



Indonesia-Malaysian Border Issues: National Online Media Coverage in Malaysia and Indonesia During 2010-2022

Tri Hastuti Nur Rochimah^{1*} , Muhammad Raqib Mohd Sofian² 
Erwin Rasyid³ 

¹Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

²Islamic Sains University of Malaysia, Nilai, Malaysia

³Lambung Mangkurat University, Banjarmasin, Indonesia

Abstract

This study analyzes how online media in Malaysia and Indonesia cover long-standing border issues that have shaped diplomatic tensions since 1957. While prior research has examined historical and political dimensions, limited attention has been given to how the media frames these issues across agenda-setting levels over time. Using quantitative content analysis and sentiment analysis based on three-level agenda-setting theory, this research examines national online media, Tempo.co, Tribunnews, and Republika (Indonesia), and Malaysiakini and Astro Awani (Malaysia)—from 2010 to 2022. Data were collected through web scraping of headlines and leads, followed by sentiment classification and word cloud visualization. Findings reveal three key patterns. First, negative tones dominate coverage, indicating strong issue salience at the first level of agenda setting. Second, media emphasize military and security approaches over cultural, educational, and economic aspects, reflecting second-level attribute prioritization. Third, there is a notable imbalance in coverage intensity, with Indonesian media producing significantly more border-related content than Malaysian media. These results contribute to understanding how online media operationalize agenda-setting in Southeast Asia and highlight the importance of promoting peace-oriented journalism in reporting international border disputes.

Keywords: Online Media, Covering, Border Issue, Indonesia, Malaysia

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***Corresponding author:** erwinrasyid@ulm.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

After achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia formally established diplomatic relations with Indonesia. Nonetheless, relations between the two states have long predated their formation as independent nations. Along the way, the two nations have encountered numerous obstacles which have frequently caused political tension between them. At the peak of the Cold War, confrontation was a dark chapter that went into the history books of both countries. Similarly, in the post-Cold War period, numerous sensitive issues brought relations between the two countries back to a boil (Maksum 2016). Despite their many cultural similarities, the relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia has never been simple and straightforward. Why is this so? Since Malaysia and Indonesia have separately attained independence and sovereign status, the spirit of cooperation between the two countries has undergone transformation and become increasingly hazy (Liow and Chinyong 2004). Hidden issues that have the potential to disrupt bilateral relations are among the reasons for this (Wardhani 1999).

Generally, the relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia can be divided into three phases. The first phase was during the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation in 1963–1966, where there was the ‘Ganyang (crush) Malaysia’ frame under the regime of Soekarno (Adnan and Dunan 2016). The second phase was the frame of ‘Saudara Serumpun’ (family brotherhood) during the New Order regime under President Soeharto, while the third phase is ‘Malingsia’ (Malaysian thief) during the period of ‘Reformasi’ (1999–2004). A recurring source of friction between these two nations pertains to border-related matters, encompassing both land and maritime disputes. The marine and land borders between Malaysia and Indonesia have historically been a source of conflict in Southeast Asian geopolitics (Nik Hasan et al. 2021).

Conflicts, particularly those related to maritime borders, have occasionally strained diplomatic relations as these two adjacent countries continue to manage the extensive area that is the South China Sea. This has resulted in confrontations that necessitate a comprehensive understanding of the underlying intricacies of their relationship (Nik Hasan et al. 2021; Maksum 2016; Wardhani 1999). The border areas of Indonesia and Malaysia are fragmented among multiple regions, encompassing both terrestrial and maritime boundaries. The land border areas are only found on the island of Borneo, whilst the marine border stretches across the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Celebes Sea (Itasari 2020).

As long as independent nations continue to exist, the administration of regional borders will endure. This endurance is due to the fact that territory is a fundamental component of a country's existence, complementing its people, government, capacity to engage with the international community, and the acknowledgment of sovereignty conferred by other nations (Wardhani 1999; Irwansyah 2017). Subsequently, it is only natural that border regions require a sustainable and integrated management mechanism, as "friction" is an inevitable occurrence in the border space, comprising both positive and negative interactions with neighbouring countries (Putrayasha 2017). Border problems are typically quite complicated, containing elements of political, economic, and socio-cultural problems, or a combination of them. There are political issues which have affected the Indonesian-Malaysian borders, such as the loss of Sipadan and Ligitan, and the Ambalat dispute (Ching and Tiung 2009). In regards to this border region, Awang (2017) stated that there is a place called Outstanding Boundary Problems (OBP), which is a term used in international treaty law in relation to border disputes between two neighbouring countries (Putrayasha 2017).

