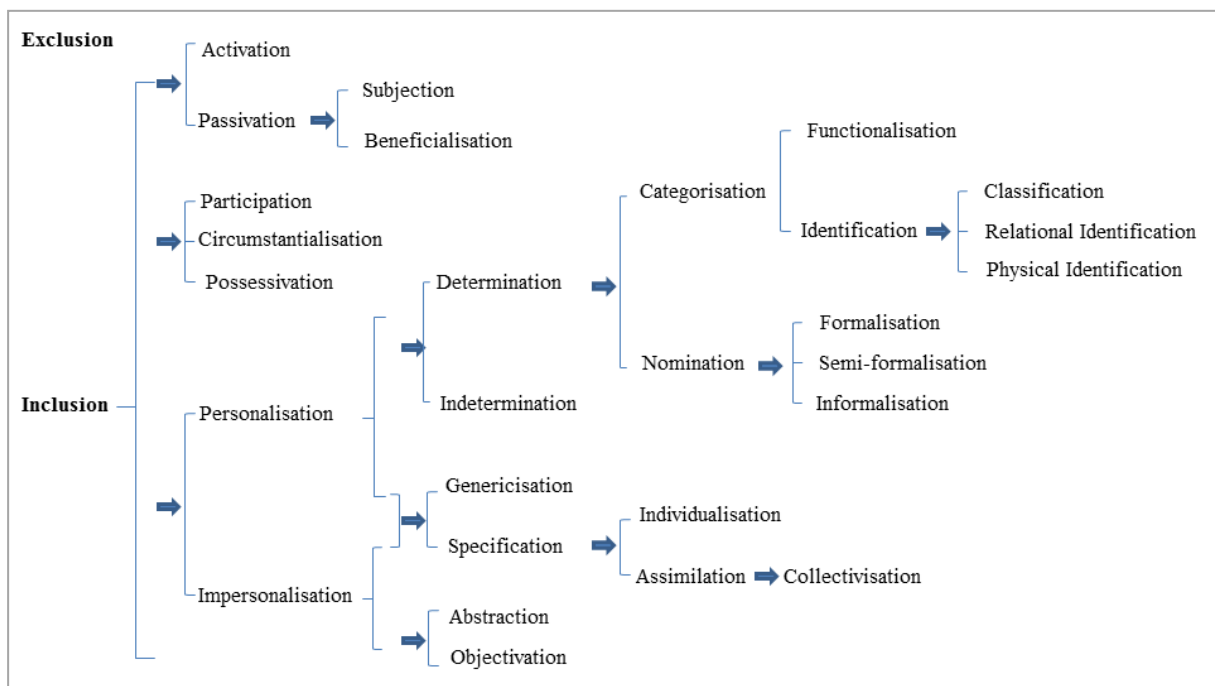
Figure 1: The Representation of Social Actors in Discourse

Research Methodology
All 35 news headlines covering this report published locally and internationally on the 5th and 6th of April 2017 were analysed for this study. These dates were chosen to maintain the relevance of the news to the heated comments made by a Malaysian member of parliament that a rapist should marry the rape victim. Six of the headlines were from local news outlets, including The News Straits Times, The Star, Malay Mail, Malaysikini, the Sun, SAYS Malaysia, and Borneo Post. 29 headlines from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, Russia, Hong Kong, Pakistan, India, Singapore, the Philippines, Asia Pacific and Indonesia were also collected and analysed. Each of the 35 headlines was taken from different news outlets which have wide circulation in their localities. Editorial and opinion letters were not included in this study.

The analysis begins by identifying the discourse participants in each headline. Following van Leeuwen's description, the types of representation for each participant in each headline were identified. Interpretations were made following Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework.

Representations in the headlines

There are four major participants mentioned in the headlines, which are the Members of the parliament, the rapist, the victims and the children.

