

## Janus-Faced Portrayal: News Representation of Migrant Workers in Malaysian Newspapers Amid COVID-19

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The global pandemic has adversely affected migrant workers psychologically and economically, leading to a poor quality of life. How the Malaysian media portrays this group during uncertainty remains unexplored. Aside from Eurocentric-focused scholarship, this study uniquely examines the representation of migrant workers in Malaysia. An inductive qualitative analysis of two Malaysian newspapers, *Malay Mail* (n = 36) and *New Straits Times* (n = 33), was conducted from January 2021 to August 2021. The findings show that the media portray migrant workers in a Janus-faced manner: They sympathetically represent them as vulnerable groups but also with an antagonistic stereotypical representation. This shows that media outlets adopt a more versatile approach to reporting on this group, which differs from previous studies. This study adds new perspectives and broadens the literature on the representation of migrant workers in ASEAN countries, such as Malaysia. It is also significant because it highlights subaltern erasures in the news discourses of marginalized groups, reducing xenophobia and racism toward them.

*Keywords:* migrant workers, news representation, Malaysia, COVID-19, Malaysian newspaper, news portrayal

The media is a source of information that could change people's perceptions and opinions about migrant workers and influence citizens' attitudes toward them (Kaur-Gill, 2020). The representation of migrants in mainstream media creates opportunities for migrant workers to either become part of society or be excluded from the public sphere (Bleich, Bloemraad, & De Graauw, 2015). Globally, the lives of migrant workers in developed and developing economies have changed amid COVID-19 (Avraamidou & Eftychiou, 2021; Choudhari, 2020). The closure of businesses, downsizing, and termination of migrant workers' jobs resulted in their financial crisis (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2020). Citizens' perceptions of migrant workers also changed during this period of the worldwide economic recession because of the pandemic (Carlsson-Szlezak, Reeves, & Swartz, 2020). Similarly, the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia resulted in harsh lives for

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migrant workers, as hundreds of them lost their jobs and the government conducted raids to detain undocumented migrant workers in an attempt to reduce the COVID-19 spread.

A World Bank report (2019) estimated that some 2.96 to 3.26 million migrant workers, including 1.23 to 1.46 million migrant workers in irregular situations, have been residing in Malaysia. Another report conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2020) suggested that the general opinion of the Malaysian public toward migrant workers was that their influx threatened the host country's culture and heritage, with 68% of respondents agreeing. Furthermore, most Malaysians did not have frequent daily engagement and interaction with migrant workers, possibly leading to widespread negative attitudes toward them. This was corroborated by the Google Trend, which showed a spike in search traffic relating to migrant workers during the initial outbreak (March 2020), with the search traffic reaching its peak by September 2021 (Google Trend, 2022).

The representation of migrant workers in the Malaysian media, as well as in political and public narratives about them, has changed over the past decade, as they are now considered a burden on the national economy and a threat to national security (Ehmer & Kothari, 2021). Keeping in view the migrant workers and their social and economic conditions in Malaysia, the negative reviews have been deeply rooted in society for decades (Devadason & Meng, 2014). For example, extant literature portrays this group with virulent rhetoric, blaming them for a host of social problems ranging from electoral fraud to an increase in street crime (Dannecker, 2005; Simkhada, Van Teijlingen, Gurung, & Wasti, 2018). Scapegoating migrants, regardless of their realities, has contributed to an environment in which exploitation and abuse are sometimes viewed as acceptable. However, during the pandemic, how the Malaysian media portrayed this stereotyped group remains unclear.

Hence, this study aims to explore the media representation of migrant workers during COVID-19 in Malaysia. As previously stated by Wald (2008), the collection of contradictions that begin to appear in an outbreak is "the uselessness and firmness of borders, the attraction and threat of strangers, and particularly the destructive and formative power of contagion" (p. 33), where the sense of citizenship and belonging are weaponized. Weaponizing a sense of belonging and citizenship during a crisis has health impacts on those who are typically marginalized because of their vulnerable social positions. Thus, it is imperative to map out the portrayal of migrant workers in the Malaysian media, as this study aims to call attention to subaltern erasures and shed light on discourses relating to inequality.