Other cases involving migrant workers (Tenaga Kerja Indonesia) also contribute to the ebb and flow of bilateral relations (Harun 2009; Irwansyah 2017). Due to the repatriation of illegal Indonesian migrant workers to Indonesia, relations were somewhat tenuous in 2020 (Yusof 2023). Approximately 1.7 million individuals from Indonesia are employed in Malaysia, with many experiencing exploitation and mistreatment (Rizaldi and Qodariyah 2021). Meanwhile, the presence of illegal Indonesian workers has forced Malaysians to compete for employment and affected Malaysia's social vulnerability (Satyanugra and Susiatiningsih 2014). In addition, environmental issues such as forest fires causing transboundary haze pollution have also caused concern (Fadli et al. 2019). Palm oil is an important commodity and source of income in the region. Furthermore, some palm plantations in Indonesia are owned by Malaysian and Singaporean companies. Therefore, the Indonesian government may find it challenging to combat the problem due to the need to preserve its economic interests (Varkkey 2016 in Reetz, Boediono and Wolling 2020).

The strained relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia is typically attributed to divergent public reactions stemming from media framing (Adnan and Dunan 2016). The media in both countries can manipulate audience perception, fueling nationalist sentiments and anti

Malaysia/Indonesia animosity ((Budiawan 2017; Yaputra and Mulyana 2020). Consequently, the way news is presented and how media stories are crafted significantly influences border-related issues.

Although previous studies have examined media coverage of Indonesian-Malaysian border issues, significant gaps persist. First, existing research has predominantly employed framing analysis on specific incidents (e.g., Ambalat crisis, Sipadan-Ligitan dispute) rather than examining longitudinal patterns across extended time periods (Priyowidodo and Indrayani 2012; Latif and Tiung 2009; Adnan and Dunan 2016). Second, comparative studies between Indonesian and Malaysian online media remain limited, with most focusing on traditional print or television media (Hapsari and Pawito 2014; Harun 2009). Third, while sentiment analysis has been applied to media studies, its integration with multi-level agenda setting theory in border dispute contexts remains underdeveloped.

This study addresses these gaps by: (1) analyzing a 12-year corpus (2010–2022) of online media coverage to capture evolving patterns; (2) comparing five major online media outlets across both countries; (3) applying the three-level agenda setting framework (McCombs and Valenzuela 2020; Zhang et al. 2024) to examine not only issue salience (first level) but also attribute emphasis including sentiment tones (second level) and network relationships among issues (third level); and (4) employing systematic sentiment analysis to quantify emotional framing. The novelty lies in integrating agenda setting theory with computational content analysis to reveal how online media in Southeast Asia construct border dispute narratives across multiple levels of agenda influence.

The Complexity of Border Issues in Indonesia-Malaysia Relations

Significant discussions on national border matters, including the alliance between Indonesia and Malaysia, have consistently persisted. This link between the two nations has existed since colonial times. Citizens living along the Indonesia-Malaysia border are divided by nationality. Nonetheless, the majority of them remain affiliated with the same tribe. This results in the emergence of two identities in border regions: ethnic and national. Indonesia-Malaysia relations are among the most significant bilateral ties in Southeast Asia (Clark 2013) which have evolved over time, due to both domestic and international causes (Maksum 2016). Diplomatic initiatives to structure and manage borders are suboptimal due to inadequate

institutional development (Rachmawati and Fauzan 2012). Essentially, border management must prioritise the welfare of the populace, especially those residing near the borders (Itasari 2020). However, problems such as the low level of communal welfare paint a hazy picture of personal safety near the Indonesian-Malaysian borders (Sanak 2012).

In border regions, the most prevalent factor is economic difficulties. Threat to public safety and culture comes next, followed by political and technological concerns (Gultom et al. 2020). In general, the border areas of Indonesia and Malaysia are fragmented among multiple regions. Both boundary regions are terrestrial and maritime. The land border areas of the two countries are only found on the island of Borneo, however the marine border between Indonesia and Malaysia stretches across several bodies of water, including the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Celebes Sea. The border delineation between the two nations will offer legal certainty regarding the usage and management of natural resources in their respective territories (Itasari 2020).