Member of Parliament (MP)

In almost all of the headlines (29/35) analysed, Shabudin Yahaya was represented through functionalization, in which his role as Barisan Nasional (BN) Member of Parliament was highlighted. Phrases like *Malaysia MP*, *Malaysian MP*, *Tasik Gelugor MP*, *UMNO MP*, BN MP, and *MP* were used in the headlines. There were also four instances in which he was referred to as *Malaysian lawmakers* or *lawmakers* in the international news headlines. This is in line with the fact that Members of Parliament (MPs) are not only the elected representatives of a nation but also legislators who form part of the parliament and whose activities belong to the domains of law and justice (van Dijk, 2004). The MPs' participation in the parliament – whether giving speeches or making queries, signifies their engagement in the process of legislation and governance as they discuss, amend or ratify the laws of their country (van Dijk, 2004). Thus, they hold an important role in ensuring that the national laws serve the rights of the people they represent.

In addition to the above, the MP was also represented through objectivation in three instances. Through objectivation, he referred to by means of reference to a place that he is closely associated with (van Leeuwen, 1996), which is *Malaysia*, e.g. *Malaysia passed a child sex crimes law*. When he is objectivated in the headlines, he is painted as representing the whole nation, which is in line with van Dijk's (2004) review, positing that an MP represents the nation he belongs to. This means that his acceptance towards child marriage and marriage between rapists and their victims simultaneously signify the nation's acceptance as well due to his status as the elected representative of Malaysia.

He was also presented as an active participant in the headlines, with processes such as '*say'*, '*tell'*, '*suggest'*, '*support'*, '*condone'*, '*defend'*, '*decide'*, '*comment'* and '*remark'* have been ascribed to him. His portrayal matches van Leeuven's observations that those political leaders are often represented through active participation and functionalisation. This reflects the expected roles that they have to play in society, serving the community that has elected them to be in power.

In democratic countries like Malaysia, the elected MPs often represent a certain political party, representing the party rather than personal views. Therefore, it justifies why formalisation was used only once, and his first or given name was used alongside his role as the MP. This can be seen in a headline by a local news agency, SAYS Malaysia, i.e. *MP Shabudin's Rape Victim Statement Receives Condemnation And Vocal Rebuke From Malaysians*.

Rapists

The rapists were also represented as active participants in the headlines, labelled as '*rapist'* (13/35) or '*attacker'* (4/35). While none of the local headlines ascribed them as an attacker, four international headlines used the word '*attacker/s*' to represent them. Blauenfeldt (2014) explained that by using the word attacker, the journalists are referring to the act they have committed – a sexual attack. Attacker also implies that the act of rape is a violent, animalistic assault. By referring to them as rapists, the journalists would not want to put too much focus on rape as a criminal act; rather, the focus was on the topic of the acceptance of marriage between rapists and their victims. It can be seen through this representation that this participant,

the rapist is not the main focus of the news media.

Besides active participants, the rapists or attackers are also being represented through possesivation. Their relational identification was also highlighted through the use of the possessive pronoun 'their' in the phrase '*their victim'*. In both local (3/6) and international (10/29) headlines, the relationship between the victims and the perpetrator was highlighted repeatedly, denoting somewhat eternal sexual ownership, even though it's a nonconsent, illegal one.

Rape Victims

Unlike the MP and rapists, who were represented as active participants in both local and international headlines, the rape victims were only presented as negative passivation (4/6) and active possessivation (3/6) in the local headlines. Rightly labelled as a *victim* (2/6) or *rape victim* (2/6), it highlights the fact that this participant is only undergoing a process and not the active agent of the process. They are treated as objects who negatively benefit from the process. In the headlines, the rape victims were not only victims of rape cases, but they were victimised by the proposal of asking them to marry the perpetrator. The negative, passivation, and subjection representation of the victims is subdued by the MP's claim that by marrying the perpetrator, the victims "*can have a good life*" (4/35), avoid a '*bleak future'* (2/35)