### **Migrant Workers, Malaysia, and the Pandemic**

The migration of skilled people has increased worldwide, specifically in developed parts of the world, and a significant number of people have migrated to emerging economies for better job opportunities. According to the ILO (2020) report, "There are 169 million international migrant workers globally. These international migrant workers made up approximately 69% of the world's international migrant population of working age (aged 15 and over) in 2019" (p. 20). Several factors are responsible for the increase in migration, such as better employment opportunities, political and economic instability, and inequalities (Wright & Clibborn, 2019).

However, the current pandemic wreaked havoc worldwide in 2020, especially in the area of employment. The pandemic has curtailed employment prospects, upended businesses, and thrown workers' lives and livelihoods into disarray (Kaur-Gill, 2020; Liem, Wang, Wariyanti, Latkin, & Hall, 2020; Sok, 2019). It triggered a rethinking of international economic and political relationships and created a "new normal" in everything—from classroom education to international labor migration (World Economic Forum, 2020). In the Asian region, the economies of countries like Malaysia are heavily dependent on foreign and migrant labor, and migrant workers account for almost 15% of the workforce. According to Bank Negara Malaysia (2020), almost 20.5 million registered migrant workers reside in and serve in different sectors, such as the manufacturing, construction, and agricultural industries. Amid the pandemic, migrant workers are the most vulnerable group because of their low wages, insecure employment, and poor living conditions. Moreover, the government of Malaysia also carried out a mass-level operation to arrest irregular migrant workers, leading to infection clusters arising in detention centers. In addition to governmental efforts to detain migrant workers, the portrayal of migrants in the media and citizens' leading attitudes has caused emotional distress and insecurity among foreign workers (Khanna & Agarwal, 2020). Prejudices and discriminatory behavior among citizens toward migrant workers were triggered. Migrant workers are segregated from communities and viewed as second-class citizens. They live in close, narrow, and overcrowded places, which has contributed to the rise of positive COVID-19 cases (Wahab, 2020). Thus, the identity of this group lures attention, making it worthwhile to explore why and how they are portrayed by the media.

#### **Migrant Workers' Representation in the Media: Discriminations and Humanitarianism**

The function of journalism is to disseminate objective information without bias and to produce neutral images (Talbot, 2007). In contrast, the media promotes the ideologies of powerful and marginalized groups who are not among the powerful elites and promotes prejudice against them (Van Dijk, 2012; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). The portrayal of migrant workers remains a heated debate. In the current extant literature, a spectrum of positive and negative representations exists, such as "the deserving/undeserving migrant and/or refugee, the threatening/vulnerable workers or refugee; and an asset/burden to the host society" (Martin, 2021; Ongenaert, Joye, & Machin, 2023). Most of these studies appear in Western media outlets. For example, the Greek Cypriot Press presents migrant workers as unfavorable (threats to the local economy) and favorable (humanitarianism and victims) to the economy (Kadianaki, Avraamidou, Ioannou, & Panagiotou, 2018). Security threats are increasingly related to terrorism and other forms of criminality that appear in German media (Holmes & Castaneda, 2016). The UK media emphasized migrant workers' justice when their human rights were largely violated (KhosraviNik, Krzyżanowski, & Wodak, 2012). Although most media outlets represent migrant workers as threats (Castillo et al., 2021; Wilkinson, 2012), some UK and U.S. media accentuated migrants' economic contributions while underlining the alarming numbers of people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea to raise sympathy (Avraamidou, 2020). By depicting migrants as sufferers or economic assets, media outlets try to legitimize discrimination against those who do not fit these frames (Kadianaki et al., 2018).

In the Malaysian media, migrant groups are portrayed as silent and perceived as social threats (Skeldon, 2014). The media portrays migrant workers mainly in law-violation cases, such as associations with crime, diseases, job snatching, drugs, and terrorist links (Widyawati, 2008). This type of media representation of migrant workers leads to stereotyping and negative discourse among the masses.

