

## EXPLORING THE STIGMA OF DRAMA LELAKI ITU: REPRESENTATION OF POLYGAMOUS ISSUES AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE ON PUBLIC AWARENESS

Dzulkarnain Mazlan<sup>1\*</sup>  
Khalisah Azman<sup>2</sup>,  
Zulkifli Abd Latiff<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, MALAYSIA.  
(E-mail: [dzul0103@uitm.edu.my](mailto:dzul0103@uitm.edu.my)), 0009-0001-0750-9307

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, MALAYSIA.  
(E-mail: [2020683726@student.uitm.edu.my](mailto:2020683726@student.uitm.edu.my)), 0009-0001-2933-6670

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, MALAYSIA.  
(E-mail: [zulkifli858@uitm.edu.my](mailto:zulkifli858@uitm.edu.my)), 0000-0002-7618-1480

\*Corresponding author: [dzul0103@uitm.edu.my](mailto:dzul0103@uitm.edu.my)

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**Abstract:** *This research examines the effects of the Malaysian television serial Lelaki Itu, focusing specifically on its portrayal of issues associated with polygamy, including domestic violence, inheritance distribution under faraid law, unregistered marriages, and incest. The research used a content analysis methodology to investigate the portrayal of social concerns in the series, emphasizing the possible influence of narrative elements on audience understanding and societal consciousness. The findings indicate that the series illustrates domestic violence and its psychological repercussions on family members, the legal and familial intricacies of inheritance in polygamous households, the vulnerabilities faced by persons in unregistered marriages, and the sensitive depiction of incest. The series underscores the necessity of estate planning and legal counsel within Malaysian households, illuminating the drawbacks of these relationships. This study continues by highlighting the importance of the series as a medium for social education, emphasizing the ability of media narratives to influence societal attitudes and elevate consciousness, particularly in culturally diverse countries like Malaysia. Future studies can enhance the discourse on polygamy by examining its psychological, economic, legal, and cultural elements, fostering a more equitable and educated understanding of this intricate practice. Investigating these neglected domains in polygamy research can bridge significant gaps in the literature and offer essential insights for policymakers, practitioners, and society as a whole. In the Malaysian context, where polygamy is entrenched in religious and cultural traditions, such research is crucial for reconciling tradition with contemporary ideals and rights.*

**Keywords:** *Stigma, Polygamy, Media Representation, Portrayals*

## Introduction

This study seeks to analyze the societal obstacles and polygamy issues depicted in the Malaysian television serial *Lelaki Itu*, with a particular focus on its capacity to shape cultural perspectives. Currently, films, television, and web series significantly influence cultural ideals and representations. Ramirez et al. (2021) assert that television dramas, a prevalent kind of entertainment, influence culture and society. They shape individuals' perceptions of interpersonal interactions and social dynamics, impacting various audiences. The primary objectives of this study are to examine the effects of *Lelaki Itu* drama on Malaysian audiences, with a particular emphasis on its portrayal of issues related to polygamy, including domestic violence, inheritance distribution under *faraid* law, unregistered marriages, and incest. This study examines the drama's portrayal of these issues, emphasizing the impact of narrative elements on audience comprehension and societal awareness.

*Lelaki Itu* explores subjects such as *faraid* inheritance disputes in polygamous contexts, unregistered weddings, and familial violence, highlighting intricate socioeconomic problems. Several circumstances, such as cultural conventions, legal constraints, and individual aspirations, influence the motivations driving characters' decisions. Within the Islamic system, these topics are typically governed by Syariah Law, which establishes parameters for familial issues, including inheritance allocation and equitable treatment among relatives. Television dramas profoundly influence viewers' views, attitudes, and behaviors related to interpersonal communication, rendering them a crucial subject of inquiry in media and communication studies (Messerli & Locher, 2024).