In contrast to the local headlines that labelled the participants as '*victim'* and '*rape victim'*, in the international headlines, they were labelled not only as '*rape victim'* (13/29) and '*victim'* (2/29), they were also labelled as '*child victim'* (5/29). This was done to further sensationalize the issue by emphasizing that marriage between rapists and their victims is acceptable even if the victims are children, which would consequently warrant a higher degree of sympathy and shock from the public. These findings can be compared with a report by Greer (2003) in his book entitled Sex, Crime and The Media, in which he stated that there is a hierarchy of victimization in media discourse in crime reports. This hierarchy categorizes crime victims as ideal victims, who sit at one extreme of the hierarchy and are perceived as "vulnerable, defenceless, innocent and worthy of sympathy and compassion", or as non-deserving victims, who sit at the bottom extreme. They are those perceived as people who deserve to be victimized, e.g. youths who are habitually violently injured in a car race (Greer, 2003). Ideal victims attract more media attention, spawn mourning on a global scale and catalyze significant change to social practice and national policies (Greer, 2003).

Apart from the above, the international headlines also represent the victims as active participants in the process of marrying the perpetrators. Headlines such as *'Rape victims should marry their rapists'* (BBC News) and '*rape victims should marry attackers'* (Metro, UK) were among the 14 instances found. Asking the victims to marry the rapist suggests that women depend on men as they are perceived as lonely, distressed and powerless after they have been raped (Schwark, 2017), and the best way to make their lives and future bearable is by marrying their assaulters as women who have lost their virginity are deemed negatively and are discriminated by the Malaysian society. Thus, they are left with no choice but to marry their rapists, even if it results in the vindication of the perpetrators and causes lifelong trauma for the victims (Barr, 2017).

In addition to the above, these victims were also represented through possessivation. Their relational identification was also highlighted through the use of the possessive pronoun 'their' in the phrase '*their rapist'* (7/35), '*their attacker'* (2/35). The relationship between the victims

and the perpetrator was highlighted repeatedly, denoting a somewhat unending sexual submissive relationship, even though it's a nonconsent, illegal one.

Minor Victims

The last participants in the headlines are minor victims, young girls as young as nine years old. In the local headlines, this participant is represented loosely based on the major social categories they belong to in society, according to their age- '9-year old'. In the international headlines, their young age was emphasized through labels such as '*girls*' (6/29), ' *young*' (2/29), *child/children* (5/25) and '*nine-year-old*' "6/25). Not only that, the victims are further represented according to their gender – '*girls*' (6/29). This finding can also be supported by Greer's (2003) hierarchy of victimisation, in which the headlines emphasised the girls' very young age when addressing the issue of child marriage. The examples can be taken from Deccan Chronicle – *'9-yr-old girls physically ready for marriage': Malaysian MP stokes controversy*, and from The Star – *MP: Okay for rapists to marry victims, even some 9-year-olds can marry*. Their age is specifically mentioned in order to make them the ideal victims who are way below the age of consent. Greer (2003) also mentioned that citing demographic characteristics, e.g., specifying the victims' age, can influence the levels of victimisation and media interest garnered.

This minor victim was also presented as an active agent in the process of marrying their perpetrator in both the local and international headlines. Phrases such as '*can mary*', '*ready for marriage*', '*ready to wed*', and '*physically & spiritually ready to marry*' were used to denote such representation. These news headlines emphasise that marriage between rapists and their victims is acceptable to the point that it is deemed '*okay*' (6/35), even if the victims are children. This paints the victims as children who have been raped, generating a greater response, both in the form of sympathy and outrage from the public. Greer (2003) mentioned that victims in crime reports are idealised by the media in order to introduce changes in practice and policies.