Matters pertaining to the Indonesia-Malaysia boundary has traditionally been a source of heated debate. Several incidents which occurred have led to the intensification of this issue. Transnational activities in border towns and their relevance to state security in the social sector are among the issues caused by the interaction between the two contiguous countries. This vital border region has the potential to be subject to military and non-military security threats (Haris Zulkarnain and Roisah 2018). In an endeavour to protect their borders, the two countries have tightened security at the West Kalimantan-Sarawak border through border post patrols and increased monitoring to quash illicit cross-border operations. There are two primary categories of social security-related activities involved: border security and political nationalism (Sudagung 2021).

West Kalimantan and Sarawak are the regions affected by the intricacies of the border connections between the two countries. The boundary between West Kalimantan and Sarawak stretches for 966 kilometres, with 50 lines connecting 55 West Kalimantan villages to 32 Sarawak villages. In the border regions of West Kalimantan and Sarawak, the primary concern is border security. Border regions, particularly the Entikong District, are confronted with many issues. Among them are the lack of infrastructure, the trade sector's reliance on product

marketing and supply of basic necessities from Malaysia, the low level of public education, the threat of nationalism, the absence of interdepartmental coordination, and the imbalance of authority between the central, provincial, and district governments (Raharjo 2013).

Due to its strategic location in West Kalimantan on the Malaysia-Indonesia border, the Entikong District community is highly sensitive to the political policies of Malaysia and Indonesia (Martono et al. 2022). The numerous difficulties present in border areas cause border communities to have weak patriotism and a propensity to retain transnational commercial contacts even if they must break national laws (Bangun 2018). The complexity of border concerns necessitates a specialised approach in handling border challenges. To create an effective border, a plan that can satisfy the individual needs of both nations is required.

The people of the two nations, especially Indonesia, continue to recall the events of past confrontations. Since the memories and perceptions surrounding the clash have not faded with time, this is extremely detrimental to the building of good relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. This is evidenced by the expression of anti-Malaysian sentiments whenever tensions grow between the two nations (Budiawan 2017). Consequently, the way that the news is being framed and the construction of media narratives on the matter will have a substantial impact on border concerns.

The Role of the Media: Agenda Setting

Agenda setting theory has been widely applied across communication and sociology research, though often without effective theoretical integration (Zhang 2025). The theory posits that the mass media has the ability to influence public perception by determining what issues the public thinks about, what facts will be believed, solutions to issues, focus on issues, and matters that should be known by the public (McCombs and Shaw 1993; Idid 2017). When applying agenda setting theory to news platforms, news headlines serve both first and second-level agenda setting, not only by drawing attention to specific targets but also by highlighting their attributes. Article content further reinforces the second level by emphasizing the nature of reported social phenomena (Kim et al. 2025). Within classical agenda-setting theory, the traditional focus examines how media news agendas shape public perceptions and priorities (McCombs and Guo 2014). The theory holds that media significantly influence public

discourse and collective thinking by consistently highlighting specific events and issues in their coverage (McCombs and Valenzuela 2020; Zhang 2025).

Agenda-setting theory comprises three main levels. The first level concerns "issue salience," focusing on how frequently news media cover a particular topic (McCombs et al. 1997). This level influences what audiences consider important social issues. The second level, "attribute salience," relates to the emphasis given to specific characteristics or attributes of a subject and how media portray these attributes (e.g., with positive, negative, or neutral sentiment). This approach enables capturing the nuances and essential nature of social phenomena by revealing the emotional tone and specific characteristics highlighted in media coverage (Coleman and Denis Wu 2010; Kim et al. 2010, 2025). The second level argues that media not only emphasize the importance of specific events but also underscore the importance of particular issues associated with those events (Zhang 2025). The third level integrates the first and second levels, acknowledging that media communicate not only the importance of events and their individual issues but also the relationships and correlations among various events and issues as a network (McCombs et al. 2014).

Past Studies Relating To Indonesia-Malaysia Border Conflict and the Media

Previous research on the Indonesian-Malaysian border conflict using framing analysis has revealed several patterns. The Indonesian press, Kompas, framed the mid-August 2010 dispute as an issue involving Indonesia's dignity, emphasizing the need for Indonesians to be firm and for both countries to continue negotiating (Priowidodo and Indrayani 2012). The Ambalat crisis of 2005 sparked war messages in the virtual world, with Indonesian websites launching nationalistic campaigns (Madu 2008). Furthermore, related to border conflict issues, one of them is about natural resources. Research conducted by Yahya and Aditia, shows that Indonesia and Malaysia will continue to be involved in violent and prolonged border conflicts regarding natural resources due to limited natural resources. Due to the scarcity and abundance of renewable resources, there are border disputes between Indonesia and Malaysia. Illegal fishing is a concern for both countries. Laws governing maritime sector activities are

vulnerable to institutional conflicts due to overlapping regulations and legislation resulting from cross-border processing at maritime borders (Zein et al. 2023).