The themes of polygamy in *Lelaki Itu* are particularly relevant in the Malaysian setting, where polygamous marriages persist and frequently entail complex family dynamics. Motivations for polygamy may encompass companionship, emotional satisfaction, and cultural norms, as illustrated in the series by the character Syed Mirza and his family. Another argument, presented by Ali (2002), posits that it is preferable to marry a second wife during the first wife's infertility rather than to divorce her, which can lead to psychological distress.

*Lelaki Itu* emphasizes the individual and societal consequences of these decisions, illustrating them via relatable character developments and authentic tales. Research by Liao, CH (2023) substantiates that social influence compels individuals to modify their attitudes, behaviors, opinions, or beliefs to conform to the majority, a phenomenon termed conformity. Media can both mirror and mold public perception, a notion illustrated in the drama's portrayal of the challenges encountered by Syed Mirza's family as they contend with inheritance rights and social stigmas following his concealed polygamous marriage and subsequent death.

Data from Sisters in Islam in 2021 indicates that polygamy continues to be pertinent in Malaysia, with 12% of their customers engaged in such unions, highlighting the persistent discussions around equity, financial viability, and familial cohesion (Muzammel I. & Abazah S. F., 2021). Media representations of delicate topics such as polygamy, domestic violence, and unregistered weddings can stimulate meaningful social dialogue, enhancing public comprehension of these intricate issues. Television serves as a conduit for meanings and pleasures, as well as a medium for the development and dissemination of culture throughout

society. Television perpetually generates and reiterates meanings and popular enjoyment, playing a significant role in social dynamics and structure (Fiske, 2010).

Communication studies on polygamy are still scarce, frequently disregarding the ordinary relationship dynamics within polygamous families. Most research focuses on legal or moral issues while disregarding how co-wives, husbands, and children communicate, negotiate roles, and resolve conflicts. Stereotypes are regularly used in media portrayals, and the voices of persons living in polygamous communities. Critical frameworks such as intersectionality, decolonization theory, and feminist viewpoints are rarely used. To fill these gaps, future research should prioritize ethnographic, participatory, and narrative approaches that center on lived experience, question dominant assumptions, and investigate varied communicative patterns within polygamous family structures.

### Literature Review

Polygamy, the practice of maintaining many marriages, is legally and culturally sanctioned in numerous Muslim-majority nations, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria. Nonetheless, its implementation and societal endorsement fluctuate markedly between locations owing to variations in cultural norms, economic circumstances, and legal structures. In Malaysia, polygamy is legally sanctioned under Islamic Family Law, contingent upon stringent criteria, including the necessity of judicial approval and the demonstration of financial capacity and equitable treatment of all spouses. Research in Malaysia has emphasized the intricate relationship among religion, culture, and gender dynamics in influencing perceptions of polygamy. For instance, regarding women's viewpoints, prior research by Othman, N (2006) revealed that numerous Malaysian women perceive polygamy as a threat to their marital security and economic stability, notwithstanding its religious endorsement. Men frequently rationalize polygamy as a religious entitlement or a remedy for social challenges, including widowhood or infertility (Siti & Wah Yun 2000).

The implementation of polygamy laws in Malaysia has faced criticism for its inconsistency, as certain men circumvent legal stipulations through unofficial marriages (Nurul Huda Mohd Razif, 2020). In comparison to other Muslim countries like Indonesia, polygamy is allowed; however, it is strictly regulated. Research indicates that polygamy is frequently engaged in by affluent males and is perceived as a status symbol, yet it remains contentious among advocates for women's rights (Smith-Hefner, 2006). Polygamy is broadly accepted and practiced in Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, underpinned by religious and cultural standards. Research demonstrates that economic considerations, including the capacity to sustain many wives, significantly influence its practice (Adeleke, 2018). Nevertheless, younger generations are progressively scrutinizing its significance in contemporary society (Al-Sharif et al. 2018).

