

## Exposure to the US News Media, Religion and the Malaysians' Students Attitudes Towards the United States

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### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan mengenal pasti pengaruh pendedahan kepada media Amerika dan agama ke atas sikap terhadap Amerika Syarikat dalam kalangan pelajar Malaysia. Seramai 133 pelajar lelaki dan 158 pelajar perempuan (181 Islam dan 105 bukan Islam) terlibat dengan memulangkan borang soal selidik tadbir sendiri yang diedarkan bagi mengukur sikap mereka terhadap Amerika Syarikat. Dapatan kajian memaparkan kecelaruan kecenderungan yang didapati majoriti tidak suka kepada nilai-nilai dan idea Amerika dan konsep demokrasi Amerika yang perlahan-lahan menular dalam kehidupan masyarakat Malaysia. Tetapi pada masa yang sama, mereka mengalu-alukan muzik dan filem Amerika, kemajuan saintifik dan teknologi Amerika, dan etika kerja dalam kapitalisme Amerika. Tiada perbezaan signifikan bagi kesemua item sikap di atas antara responden yang terdedah kepada CNN dan majalah Amerika berbanding yang tidak, kecuali sikap terhadap kemajuan saintifik dan teknologi Amerika Syarikat. Pengaruh agama didapati lebih ketara. Terdapat perbezaan signifikan antara responden Islam dan bukan Islam dalam sikap mereka terhadap nilai dan idea Amerika, muzik dan filem Amerika, dan kemajuan saintifik dan teknologi Amerika. Walau bagaimanapun, sikap terhadap cara mereka mengendalikan perniagaan dipuji kedua-dua kategori responden. Pola dapatan kajian memberi makna bahawa pendedahan kepada media asing tidak semestinya petunjuk yang baik dalam menentukan orientasi terhadap budaya asing; sebaliknya faktor agama didapati lebih kuat mempengaruhi reaksi terhadap pengalaman pendedahan kepada budaya antarabangsa.

### ABSTRACT

This study primarily seeks to determine the influence of exposure to US media and religion on Malaysian students' attitudes toward the United States of America. A total of 133 male and 158 female students (181 were Muslims and 105 non-Muslims) participated in a self-administered survey assessing their attitudes toward the US. The findings showed that ambivalent tendencies reflected in the majority of students' seeming dislike towards American idea and values, and 'concept of democracy' that are slowly seeping into the Malaysian way of life. On the other hand, the same respondents also welcomed American music and movies, its technological and scientific advancement, and the 'work ethics' that American capitalism claims to adhere. No significant difference was found on all four items on attitudes toward US between respondents who were exposed to CNN and US newsmagazine from those who were not exposed to these US media, except on attitudes towards US technological and scientific advancement. The influence of religion seems more prominent. Muslim and non-Muslim respondents significantly differed in their preference for American ideas and customs, music and movies, and technological as well as scientific progress. However, attitude towards the American way of doing business was well appreciated. The pattern of findings suggests that foreign media exposure is not necessarily a good measure of foreign cultural orientation, but religion seem to be a powerful factor of audience attitudinal reaction to international cultural exchange.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to digital revolution and globalization, Malaysians today are more exposed to the American way of life and pop culture. More have come to learn about the United States of America's role in international affairs. While the growing influx of American cultural products has brought a greater opportunity for Malaysian youths to learn about the United States, the flow of US values and practices into the country is a contentious phenomenon. It is both a subject of admiration as well as resentment.

Malaysians have formed their perception of what America is and what it represents partly from their exposure to images of the US in the local media and in the US media and accordingly, have developed affinity or disdainful attitude towards the United States. While Malaysians can learn about the United States through international newsmagazines such as the *Times* and *Newsweek*, television is the most popular source of information where most of its programming is dominated by American programs. In addition of the availability of CNN in satellite television, recent estimate shows that about sixty percent of the programming in terrestrial televisions is imported, mostly from the US. Accordingly, it is presumed that television is the major source of stereotypes about America. Since many of the Malaysian youths have minimal contact with America and Americans, their perception of and attitudes toward the United States are assumed to be formed by exposure to portrayals about America in the mass media.

Although the United States is viewed highly because of its economic and technological progress, much of the American western cultural values are in contradiction with the Asian values. Many critics argued that exposure to US cultural products would weaken local culture and values, especially among the youths as they are heavy users of mass media. As such, a proliferation of US values, standards and popular culture could be perceived as interference in the philosophical, religious, or economic thinking of Malaysia societies; thus, could be one of the sources of resentment. Additionally, rising expectation generated by the US cultural products may not go well with Malaysian cultural values and aspirations. As a form of media

imperialism, US cultural products may undermine local values within the social structure.