Widyawati (2008) examined the representation of migrant workers and concluded that migrant workers are poorly represented in Malaysian newspapers, which mostly publish their involvement in crimes. Malaysia lacks refugee and migrant worker policies, yet segregation between citizens and noncitizens has always existed (Kaur, 2007), resulting in human rights violations, racism, and other discriminatory behaviors (Loganathan, Rui, Ng, & Pocock, 2019; Noor & Shaker, 2017). Perceivably, the Malaysian media overwhelmingly portray this group as negative. Fuelled by the pandemic, how Malaysian media represent this group requires further exploration.

COVID-19 has caused a shift in opinion, leading to changes in the media coverage of migrants. The media discourse emerged as more nationalistic, adopting diverse yet mixed frames to depict migrant workers' suffering and their presence as a burden on the economy and blaming them for the spread of the virus. A comparison in media coverage of migrants pre- and post-COVID-19 reveals that before the pandemic, media coverage heavily focused on representing migrants as aggressive or lacking in empathy, using cliché frames that were derisory and dishonest. The postpandemic media coverage used inaccurate labeling techniques in headlines created a hostile environment for migrants and depicted them "in the most harmful of ways, from criminals to benefit scroungers" (Harraway & Wong, 2021). Bhattacharjee (2020) observed two kinds of media narratives about migrants during the pandemic: One is relatively democratic, promoting news based on facts about migrants while the other conservative media, following tradition, has highlighted migrants as carriers of the virus and demanded their ostracism.

### **Theoretical Framework**

When discussing and explaining attitudes toward migrants, social identity theory and realistic conflict theory are heavily used in the literature. The social identity theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner (2007) states that the association with a group is positively evaluated and discriminated against by others who do not belong to a group or community. From birth, each individual belongs to one group or community, and this also reflects his or her identity. However, interactions with different groups constitute individuals' positive or negative attitudes. Furthermore, while interacting with different groups, identities are re-formed in different contexts over time, which leads to the creation of an in-group (if a person becomes part of the group) and an out-group (where one individual fails to identify as part of the group). This concept of in-group and out-group reflects the difference between nationals as "us" and "others," which becomes a collective mindset and fails to develop the concept of "our."

Furthermore, the theory also explains the affiliation of people with a group, which becomes their identity and distinguishes people as in-group and out-group. Likewise, the concept of ethnocentrism also differentiates people based on ethnicity, where one ethnic group competes with and feels superior to another ethnic group. According to SIT, there are three stages of favoring an in-group: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 2007). Citizens (in-group) categorize themselves as a special group or superior to immigrants because of their nationality (social identity), and they compare themselves to immigrants (out-group). This results in differences and similarities between different groups living in any community or country, causing a favorable attitude toward one group and an unfavorable attitude toward others. The study is rooted in the COVID-19

context in Malaysia, which has caused conflicts among nationals and immigrants because of the economic crisis in which citizens are given extra benefits.

The belongingness theory is crucial to understanding the fundamental role of interpersonal relationships in human lives. The theory postulates that individuals have a strong desire for belonging and are thus motivated to make interpersonal contacts and satisfy their needs to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, and Collier (1992) defined a sense of belonging as the experience of personal involvement in an environment that bestows an individual with the feeling of being an integral part of that environment. From a theoretical perspective, the status of foreign migrant workers can be explained through belongingness theory. When migrant workers believe that their work environment in a foreign country provides them with appropriate social support and identification, they are more likely to satisfy their desire for belonging (Chin, 2017; Phungsoonthorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2019). Taking this theoretical lens, Malaysian newspapers deliberately produce empathetic and caring reporting, urging relevant government bodies to provide health insurance and favorable policies to migrant workers. This strategy is designed to create a sense of belonging, which makes them feel as if they have merged into the local community. This is in line with the Malaysian government's consideration of the country as having a multiethnic and inclusive society.

However, in-group and out-group differences remain abundant in multiethnic societies. Discriminatory behavior toward migrants and violence directed at nonnationals are commonly observed in such societies (ILO, 2020). The approach toward migrants as "others" and the widening gap between "us" (nationals) and "others" (foreigners or migrants) is quite common in journalism studies, while explaining migrant issues in the media (Riegert & Hovden, 2019). According to Hall (1997), creating differences and articulating distinctions lead to collective meaning in society and result in disparities based on gender, race, and religion. Thus, in light of the current state of COVID-19 and its potential impact on the lives of migrant workers in Malaysia, the current research is grounded in distinctions between "otherness" and "usness."