Researchers frequently utilize sociological, psychological, and feminist approaches to examine polygamy. Feminist scholars denounce polygamy as a patriarchal institution that perpetuates gender inequity and subjugates women. They contend that polygamy frequently undermines women economically, emotionally, and socially (Ahmed, 1992). In Malaysia, feminist viewpoints underscore the conflict between religious rights and women's rights, especially in instances of polygamy conducted without the consent or awareness of the first wife.

Social role theory posits that gender roles and cultural expectations influence behavior and attitudes. In Muslim countries, men are frequently conditioned to perceive polygamy as a religious obligation or benefit, whereas women are socialized to embrace it as an aspect of their religious and cultural identity (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Conversely, research has employed psychological models to investigate the emotional and mental health effects of polygamy on women and children. Research in the Middle East indicates that women in polygamous relationships frequently exhibit elevated levels of anxiety, sadness, and diminished self-esteem relative to their counterparts in monogamous marriages (Al-Krenawi et al. 2001).

Television dramas and other media significantly influence public attitudes toward social issues, including polygamy. They can either perpetuate stereotypes or contest cultural standards, contingent upon the portrayal of the issue. Research on media representation of polygamy is few; nevertheless, available research indicates that dramas frequently sensationalize the practice, emphasizing conflict and drama instead of offering a balanced perspective (Smith, 2015). In Malaysia, operas such as *Lelaki Itu* drama have ignited public discourse over the ethical and social ramifications of polygamy. Although considerable study exists regarding the social and psychological effects of polygamy, limited studies have investigated its portrayal in media, especially within the Malaysian setting. Comparative studies are necessary to examine the portrayal of polygamy across various cultural and media contexts, along with its effects on public awareness and views. The capacity of the media as an instrument for informing the public about polygamy remains insufficiently examined. This encompasses its function in enhancing awareness, cultivating critical thinking, and facilitating debate.

### Objectives

The aim is to investigate the impacts of *Lelaki Itu* on Malaysian audiences, focusing specifically on its portrayal of issues associated with polygamy, such as domestic violence, inheritance distribution under *faraid law*, unregistered marriages, and incest. This study examines the portrayal of these issues in the drama, highlighting the influence of narrative elements on audience understanding and societal awareness. An inquiry was conducted to analyze the depiction of domestic violence and its psychological repercussions on family members, the legal and familial intricacies of inheritance in polygamous families, the vulnerabilities faced by individuals in unregistered marriages, and the sensitive representation of incest. The study examines storytelling techniques used to convey each theme, highlighting how the depiction of these societal issues can influence cultural attitudes and promote improved social discourse and empathy.

### Method

This study applies a qualitative research methodology and utilizes content analysis to investigate the representation of social themes in *Lelaki Itu*. Content analysis is a qualitative research method that systematically codes and interprets narrative components within chosen episodes to derive insights into the representation of particular topics (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher also utilizes secondary sources to enhance the contextual comprehension of societal themes shown in the drama, including domestic violence and inheritance conflicts. The purposive sampling method was utilized to identify critical episodes, guaranteeing that the selected content includes substantial representations of

polygamy, domestic violence, inheritance under *faraid*, unregistered marriages, and incest. This method facilitates a concentrated examination of instances that illustrate the show's interaction with these themes, permitting a thorough investigation of its narrative influence. Examining how television shows reflect and contest gender stereotypes influences media representation and gender equality. Scholarly investigations have examined the influence of socioeconomic status and culture on television drama communication (Yue, Wang, & Singhal, 2019). The examination of each episode was organized to assess character interactions, story development, and dialogue, emphasizing the impact of particular scenes on audience impressions. Lee & Son (2022) asserted that socialization influences individuals' perspectives, communicative skills, and dispositions. These characteristics influence their social identities and interactions in both mediated and interpersonal contexts (Lee & Son, 2022). The classification and interpretation of scenes adhered to the methodology established by Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019) for detecting thematic patterns, enabling the researcher to classify and assess the influence of each social issue. The findings from this method were enhanced by secondary research, encompassing studies on media influence, cultural norms, and legal ramifications in Malaysia, to contextualize the drama's depiction of societal issues. The amalgamation of content analysis with secondary sources yielded a thorough comprehension of how *Lelaki Itu* mirrors and maybe influences public consciousness regarding social issues in Malaysia. This technique analyzed the drama's correspondence with societal reality and its possible educational effects on viewers, offering insights into the cultural impact of television dramas on social discourse.