How do other cultures perceive the United States is a pertinent issue particularly with the "Americanization" of the global village and the new-found status of the United States as the sole superpower. While the US is respected for its economic and technological advancement, recent development in the war against terror led by the United States has spawned anti-American sentiment in many parts of the world. A recent global survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that international sympathy for the United States, which rose in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attack, has been replaced by an increasing resentment in the way America is prosecuting the war on terrorism (Thibault 2002). Brittan *et al.* (2003) have argued that the hatred or the anti-American sentiment did not only result from the clash of cultures or civilizations. But much of it has to do with American ethnocentric foreign policy. They pointed out four main sources of resentments, namely (i) the US proclivity to act unilaterally in international affairs, (ii) the style and tone of US foreign policy, (iii) opposition to particular US policies, and (iv) the way the US projects its overwhelming power. In some parts of the world, such as in Islamic countries, resentment towards the United States is reinforced by religious and ideological differences.

A love-hate relationship with America has existed even before the United States and its coalition partners invaded Iraq with the pretext that Iraq has weapon of mass destruction, and Saddam's repressive regime is a threat to the world security. While there is a wide admiration for American movies, music and technology, there is also a growing resentment towards the US in several countries which is attributed to its unilateralist policy (Thibault 2002). In light of this development, and given the fact that some Malaysian youths are exposed to US news media, particularly the CNN, and local television channels, the present study examined the influence of exposure to US news media on attitudes toward the United States as compared to those who were not exposed to US news media. More importantly, the role of religion is also considered in examining the effect of exposure to US news media on attitudes toward

the United States. Hence, the specific objectives of the present analysis were (i) to determine whether there is a difference in attitude towards the United States between youths who are exposed to US news media and those who are not exposed, (ii) to determine whether there is a difference in attitude towards the United States between Muslim youths and non-Muslim youths, and (iii) to determine the influence of exposure to US news media on attitudes toward the US when religion is controlled for.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Based on the assumption that most people around the world develop their view of America from the media they are exposed to, the question of the effect of exposure to US media on non-America audiences has been a subject of inquiry. How others perceived the United States and the effect of exposure to American media on attitudes toward the United States have been studied since the sixties. While past studies have yielded important insights, many have failed to consider the role of religion in examining the effect of exposure to US news media on perception or attitudes toward United States. In other words, studies that determine the combined effect of exposure to US news media and religion on perception or attitudes toward the United States is clearly lacking.

The present study is not about the patterns of news coverage in the US news media, but about the consequences of exposure to images of United States in the US news media. Past studies have underscored the relevance of agenda-setting theory in explaining how the news media influence public opinion. As suggested by previous studies, (e.g. Wanta *et al.* 2004) news coverage did have an agenda-setting effect. The agenda-setting function of news media is expected as the news organizations usually subscribe to a particular ideology, which in turn shapes the nature and direction of coverage. Along this line, Bennets (1990), has observed that the nature of international coverage by news media is often consistent with the foreign policy of the nation. It has been reported that past research on international news coverage by U.S. network television news program revealed a lack of balance in the coverage. Kawatake (cited in Saito 1996) reported that news related to US in the US

media has the following characteristics: (i) news about the dynamics of the business world in the US, (ii) news demonstrating America's political power, (iii) news depicting some aspects of the US as the "free" country, (iv), news dealing with trends in the US, (v) news showing social problems in the US, and (vi) news focusing on crises and conflicts in the coverage of foreign nations.

The images of United States portrayed in the US news media and local news media are assumed to have an influence on non-American audiences' perception and attitudes toward the United States. Salwen (1991), for instance, has pointed out that relentless promotion of Western ideas and concepts through exposure to Western media in foreign countries might affect recipients' lightly held beliefs and values such as perception and attitude towards other cultures. Dell'Orto *et al.* (2003), likewise, found that how news stories are framed has an effect on audience perception of foreign realities.

Most of the past studies on effects of media on perception and attitudes toward the United States were informed by social learning theory on stereotype formation and cultivation theory. The social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behavior, attitudes, and emotional reaction of others in the formation of personal values, beliefs, and stereotypes. The mass media, particularly the television, are important sources of information and learning. Although stereotypes are generally learned from primary groups and peers, the mass media serves as an important agent, particularly in cross-cultural situations where direct personal experience is limited. For instance, in Thailand, Mexico, South Africa and Taiwan studies have found that American programs were major sources of social stereotypes about Americans (see Kalimapour 1999; Tan *et al.* 1986; Tan and Suarchavarat 1988). In their meta-analysis study, Emmers-sommers and Alen (1999) concluded that mass media are a significant source of learning and media can influence attitude, which in turn, may influence or shape behavior. Consistent with social learning theory, it is argued that frequent exposure to America news and entertainment programs might serve as important clues in the formation of perception and attitude towards America among foreign audiences.