## **Research Methods**

### **Malay Mail and New Strait Times: A Brief Dossier**

Two of the country's leading newspapers were selected: *Malay Mail* and *New Straits Times*. The chosen outlets enjoy the highest circulation among Malaysian newspapers, which guarantees the scope of information dissemination. The *Malay Mail* has been satisfying readers' informational needs in Malay, English, and Chinese since 1986. Because of its left-leaning position, it has consistently reported on issues in ways that support the government's agenda, which is Malay-dominated (Lee, 2021). Following the rigorous restrictions placed by the government to curb the COVID-19 epidemic, online traffic indicated that reading for the *Malay Mail* increased by 250% during a seven-day period in March (Chin, 2020). The *New Strait Times* is also one of Malaysia's oldest and most widely circulated newspapers. In 2020, the paper was listed as the fifth most trusted in a Reuters Institute survey of 14 Malaysian media outlets with a right-leaning position (Newman et al., 2021). Hence, it appears to be a worthwhile medium for analyzing and reporting identities in modern Malaysia. This ensures that the newspapers' agendas do not favor one ideological camp (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008).

### Procedures

For the current research, a content analysis of Malaysia's two leading newspapers (online version) was conducted from January 2021 to August 2021. The themes in selected news articles relating to migrant workers and their financial, emotional, social, and health positions were analyzed to examine their representation in print media amid COVID-19. Data were collected from the LexisNexis database. However, to find sufficient data, multiple keywords were used, such as migrant workers, immigrant workers, and foreign workers in each sample newspaper.

Letters to editors, features, and special reports were excluded, and only news about migrant workers on the front page and last page was downloaded. Furthermore, news about refugees was not included in the study. To find the most relevant news, the keywords "migrant foreign workers, Malaysia, and COVID-19" were repeatedly used. A total of 117 news articles were chosen for additional analysis. After screening the news articles and eliminating irrelevant stories, only 60 articles relevant to the current study were available for analysis. According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008), the obtained news stories were screened, and those irrelevant to Malaysia were discarded before being published in selected newspapers. Additionally, news stories about refugees were culled to ensure that the data matched the research objectives.

### Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytic method for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Beginning with a data-driven inductive orientation toward analysis, themes were initially identified that represented patterns relevant to the representation of migrant or foreign workers. Themes were drawn from the explicit descriptions in news reporting, with minimal interpretation of the latent meanings underlying the situation of migrant workers. A more interpretive analytic approach was then used to interpret explicit themes and to make sense of latent connections between themes in light of the existing theory.

Precise, contemporaneous notes documented the coding process and the evolution of themes as they were refined throughout the analysis process. First, data were read and observed several times to make sense of it and to comprehend "what was happening" in the media by focusing on the portrayal of migrant workers from Indonesian, Indian, Bangladeshi, etc., codes such as "psychological care," "health insurance," and "supporting/strengthening community," "reforming the law, regulating recruitment agencies," and "compassionate toward migrants" emerged. The researchers then compared the coding results and consolidated their codes into a framework to recode the articles. Next, the authors categorized the codes and explored different hierarchies for the emerging categories of concepts. For example, "health insurance" and "reforming the law, regulating recruitment agencies" were both categorized into a subtheme of policy for foreign workers. By combining all the categories, the main theme of *Empathetic Representation* emerged. For the next theme, the same process was conducted from some codes of "subhumans," "undocumented workers," "virus cluster," and "economic threat" to categorize infection carriers and law violators to the main theme of *antagonistic representation*.

## **Findings**

Overall, the selected Malaysian newspapers employed a Janus-faced representation of migrant workers. In other words, this subaltern group is sometimes portrayed as an empathetic community disguised as "usness." At other times, it is portrayed as an antagonistic group with a salient "otherness." The Malaysian newspapers (*Malay Mail* and *New Strait Times*) mainly focused on Indonesian, Indian, and Bangladeshi migrant workers and referred to them by ethnicity. Another label used by the newspaper was "foreign workers" and differentiated between "documented" and "undocumented" workers.