The study involved conducting interviews with six participants. The selection of informants representing various genders, professional backgrounds, and ages is a deliberate methodological choice intended to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This research utilizes a semi-structured interview method, incorporating a predefined set of open-ended questions to facilitate discussion. Gender, age, and professional background significantly influence individuals' perspectives, experiences, and attitudes regarding the themes explored in the drama *Lelaki Itu*. Men and women may hold differing views on polygamy, shaped by societal norms, power dynamics, and personal experiences. Socioeconomic status and professional environments may shape individual views on polygamy, as these factors impact educational opportunities, exposure to diverse perspectives, and financial independence.

An In-Depth study enables researchers to investigate the experiences and perceptions of polygamy across diverse social strata, yielding a comprehensive understanding of the practice through demographic representation, thereby preventing overgeneralization and ensuring the findings apply to a wider population. The aim is to examine the differences in attitudes towards polygamy throughout the 30 episodes of the drama *Lelaki Itu* aired over 6 weeks, focusing on gender, age, and occupational groups. This facilitates the identification of patterns, paradoxes, and distinctive insights that may be overlooked in a homogeneous sample. To mitigate bias and guarantee equitable representation, researchers employ random selection to diminish selection bias and utilize anonymous data gathering to promote candid responses by assuring anonymity, thereby alleviating the need to adhere to societal norms. By meticulously structuring the study to encompass a diverse participant pool and mitigating any biases, researchers can yield findings that are equitable, impartial, and reflective of the wider population's experiences and beliefs regarding the topics in drama *Lelaki Itu*.



The demographic characteristics of the informants are encapsulated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Informants**

Informant	Gender	Age	Role
1	Female	28	Viewer
2	Male	34	Viewer
3	Female	45	Social Worker
4	Male	28	Lawyer
5	Male	50	Religious Leader
6	Female	42	Counsellor

## Findings

### Domestic Violence: Portrayal and Social Awareness

The drama *Lelaki Itu* employs the figure of Syed Mirza's wife to examine the ramifications of domestic violence, illustrating both physical and emotional abuse within the familial context. The series vividly portrays the trauma and psychological effects on victims, especially spouses and children, who experience terror, loneliness, and worry through intense and emotionally charged situations. Depictions of the wife's reluctance to report her abuse highlight societal obstacles, including stigma and fear of retribution, that frequently inhibit victims from pursuing assistance (Ahmad et al., 2018).

Viewer Reactions and Social Implications: Informants 1 and 3 noted that the series could enhance public empathy for victims by depicting the challenges they encounter. Informant 3 remarked, "*The show illustrates the concealed challenges faced by victims, potentially fostering greater support and awareness among viewers.*" Informant 1 articulated apprehension that certain viewers may perceive the characters' suffering as exaggerated, which might diminish the message if people regard it as implausible. This 5 underscores the required equilibrium between dramatization and realism to effectively augment social consciousness (Singh & Kaur, 2023).

The depiction of domestic violence in *Lelaki Itu* aids in dismantling stigmas and may foster empathy and public understanding. The series illustrates the severe realities encountered by victims, functioning as a means for comprehension and potential prevention, consistent with research by Delcambre (2015) and Karim & Ismail (2020) that demonstrates the influence of media in altering public perspectives on delicate issues

### Inheritance Under *Faraid* in Polygamous Families: Legal and Familial Conflicts

The narrative exposes intricate inheritance difficulties after Syed Mirza's demise, emphasizing the legal and emotional tensions stemming from *faraid* law inside a polygamous family. *Lelaki Itu* depicts the legal difficulties encountered by several wives and children contending for their entitlements, highlighting the possibility of enduring familial discord. The script frequently highlights the sense of injustice among family members, especially when one wife's inheritance is markedly less than that of others due to the *faraid* divide (Razimi & Shahril, 2016).