Websites from Indonesia launched a nationalistic campaign that essentially sought to defend the interests of their country based on their own perception or version of events. Another study on the topic of border regions in the national print newspapers revealed that the newspapers tended to be less concerned or even unbothered about border issues (Hapsari and Pawito 2014). The news regarding the border region was mostly focused on general national issues such as education, community welfare, the economy, infrastructure, state defense and security, conflict, and crime.

Harun (2009) found that Indonesian press media often sensationalize conflicts and provoke confrontation with Malaysia, while Malaysian media appear more moderate, possibly due to government control. Adnan and Dunan (2016) investigated Indonesian television framing and found Malaysia was negatively framed, with most reporting employing conflict frames. Following the fall of the New Order era, numerous events caused disputes, including the repatriation of migrant workers, arrests of undocumented migrants, harsh treatment of Indonesian laborers, forest fires, and island disputes (Mauliansyah 2018).

Another study was conducted on news framing on the Ambalat case by the Indonesian media, consisting of 14 organizations. Findings from the study showed that the Indonesian media often used diplomatic and war frames when discussing the issue. Political elite groups, the government, and the Indonesian National Army were the main sources of news. The findings also indicate that selected Indonesian media often put aside their own national interests when covering international news that involves Malaysian interests (Latif and Tiung 2009). A study conducted by Ramli et al. (2015) entitled *The Framing of News on the Border of Camar Bulan and Tanjung Datu, West Kalimantan*, illustrates that Kompas.com reveals news that is dynamic, contemporary, and tends towards war journalism, in contrast to peace and neutral journalism, while Utusan Online has normative, traditional, and neutral attributes, in contrast to war journalism. In the framing process, Kompas.com and Utusan Online are based on nationalism as the most important element in building news framing about the border. Nationalism plays a significant role in news reporting about Indonesia and Malaysia's shared border (Ramli et al. 2015).

Despite these contributions, existing studies have not systematically applied the three-level agenda-setting framework to online media coverage of border issues over extended periods. This study addresses this gap by examining first-level issue salience (coverage volume and frequency), second-level attribute salience (sentiment tones and thematic emphasis), and third-level network relationships (issue interconnections) across Indonesian and Malaysian online media.

METHODS

This research employs quantitative descriptive methods with content analysis and sentiment analysis. Sentiment analysis is the process of automatically understanding, extracting, and processing textual data to obtain sentiment information contained within opinion sentences (Pang and Lee 2009). It is conducted to examine opinions or tendencies towards an issue, whether they tend to be neutral, negative, or positive. Sentences using negative words will be categorized as negative, and likewise for positive and neutral words, depending on the type of text topic being studied (Juditha 2019). Sentiment analysis analyzes people's opinions, sentiments, evaluations, assessments, attitudes, and emotions towards entities such as products, services, organizations, individuals, issues, events, or a topic (Cahyono 2017).

This study investigates how online media carries out reporting on various cases related to the Indonesian-Malaysian border, encompassing both border issues and policies. Data were collected using web scraping techniques with the keyword "Indonesian Malaysian Border" from five online media outlets: Tempo.co, Tribunnews, and Republika in Indonesia; Malaysiakini and Astro Awani in Malaysia. These outlets were selected based on website traffic rankings, audience reach, and editorial influence, representing the top 10 online media in each country. The study period spans 2010 to 2022, yielding 116 news headlines for analysis.

The selection of these five online media outlets is based on their prominence and influence within the online media landscape. The specific factors considered include readership, audience engagement, credibility, and overall impact. By singling out these five media sources, the researchers aim to focus on a subset that not only represents the upper

echelon of online media in both countries but also ensures a diverse yet comprehensive coverage of the Indonesian-Malaysian border-related issues. The precise criteria used for the selection include website traffic, audience reach, and editorial influence.

To collect and analyze data, news titles and leads from various Indonesian and Malaysian online media are scraped using a web scraping technique. Data retrieval is conducted using the "Indonesian Malaysian Border" keyword, and all available metadata are retrieved from each news portal via text mining. Text mining is an interdisciplinary field that includes data mining, machine learning, statistics, computational linguistics, and the process of gathering information (Agarwal 2014).