### ***Empathetic Representation of Migrant Workers***

Amid the pandemic, newspapers rightly depicted the plights of immigrant workers. Since the pandemic caused worldwide difficulties, the problems faced by migrant workers were also represented in the print media. Empathetic representation refers to a reporter/journalist who can employ cognitive empathy to approach an underserved community by using verbal and nonverbal signals to show that they are working to understand another person's feelings and ideas. Here, it emerged through the following: devising policies for foreign domestic workers, ensuring health insurance, condemning raids and arrests of foreign workers, and other social activities, such as the arrangement of food and shelter.

### ***Policy for Foreign Workers***

COVID-19 had a huge impact on all segments of life. People from all walks of life suffered, and gradually, their suffering, either financially or emotionally, increased. The Malaysian government took the required and urgent steps to minimize the suffering of foreign workers, especially domestic workers, who were more economically vulnerable. The health crisis negatively impacted them, as some lost their jobs, were placed on travel restrictions, or faced detention in prisons. The Malaysian government provided a setting to incubate this group and create empathetic feelings.

On March 7, 2020, a news report stated that migrant workers are not servants and urged them to amend employment policies (*Malay Mail*, 2021e). Consequently, workers who had been stranded abroad were allowed to enter Malaysia in November 2020. The ILO also urged the Malaysian government to devise a policy to protect the rights of domestic workers during COVID-19. According to a *New Strait Times* report, Malaysian and Indonesian governments agreed to recruit and protect the rights of Indonesian domestic workers; We need to care them as they are marginalized group. The representation of domestic workers and the discussion of the lack of a domestic worker protection policy in Malaysian newspapers suggest that the media value foreigners' legislative problems equally and regard them as part of "usness." To some extent, newspapers create a sense of belonging, which makes migrant workers feel like they are an integral part of the host country, leading to positive emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

### ***Condemnation of Arrest***

Since millions of undocumented workers reside in Malaysia, and given the economic situation and the increase in infection cases, the Malaysian government tracked down and prosecuted

undocumented workers. On the other hand, numerous social actors (including elected officials) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or associations urged the government to treat them humanely. This demonstrates that, despite Malaysia's designation of them as undocumented and illegal, some expressed support for them by referring to them as disadvantaged and empathetic communities. Thus, the media creates a sense of belongingness so that in a foreign country, migrant workers can also receive adequate social support, affiliation, and even recognition (Watt & Badger, 2009). This is also correlated with SIT, which argues that the intergroup is no longer perceived as opposed but rather as united in confronting a shared challenge (Dovidio, Glick, Hewstone, & Esses, 2010). Moreover, the transition from common in-group/out-group to intergroup definitions of identity is reflected in transitions in media discourse. Emphasis shifts to depicting particular groups as sympathetic because of their high personal vulnerability to infection or inferior social and economic status (Abrams, Lalot, & Hogg, 2021). A news report published in the *Malay Mail* (2021e) presented a statement by the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA): "So the association urges the government to treat migrant workers more humanely in its efforts to curb the COVID-19 pandemic" (para. 4).

A news report published in the *New Straits Times* (2020a) carried the headline, "UN: Use Alternatives to Detention in Fight Against COVID-19." Because these acts of Malaysian concerned authorities were condemned by civil and medical organizations, and published in print media, the Malaysian government assured not to arrest even undocumented workers during vaccination, which was an official response to treat migrant workers empathically and humanly, depicting an image of a government that is taking care of vulnerable people.

### ***Social Activities and Ensuring Health and Vaccination***

Furthermore, newspapers also reported on societal actions to help underprivileged and jobless migrant workers. The *Malay Mail* reported on a civil movement in Malaysia to support migrant workers, which aimed to provide them with medical health and daily necessities. The news stated, "the MMA urged the government to treat migrant workers more humanely. 'We may not achieve herd immunity if we fail in our efforts to vaccinate our significantly high migrant worker population'" (*Malay Mail*, 2021e, para. 3).