Situating Representations in the Context of the Discourse

In addition to the above, the MP was also represented as one who upholds the male-dominated patriarchal tradition. Just like in any patriarchal society, the man or the male figure in the family – usually the father, has the authority to decide what is best for his family members. In the context of forced marriages, the family members – the women and the girls, would attempt to make forced marriages work to respect his power (Luckenbaugh, 2016). Through the headlines, it can be seen that the MP is represented as someone who is exercising his patriarchal role by telling and, in some headlines, advising the girls and the rape victims to marry their rapists to lead a 'good life' and to avoid a 'bleak future', as well as helping the rapists to 'turn over a new leaf'.

His views are believed to be based on the stereotypes that exist in society, sexually-assaulted women are often subject to society's discrimination (UN Women, 2017). In Malaysian society, women who have lost their virginity before marriage are perceived negatively and, at times, accused of fornication. To make it worse, rape victims also have to deal with negative assumptions about their sexual behaviour (Amnesty International, 2010).

In addition to that, to ensure that the family's honour is protected, the marry-your-rapist law is linked to a woman's chastity; therefore, marriage after rape is believed to help protect the family's dignity and shield them from the 'scandal' (Sengupta, 2017). A case reported in Lebanon revealed that a rape survivor's family agreed not to file any charges in exchange for a

marriage between the raped daughter and her rapist (Sengupta, 2017). All these reflect a patriarchal attitude towards female survivors of rape as it sets aside the rights of the victims and diminishes their pain and struggle. Their struggle is even worsened if they were to live a life with their rapists through marriage, resulting in lifelong trauma and distress (Barr, 2017).

The aforementioned factors might contribute to the Malaysian MP's views about marriage between rapists and victims. His patriarchal view is also in line with Greer's (2003) statement, which reported that media representation of rape is usually structured in masculinist terms. This, in turn, would maintain the patriarchal stereotypes that the society has towards rape and female rape victims. Through the review of the headlines, the media painted a picture as if the MP did not show any concern at all for the rape victims' plight when he suggested they marry their rapists; he was portrayed as someone who believed that it could help them have a brighter future, but in reality, as reported by Barr (2017), it could only make it worse by prolonging their suffering.

As for legalizing child marriage, an analysis of the headlines revealed that there was only one headline from the local news website (The Star) that addressed the issue of child marriage. In comparison, 15 headlines from international news headlines. The MP stated in his speech that child marriage is religiously and legally permissible. Instead of agreeing with Kulai's MP bid to standardise the legal age of consent to marry at 18 years of age for all Malaysians, he refuted her points by saying that it is against the Sharia law.

According to Malaysia's Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act, Sections 10 and 12, non-Muslims are allowed to marry once they turn 18, and would require parental consent if they are below 21 years of age. However, for Muslims subjected to the state's Islamic family laws, the legal age of consent is 18 and 16 for males and females, respectively, yet those below this specified age can still marry if they have been granted approval from the Sharia judge.

A joint report by the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Al-Azhar University stated that child marriage is just a custom and is not part of Sharia or a form of worship (UNICEF Malaysia, 2017). Sharia does not, in any way, allow young girls to be forced into marriages. Nonetheless, this myth might still be prevalent in Malaysian society, as reflected by the MP's view regarding child marriage as well as the lack of local headlines that address the issue. It was less addressed in the local headlines, probably to respect the conservative tradition still practised in some minor parts of Malaysian society, as evident in the statistics. A 2000 census revealed that a total of 10,267 children in the 10-14 age range were married, while a 2010 survey recorded 155,810 children in the 15-19 age range were married (Lim, 2017), indicating that child marriage is still being practised in Malaysia. As child marriage would lead to many adverse effects, UNICEF suggested that the ideal age to marry is after the age of 18 years (UNICEF Malaysia, 2017).

Conclusion
It can be concluded that the different representations constructed by the local and international media for the different discourse participants in the media are often not as neutral as most believe. The representations, once analysed, help the reader discover the underlying message the journalists are conveying besides the facts and figures of the situation. Comparative studies on how media discuss the issue of child marriage and rapists marrying their victims in other countries, either Muslim-majority countries or not, could help shed light on how these issues are generally perceived and discussed in the media and society.

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