Expert Analysis: Informants 4 and 5 noted that although the drama adeptly portrays *faraid* as intricate and disputed, it might benefit from more explicit information regarding legal procedures and alternate options, such as estate planning. Informant 4 stated, “*The program could familiarise viewers with estate planning to avert such conflicts, a strategy that is underutilized in Malaysia.*” Informant 5 highlighted the prospective function of religious leaders in assisting families with the *faraid* application to promote equity and mitigate disputes.

The depiction of inheritance matters under *faraid* in *Lelaki Itu* highlights the necessity for estate planning and legal counsel in Malaysia's polygamous families (Yusof & Ghazali, 2019) and (Daud et al., 2018). The series demonstrates that the *faraid* law, although founded on principles of equity, can evoke perceptions of inequity in the absence of transparent communication and adequate preparation, indicating a possible domain for social and legal reform to facilitate more equitable inheritance transfers (Ibrahim & Rahim, 2023)

### **Unregistered Polygamy Marriages: Social and Legal Consequences**

The portrayal of character experiences in *Lelaki Itu* illustrates unregistered polygamous marriage as a double-edged sword, with characters confronting both personal and legal complexities. Syed Mirza's unregistered polygamous marriage overseas is a topic of dispute, especially as his second wife and their child face challenges in asserting inheritance claims. The drama underscores social stigma, the absence of legal acknowledgment, and the susceptibility of individuals in these relationships, illuminating the drawbacks of polygamous marriages (Omar & Wahid, 2019).

Input from Counsellors and Observers: Informants 2 and 6 highlighted the significance of this depiction for audiences who may lack a comprehensive understanding of the legal ramifications of unregistered polygamous unions. Informant 6 noted, “*This narrative can enlighten individuals who might contemplate unregistered polygamous marriage due to financial or familial constraints.*” It imparts knowledge regarding the associated risks. Informant 2 indicated that, as a spectator, this subplot was enlightening, highlighting the significance of legal security in marriage (Rahman & Lim, 2021).

*Lelaki Itu* effectively elucidates the legal and social ramifications of unregistered polygamous marriages by dramatizing the problems encountered in such partnerships. The narrative may encourage viewers to obtain legal advice or formalize their marriage registration, consistent with the research by Yue et al. (2019), which indicates that media studies demonstrate the capacity of televised information to affect viewers' behaviors and choices

### **Incest: Psychological and Social Repercussions**

The narrative explores incest as a profoundly traumatic experience with enduring psychological repercussions. *Lelaki Itu* illustrates the emotional and relational upheaval stemming from incestuous relationships through intricate character arcs, particularly highlighting the struggles of young victims grappling with guilt, betrayal, and solitude. These sequences are designed to illustrate both the immediate shock and the enduring psychological effects, highlighting the characters' internal conflicts as demonstrated by the research of Razali & Abdullah (2022).

Perspectives on Portrayal Sensitivity: Informants 3 and 5 concurred that although *Lelaki Itu* sensitively tackles the issue of incest, the program may enhance audience support by offering resources for victims seeking assistance. Informant 3 emphasized, “*The depiction is authentic; however, it would be advantageous for the show to provide resources for viewers on how to assist victims or pursue counselling.*”