Research on television effects has also examined how television contributes to perception of social reality. This line of research is often guided by cultivation theory. While many studies concerning cultivation theory focused on TV violence, the theory has also been applied to a wide variety of topics which included images or perception of America (see e.g. Kamalipour 1999; Saito 1996; Tan and Suarchavarat 1988). Cultivation theory postulates that the more time people spend watching television, the more likely it is that their conception of social reality will reflect what is seen on television. Accordingly, one probable effect of exposure to US cultural products, whether news or entertainment, could be to increase a person's favorability towards the country, in the way familiarity breeds positive feelings, as suggested by Synder *et al.* (1991). Synder *et al.* also pointed out that, while there were studies which found that liking the United States is positively related to exposure to foreign news via newspaper and watching TV entertainment series, familiarity through the media exposure may also breed contempt in other cases.

The findings on impact of exposure to American television on foreign audiences have been mixed. Ogan (1993), for instance, found that the consumption of foreign media products among Turkish respondents did not predict a favorable foreign cultural orientation or produce any clear pattern of positive description of the United States. Saito (1996) found that American program in Japanese television did not necessarily cultivate unfavorable images of the United States. Willnat *et al.* (1997), on the other hand, found that foreign TV consumption is related to negative stereotypical perceptions and feelings toward Americans. A meta-analysis of seventeen studies of the impact of American television on foreign audiences by Ware and Dupagne (1994) found small but statistically significant correlations between exposure to American entertainment programs and perception, attitude and behavior of foreign audiences.

In examining effects of exposure to US media on non-American perception of United States, it is important to note on the type of media and programs. Willnat *et al.* (1997) suggested that in studying media influence,

researchers should separate the media that have different content and different audience. In light of this view, it is worthwhile to examine whether there is a difference in attitudes toward the United States among non-American audiences who were exposed to the CNN and US newsmagazine such as the *Times* and the *Newsweek* as compared to those who were not exposed. In a post September 11 era, it is important to examine this issue as news in CNN and US newsmagazine seem to be skewed towards the US's interest. Furthermore, recent research has observed an emerging CNN factor in the direction of US foreign policy by evoking responses in their audience through concentrated and emotionally-based coverage, which in turn applies pressure to governments to act in response to a particular problem (Hawkin 2002). On the contrary, news commentaries on the US unilateral policy in international affairs in the local media seemed negative and critical.

In addition to media use, religion could also be a factor in explaining for the variation in attitudes toward the United States among non-American audience. Religion is assumed to have a profound influence on audience perception and reaction to what they experience in life, including those what they learn from the media. A majority of the Malaysians are Muslim in which their values are in sharp contradiction with the western values. But this argument has not been adequately and empirically examined. In one study of religion and media, Golan (2001) found that on moral issues, religiosity is positively associated with perceived media impact on others. But on non-moral issues, religiosity is not associated with perceived media impact on self and others.

Based on the above discussion, this study tested the following two research hypotheses and addresses one research question:

H1: There is a significant difference in attitudes toward the United States between youths who are exposed to US news media from those who are not exposed to US news media.

H2: There is a significant difference in attitudes toward the United States between Muslim youth and non-Muslim youths.

RQ: What is the role of exposure to the CNN on attitudes toward the United States when religion is taken into account?

## METHODOLOGY

The data reported here is part of a large survey data on media and war. The data were collected one week before the start of the Iraq War on March 19, 2003. A total of 295 undergraduate students completed a self-administered questionnaire survey on a voluntary basis between March 10 and 14, 2003. The group-administered survey contained questions including students' media exposure and attitudes toward the United States. Respondents were also asked to provide detail on gender, age, ethnic, religious affiliation and their interest in politics. The questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in communication, language, and human resource development classes at a public university in Selangor, Malaysia. It took about 10-15 minute to complete the said questionnaire.

Exposure to US news media, as a variable, was measured by asking students to indicate how often (regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never) they used the CNN and US news magazine. The regularly and sometimes responses were collapsed into one and categorized as expose to US news media, while the hardly ever and never were collapsed into not expose to US news media category. The measure of attitudes toward the United States involved asking respondents to mark on the left or right of the five bi-polar statements that better reflects their views. The five statements are (i) it's good/bad that American ideas and customs are spreading here, (ii) I like/dislike American ideas about democracy, (iii) I like/dislike American way of doing business, (iv) I like/dislike American music and movies, and (v) I admire/do not admire the United States for its technological and scientific advances.