The *New Straits Times* also stated that they are integrated into our communities as they access the same public services and work side by side with Malaysians. By doing so, these social activities were employed to help migrant workers develop a sense of belonging—a disguised "usness." The word "disguised" implies a sense of belonging or inclusivity that might not be genuine because local people might outwardly accept migrant workers into their community for the sake of social harmony or because of governmental policies or initiatives (Surface Acceptance/Tokenism). As SIT posits, individuals cognitively represent social categories as prototypes. These are fuzzy sets, not checklists, of attributes (e.g., attitudes and behaviors) that define one group and distinguish it from other groups (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Here, migrant workers are represented as part of the local Malaysian population.

Universal Health Coverage, with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, urged more on the health of migrant workers and pledged that no one is left behind (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015). In meeting the health requirements of a growing number of migrant workers,



the Malaysian government increased noncitizen healthcare fee revenue from 2014 to 2018 (Loganathan, Chan, & Pocock, 2020). Malaysia has achieved Universal Health Coverage and initiated the Foreign Worker Hospitalization and Insurance Scheme to provide migrant workers with financial risk protection against healthcare expenditures. However, this problem is exacerbated by the pandemic. Considering the increasing number of infection cases in Malaysia, particularly among foreign workers living in close-knitted places, media reporting highlighted the importance of health insurance for them. As reported in the *New Straits Times* (2021c), "Migrant workers should have access to life insurance. Migrant workers play a significant role in driving the country's economic growth" (para. 2).

*Malay Mail* (2021c) also reported that in Malaysia, documented and undocumented immigrants face multiple barriers to healthcare access because of language, immigration status, low income, poor education, perceptions of discrimination, transportation problems, culturally based healthcare beliefs and values, and a complex Malaysian healthcare system. The depiction of such news by print media suggests that the media is concerned with the health of both noncitizens and citizens to avoid discrimination. All these moves are inclined to develop a need for affiliation, a sense of belonging, and attachment toward the society in which they reside, as people seek social inclusion and avoid exclusion (Phungsoonthorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2019). The selected newspapers deliberately offer these belongings and attachments to migrant workers, aiming to help them with the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that they associate with this particular locality (Williams & Stewart, 1998).

### ***Antagonistic Representation of Migrant Workers***

Apart from empathizing with migrant workers, print media stereotypes them into antagonistic communities. Here, antagonism can be explained as an unfavorable discourse toward a certain group of people. Antagonistic representations are commonly used in the comparison of Muslim and non-Muslim binary (Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008), media discourse, power, and politics (Roslyng & Dindler, 2022). Drawn from there, these news stories focused on migrant workers and portrayed them as carriers of disease, disobedient to laws, and economic burdens.

### ***Migrant Workers as Infection Carriers***

During this period, as the spread of infections increased despite vaccination, many positive cases were reported among foreign workers. On January 31, 2021, two selected newspapers used the word "infection carrier" to depict the danger of migrant workers. These antagonistic stereotypes remind us that social stereotypes are shared beliefs held by one group about another group (Daoud, English, Griffin, & George Mwangi, 2018; Hogg & Reid, 2006). Furthermore, Oakes, Haslam, and Turner (1994) claim that such stereotypes are not idiosyncratic and inaccurate beliefs but rather accurate beliefs that represent a shared social reality. In addition, SIT proposes that negative identity derives largely from unfavorable comparisons that can be made between the out-group and relevant intergroups (Brown, 2000). The following are some excerpts from the selected newspapers: "The programme implementation is based on the assessment by the Ministry of Health, which found the risk of infection among foreign workers is higher than among local workers" (*Malay Mail*, 2021d, para. 4). "With the manufacturing

sector being the biggest contributor and migrant workers forming a large chunk of positive cases" (*New Straits Times*, 2021b, para. 6).

In addition, by employing an assimilation strategy, reporters quote specific numbers to convey the high infection rate in this community. The concept of *assimilation* can be achieved through the use of a noun that symbolizes a group of people (Van Leeuwen, 1996). *Malay Mail* (2021a) reported that "since December 1, 2020 . . . 4,151 have been confirmed positive for COVID-19" (para. 5). The same strategy appeared at the *New Straits Times* (2021a), with it stating "634,082 migrant workers had been tested for the virus, and 9,935 of them, tested positive" (para. 8). Such specific representations like "4,151" and "634,082," and "9,935" (although a random number itself) indicate the reliability of the information, which causes antagonistic stereotypes, which are known to lead to prejudice and other negative attitudes toward out-groups, such as the migrants discussed here. This representation strategy, though having a direct numerical description, is also micro, subtle, and not easily recognized for the underlying racism and stereotype.