The use of incest as a theme in *Lelaki Itu* is significant, as it underscores a frequently taboo subject in Malaysian media (Ismail & Mustafa, 2018). This depiction may mitigate stigma, promote understanding, and stimulate discourse regarding mental health assistance for victims (Razali & Abdullah, 2022). Ahad et al. (2023) suggest that such representations may exert a destigmatizing influence, thereby fostering audience empathy towards victims and encouraging support for mental health care programs.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study has examined the various socioeconomic concerns represented in *Lelaki Itu*, focusing on their portrayal and impact on Malaysian culture. The media in Malaysia has the unique capacity to bring crucial yet often stigmatized subjects, such as polygamy, into public awareness, highlighting genuine concerns that are sometimes overlooked (Mazlan et al., 2024). *Lelaki Itu* emphasizes the significance of domestic violence, inheritance conflicts under faraid legislation, unregistered polygamous unions, and incest within the local cultural and legal context.

In 2021, the Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO) claimed that domestic violence had become a major issue in Malaysia, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns when incidences increased owing to extended home confinement and social isolation (Solhi, 2021). *Lelaki Itu* dramatizes the hidden adversities encountered by survivors of domestic abuse, aligning with empirical evidence and advocating for improved support systems and accessible mental health services. Organizations such as the WAO push for improved support systems and legal protections for victims, aiming to reduce stigma and promote community aid.

The series illustrates inheritance conflicts under *faraid* law, highlighting significant difficulties within Malaysian culture. Unclaimed inheritance has accumulated an estimated RM90 billion, mostly due to distribution disputes and insufficient legal planning (Ayamany, 2021). *Lelaki Itu* illustrates the discord arising from the contested inheritance, emphasizing the importance of estate planning, a recommendation supported by family law experts and religious authorities in Malaysia to alleviate familial disputes and guarantee fair results for all family members.

Unregistered polygamous unions, sometimes culturally endorsed but without legal protection, are an additional issue emphasized by *Lelaki Itu*. In Malaysia, Hamid & Aziz (2021) assert that unregistered polygamous marriages, especially those established abroad, lack legal recognition and may lead to complications concerning inheritance, legitimacy of children, and social security. *Lelaki Itu* encourages viewers to understand the legal and social consequences of unregistered polygamous marriages, echoing the advice of legal and religious authorities that advocate for marriage registration to protect all involved parties.



*Lelaki Itu* promotes open dialogue and understanding around the challenging and stigmatized topic of incest. Familial sexual abuse is underreported due to stigma; nevertheless, recent years have shown a rise in public awareness and support for victims (Razali & Abdullah, 2022). The series tackles the subject with compassion, seeking to reduce societal shame and encouraging viewers to support victims while recognizing the lasting psychological impacts of such encounters.

This study exemplifies how the drama *Lelaki Itu* showcases the potential of Malaysian media as an educational tool, addressing complex themes and promoting awareness and discourse within communities. To enhance this effect, the next drama series may incorporate explicit resources, such as helplines and counselling facilities, to empower viewers to take action. The integration of these resources could bridge the gap between knowledge and practical support, hence augmenting the positive influence of media in Malaysian society (Karim & Ismail, 2020).

The insights from *Lelaki Itu* provide crucial reference points for social workers, legal professionals, and community leaders in developing more comprehensive support systems. *Lelaki Itu* improves public understanding of societal issues, especially polygamous marriage, by utilizing culturally pertinent 7 narratives, thus highlighting the effectiveness of storytelling as a catalyst for positive social change. This study concludes by underscoring the importance of the drama *Lelaki Itu* as a medium for social education, emphasizing the ability of media narratives to influence societal attitudes and elevate consciousness, particularly in culturally diverse countries like Malaysia.

Polygamy is intricately linked to Islamic principles, cultural customs, and contemporary legal systems. The absence of thorough research on its social, psychological, and economic effects results in considerable deficiencies in comprehension. Utilising the aforementioned theories and models, subsequent research can yield a more intricate examination of polygamy in Malaysia, specifically regarding the lived experiences of women and children in polygamous households, the influence of socioeconomic status and education on perceptions of polygamy, and the efficacy of legal frameworks in safeguarding the rights of all stakeholders involved.

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