There were slightly more female (54.2%) than male subjects (45.8%) with an average age of 22 year (SD= 1.54). About sixty-two percent of the respondents were Muslims, and the other thirty-eight percent were non-Muslims. In terms of interest in politics, 41.3% of the respondents indicated interest in politics, 41.0% not very much interested and 17.7% not at all interested.

## RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the findings on attitudes toward the United States by exposure to US

news media. As shown in Table 1, while a substantial percentage of the respondents were exposed to CNN, not many read US newsmagazines. Accessibility and selectivity factors may explain for one's exposure to these news media. With regard to attitudes toward the United States, the findings clearly showed that, on the one hand, a majority of the respondents like American music and movies, American ways of doing business, and admire America's technological and scientific advancement. On the other hand, a majority of the respondents disliked American idea and customs spreading here, and their disdain to American idea about democracy. This pattern of findings suggests that respondents weighted and reacted differently on issue related to morality such as cultural and religious values and issues unrelated to morality such as technological progress reported in the news media. Nevertheless, when responses on the five different items on attitudes toward the United States were compared, the results of the  $\chi^2$  tests revealed no significant differences on all the five items for exposure to CNN, suggesting exposure to CNN has no influence on feelings toward the United States. A similar pattern of results is observed for exposure to US newsmagazine, except on the item admire (do not admire) American technological and scientific advancement. Overall, the present study fails to support the hypothesized difference in attitudes toward the US between those who were exposed to the US news media with those who were not exposed.

Does religion have any bearing on non-American audiences' attitudes toward the United States? Table 2 summarizes the results of the  $c^2$  tests on the five attitudinal items by religion. The survey found significant differences on four items (except item on American ways of doing business) when the responses of Muslim and non-Muslim respondents were compared. The differences are more pronounced on American idea and custom spreading in the country and the American idea about democracy. The percentage of Muslims who disliked American idea and custom spreading in Malaysia and American idea about democracy is significantly higher than that of non-Muslims. Overall, this finding generally supports hypothesis 2, suggesting that religion has an influence on

TABLE 1  
Attitudes towards the United States by exposure to CNN and US newsmagazine

Item	Expose to US news magazine		$\chi^2$	Expose to CNN		$\chi^2$
	Yes (n=47)	No (n=244)		Yes (n=98)	No (n=191)	
Like American ideas and customs spread here	21.3	17.2	.210	19.8	16.8	.218
Dislike American ideas and customs spread here	78.7	82.8	(.647)	80.2	83.2	(.641)
Like American idea about democracy	28.3	24.5	.127	23.0	26.2	.204
Dislike American idea about democracy	71.7	75.5	(.722)	77.0	73.8	(.652)
Like American ways of doing business	60.9	57.8	.051	58.0	58.4	.000
Dislike American ways of doing business	39.1	42.2	(.821)	42.0	41.6	(1.000)
Like American music and movies	87.0	85.2	.007	88.9	83.7	1.031
Dislike American music and movies	13.0	14.8	(.933)	11.1	16.3	(.301)
Admire American technological and scientific advancement	76.1	89.3	4.923	85.7	88.0	.126
Do not admire American technological and scientific advancement	23.9	10.7	(.026)	14.3	12.0	(.723)

TABLE 2  
Attitudes towards the United States by religion

Item	Religion		$\chi^2$
	Islam (N=181)	Non-Islam (N=105)	
Like American ideas and customs spread here	8.3	34.3	28.906
Dislike American ideas and customs spread here	91.7	65.7	(.000)
Like American idea about democracy	11.0	48.6	48.140
Dislike American idea about democracy	89.0	51.4	(.000)
Like American ways of doing business	54.4	66.7	3.604
Dislike American ways of doing business	45.6	33.3	(.058)
Like American music and movies	81.6	91.4	4.357
Dislike American music and movies	18.4	8.6	(.037)
Admire American technological and scientific advancement	83.2	94.3	6.330
Do not admire American technological and scientific advancement	16.8	5.7	(.012)

Note: Figures are in percentages;  $\chi^2$  used continuity-correction test.