### ***Law Violators***

Law violation, or criminalization, is the process by which behaviors and individuals are transformed into crimes and criminals (Ensor, & Goździak, 2010; Ferreira, 2021). Media outlets tend to deliberately portray immigrants as particularly crime-prone (Harris & Gruenewald, 2019). During the pandemic, negative sentiments among Malaysian citizens toward migrant workers were observed. In particular, undocumented workers were described as they disobey the law, do not follow SOPs in the *New Straits Times* (2020b), and are law violators, causing problems for Malaysia. This is also evident in *Malay Mail* (2021b), which reported that some foreign workers entering the state could have criminal records and possibly end up creating more problems. However, because the media is known as a watchdog, the representation of news, particularly about migrant workers, leads to the establishment of an attitude among native people. The reporting of criminal acts and the involvement of undocumented workers based on ethnicity constitute discriminatory behavior. Consequently, the notion of "otherness" is observed. Many reasons can explain why people can easily develop antagonistic stereotypes, since stereotyping serves an "energy-saving" function that "frees up cognitive resources" to think about other matters, which consequently leads to unfair and unjust relations between individuals and society (Augoustinos, Walker, & Donaghue, 2014, p. 234). As Tajfel (1969) opined, the categorizing process that underlies stereotyping entails seeing people who fall into one category as having several shared characteristics, or as being more alike than people who fall into a different category. Here, migrant workers are categorized as law violators. The following is evidence of the portrayal of law violators among migrant workers: "Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK) President Voon also said he feared that some foreign workers entering the state could have criminal records and possibly end up creating more problems" (*Malay Mail*, 2021b, para. 4).

### ***Economic Threat***

COVID-19 was challenging for Malaysia and the rest of the world since it caused an economic crisis because of lockdowns and the closure of business activities. The currency value of almost every country faced a recession that resulted in a troublesome life for employees, employers, and the business industry as well. By conceptualizing economic threat, migration is perceived as a potential economic threat among

large parts of domestic workers rather than a fiscal threat, as migrants directly compete with natives in the job market (Spies & Schmidt-Catran, 2016; Tatarko & Jurcik, 2021). The selected newspapers reported that “the government had insisted that jobs must first be offered to locals as Malaysia could not continue to depend on migrant labor. This can reduce the country’s overdependence of migrant workers” (Malay Mail, 2021c, para. 3). Such representation accentuated the importance of protecting local job seekers and reducing migrant workers. The sentiment of “otherness” was also observed among people who considered migrant workers invaders in the Malaysian job market, as SIT focuses on prejudice, discrimination, and conditions that promote different types of intergroup behavior—for example, conflict, cooperation, social change, and social stasis. Here, migrant workers are regarded as economic invaders who block local employment possibilities and give rise to social stasis. Bonacich (1972) stated that intergroup antagonism was initially produced by competition that arose in racially divided labor markets.

### Discussion

Research related to migrants in Malaysia remains limited, including economic, emotional, psychological portrayal, and coverage strategy. This study intends to assess the way the media represent them and its potential consequences for migrant workers. Preliminary findings presented in this study aim to pave the way for future research to further explore a humane and universal approach to managing a vulnerable segment of society, such as the migrant worker population, in times of pandemic.

By adopting the concepts of “otherness” and “usness” to examine the representation of migrant workers in the Malaysian press, the study explored the prevailing attitude toward migrants and their miseries. In Malaysia, as in other countries, the plight of migrant workers is no different. Almost 2 million migrant workers suffered the consequences of a nationwide lockdown while facing violations of their rights, losing jobs, remaining in detention, and living a tough life. However, the question of media representation amid the crisis has been explored and unraveled using different findings from social identity and belongingness theory. Nevertheless, the conventional dichotomous categorization of in-group and out-group members constrains the representation of the affected media, particularly during the pandemic.