TABLE 3  
Attitudes towards the United States by religion and exposure to CNN

Item	Muslim & Expose to CNN (n=59)	Muslim & Not Expose to CNN (n=122)	Non-Muslim & Expose to CNN (n=42)	Non-Muslim & Not Expose to CNN (n=63)	$\chi^2$
Like America ideas and customs spread here	10.2	7.4	33.3	34.9	30.909 (.000)
Dislike American ideas and customs spread here	89.8	92.6	66.7	65.1	
	$\chi^2 = .123 (.570)$		$\chi^2 = .000 (1.000)$		
Like American idea about democracy	8.6	12.2	42.9	52.4	51.625 (.000)
Dislike American idea about democracy	91.4	87.8	57.1	47.6	
	$\chi^2 = .213 (.644)$		$\chi^2 = .573 (.449)$		
Like American ways of doing business	56.9	53.3	59.5	71.4	5.782 (.123)
Dislike American ways of doing business	43.1	46.7	40.5	28.6	
	$\chi^2 = .087 (.768)$		$\chi^2 = 1.116 (.291)$		
Like American music and movies	80.7	82.0	100.0	85.7	9.241 (.026)
Dislike American music and movies	19.3	18.0	-	14.3	
	$\chi^2 = .000 (1.000)$		$\chi^2 = 4.866 (.027)$		
Admire American technological and scientific advancement	76.8	86.2	97.6	94.3	11.064 (.011)
Do not admire American technological and scientific advancement	23.2	13.8	2.4	5.2	
	$\chi^2 = 1.807 (.179)$		$\chi^2 = .597 (.440)$		

Note: Figures are in percentages.

attitudes towards United States among non-American audience.

As not many of the respondents were exposed to US newsmagazine, only exposure to CNN was considered in examining the combined effect of media and religion on attitudes toward the United States. As shown in Table 3, when exposure to CNN and religion were factored simultaneously, it is clearly evident that religion has a greater role in explaining the variation in attitudes toward the United States among the non-American audiences.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study clearly underscores the idea that in measuring attitude researchers need to specify the component of attitude being examined. As observed in the present analysis, while non-American subjects had a favorable attitude towards American music, movies, and business practices, they seem to have reservation or objection on American customs spreading into the country and American idea about democracy. This pattern of findings show that, while it is acceptable to develop an aggregate measure of attitudes toward the United States, one should take note that aggregating data would also result in a loss of information and specificity. As evident in this analysis, the study would not be able to tap the differential in attitudinal orientation on matters pertaining to ideology and morality and those that are not.

The present study found that, even of the emergence of CNN factor in the news broadcast as pointed by Hawkin (2002), exposure to CNN did not cultivate favorable attitudes towards the US among non-American audiences. The finding of the relationship between exposure to American news media among the non-American audience and attitudes toward the US is not in line with the findings of a number of studies such as Ware and Dupagne (1994) and Dell'Orto *et al.* (2003) but corroborate with the findings of other studies such as (e.g., Saito 1996; Willnat *et al.* 1997). The inconsistency in the findings of the relationship between exposure to American news media and attitudes towards the US could be due to whether the confounding influence of religion was taken into account in the analysis. As observed in the present study, religion is a factor in explaining for the variation

in attitudes towards the US, consistent with the findings of Golan (2001).

A no significant difference on attitudes toward the United States between those who were exposed and not exposed to CNN has to be taken cautiously. A failure to find support for the hypothesized difference could be attributed to measurement error. Only one question was used to measure the exposure variable and this measure may not be sensitive and discriminating enough. It is not known how much attention audiences pay to the news and programs in the CNN. Had a better measurement be established, the expected difference in attitudes toward the United States between those who were exposed and not exposed to CNN could have been observed. Despite some flaw in the measurement, the unexpected pattern of findings seems to suggest that effect of exposure may not be as strong as it was anticipated.

Although the influence of religion on attitudes toward the United States is clearly evident in the present study, it is not clear how religion actually influences information-processing capability of audiences. It is obvious that religion serves as a filter in news consumption, comprehension and reaction. One probable explanation is, because of the contrasting and competing ideological values between Islam and the west, Muslim audiences are sensitive and mindful when interpreting news produced by the American media, particularly when they are skeptical of the United States and recognizing the fact that the US news media seemed to promote nationalism in journalism.

The present study raised more questions than answers to the research objectives. A conclusion on the lack of effect of exposure to CNN on attitudes towards the United States among non-American audiences even though religion was taken into account could not be definitive enough. Although religion seems to have an influence on the attitudes, more studies are needed to understand how religion influences attitudes. And more importantly, a more rigorous design and statistical technique is required in examining the effect of exposure to US media and religion on attitudes toward the United States among non-American audiences. The relationships among religion,



exposure to US news media, and attitudes toward the United States seem much more complex. In addition to religion, more factors need to be considered, and a multivariate analysis technique is more appropriate than a bivariate analysis in determining the nature and strength of relationships between exposure to US media and attitudes toward the United States.

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