As previous research has observed, the domination of “us” (in-group) over the mentality of “others” (out-group) and unfavorable living conditions is created for migrants (Fasani, Lull, & Tealdi, 2020). Contrary to the previous study, the current research has shown a different representation from the Malaysian media despite biased attitudes among the citizens. Moreover, Howarth (2006) argues that social representations “are drawn on both to naturalize and legitimize exclusion and othering as well as to critique and challenge such stereotypes and margin-realizing practices” (p. 79). However, the findings try to understand, beyond the content of representations, the interrelation of different representations.

The selected newspapers specifically employed empathetic ways to represent migrant workers, aiming to create a disguised “usness” and a sense of belonging. Because the Malaysian media is primarily controlled by the government, it has remained selective in reporting on foreign workers. Malaysian newspapers are closely guided by the authoritarian press practice of advancing and supporting government policies and the national image. Therefore, migrant reporting is carefully crafted to avoid any national harm, as Malaysia has close economic and business ties with India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and neighboring

countries. As shown, the selected newspapers portray both favorable and unfavorable representations of migrant workers, which is consistent with Kadianaki et al.'s (2018) findings on the Greek press, although this research only focuses on European countries. Additionally, although extant literature indeed shows a spectrum of media representations in relation to migrants (e.g., favorable vs. unfavorable, Eurocentric promigrant media), recent research concerning migrant media representations amid pandemics is still scant. In this sense, this study finds more evidence from an Asian country (here, Malaysia). It also adds new perspectives to SIT by arguing that the representation of migrant workers cannot be mired in the dichotomy of in-group and out-group. It should be conditionally explained in different cultural contexts and mediascapes. As Malaysia is a multicultural and multiethnic society where people from diverse backgrounds have lived together for decades, this study adds to the current debate on migrant workers' conditions amid COVID-19.

However, the media stereotypes this group and portrays them as "otherness," which is ingrained in history. Since the current pandemic has caused economic, social, and emotional problems, the people of Malaysia (both citizens and foreigners) have experienced difficult times. Because of economic constraints and the high infection rates of viruses and diseases, migrant workers are perceived as threats. In previous studies in Malaysia, migrant workers, whether legal or illegal, were portrayed in the media in association with crime, diseases, job snatching, drugs, and terrorism (Widyawati, 2008). As government and the media are intimately connected in many ways, every government has a substantial apparatus and set of procedures for working with the media (Gong & Firdaus, 2022). This causes a long-debated issue of media professionalism, media ethnics, and biased reporting because the common interests of the (traditional and social) media and government lead to a decrease in quality, an increase in bias, and manipulation of the public by news management (Song & Lee, 2016; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). News media organizations ought to take heed to avoid a surge of partisan polarization, political distrust, and sensationalism, which breeds binary opinions, tribalism, and contradictions amid the crisis (Fanthome, 2008; Gong et al., 2022). Thus, this study still calls attention to promoting media objectivity, responsible independence, and the journalist watchdog role (Gong, Firdaus, Aksar, Alivi, & Xu, 2023; Ting, Tham, & Gong, 2022) as well as accentuating the erasures of racism and prejudices among this subaltern group. It is hoped that there will be more focus on the discourses relating to outbreak inequality because international migrant workers already suffer from a lower quality of health and living conditions that are potentially heightened by the pandemic (Liem et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Through qualitative analysis, this study examined the representation of migrant workers in two leading newspapers in Malaysia. The findings revealed a Janus-faced portrayal with empathetic and antagonistic representations. Contrary to previous studies, the findings of the current research suggest and conclude that the media somehow delivers positive reporting of migrant workers as a disguised "usness" rather than a dominated "otherness" blame. Thus, favorable and unfavorable frames are parallel vis-à-vis news reporting throughout the selected period, which suggests that news organizations have evolved from stubborn and arbitrary representation strategies to a more versatile and tactful status.

The limitations of this study are evident in the selection of two newspapers and eight months of data. As a result, the study recommends expanding the number of newspapers, and a comparative analysis of migrant representation in newspapers before and following COVID-19 would reveal both similarities and differences. Additionally, it is beneficial to chart the impact of policy changes on migrant workers in the context of media advocacy about the post-COVID or endemic era. Furthermore, in-depth interviews with newspaper reporters covering migrant issues would yield a wealth of information about migrant framing.

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