To ensure validity, sentiment classification criteria were established prior to analysis: negative sentiment included words indicating conflict, tension, dispute, violation, or criticism; positive sentiment included cooperation, development, diplomacy, or peaceful resolution; neutral sentiment included factual reporting without emotional valence. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using two independent coders on a 20% random sample (n=23), achieving Cohen's kappa of 0.84 for sentiment classification, indicating substantial agreement.

The analysis proceeded through multiple stages. The first step was Pre-Processing Data, which included: (1) removal of non-unique data (duplicate entries); (2) cleaning (refining and organizing data to enhance quality); (3) case folding (standardizing text to lowercase); (4) stopword removal (excluding common words with no significant meaning); (5) stemming (reducing words to root forms); (6) tokenization (breaking text into individual units such as words or phrases); and (7) data labeling (categorizing or tagging data for classification purposes). Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) weighting followed the Pre-Processing Data phase, required for machine learning classification algorithms. Sentiment classification categorized news as positive, negative, or neutral based on lexical analysis of emotional valence in headlines and leads.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First-Level Agenda Setting: Issue Salience

Using the content analysis method with sentiment analysis, this study investigated how the national media in Indonesia and Malaysia carry out reporting on border concerns. The

collection of textual data using the keyword “Indonesian-Malaysian Border” yielded a total of 116 news headlines over the vulnerable years of 2010 to 2022. The widest coverage was carried out by tempo.co with 32% of border-related reports found, followed by Tribunnews coverage with 28%, and then Republika Online with 24%. Meanwhile, Malaysian online media, namely Malaysiakini and Astro Awani, were responsible for less than 10% of the coverage found during that period. Table 1 presents the distribution of coverage and sentiment across media outlets.

Table 1.

Media	Number of news	Sentiment		
		Positive	Negative	Neutral
Tempo.co	37 (32 %)	12	20	5
Tribunnews	32 (28%)	14	12	6
Republika.co.id	28 (24%)	11	7	10
Malaysiakini	10 (9%)	3	6	1
Astro Awani	9 (8%)	4	5	0
Total	116 (100%)	44	50	22

Number of Border-Related Reports and Opinions in Indonesian and Malaysian National Media

The data reveals significant asymmetry in coverage volume: Indonesian media (Tempo.co, Tribunnews, Republika) account for 84% of total border-related news (97 articles), while Malaysian media account for only 16% (19 articles). This finding demonstrates first-level agenda setting. Indonesian online media show significantly higher salience for border issues than their Malaysian counterparts.

The news coverage on Indonesia's border regions is generally regarded by the media as less of a priority (Hapsari and Pawito 2014). As a result, the news that do appear, especially in online media, somehow lacks intensity, as demonstrated by the fact that only 116 news articles were found to have been published in a span of 10 years. Since the 1960s, from the Soekarno era until the Jokowi era, the two countries have been entangled in a variety of problematic

issues, ranging from island ownership claims, environmental problems, to migrant problems. There are also still many issues related to the Indonesia-Malaysia border; it turns out that it is not linear, with the low coverage given by the media. Furthermore, it is noted that for over a decade, namely from 2010 to 2022, the online media in Indonesia has given bigger coverage to border area issues compared to the online media in Malaysia.

Referring to the concept of agenda setting (Littlejohn and Foss 2009), the contention is that various mass media do not reflect reality because the media selects and filters various events to form issues and become the media agenda. In this case, the media functions as the gatekeeper to determine whether an issue will be included in the media agenda or not. Likewise, with the border issues between Indonesia and Malaysia since the Soekarno era until the Jokowi era; there were so many issues not reported because the media did not consider them as important; there is a selection process for various events occurring in society. Based on data, in terms of coverage given by the

Indonesian and Malaysian media during the said 12 years, only 116 news articles were published. The data showed that the Indonesian-Malaysian border issues were not among the serious agendas of the media, except when the relationship between the two countries became strained.

As can be seen in Table 1, the Indonesian-Malaysian border issues have not dominated the news reported by the Malaysian national media. Domestic issues on politics, race, religion, and economics are given more emphasis by the Malaysian media, particularly the new media (Pui 2014). The rise of new media has had a significant impact on Malaysia's social and political scene (Alivi et al. 2018). For instance, independent news portals like Malaysiakini play a significant role in influencing people's perceptions of the government; they do a lot of reporting on politics and do not focus too much on border issues. Generally, it can be said that most online media in Malaysia do not place much importance on issues related to Malaysia-Indonesia relations (Yaputra and Mulyana 2020).

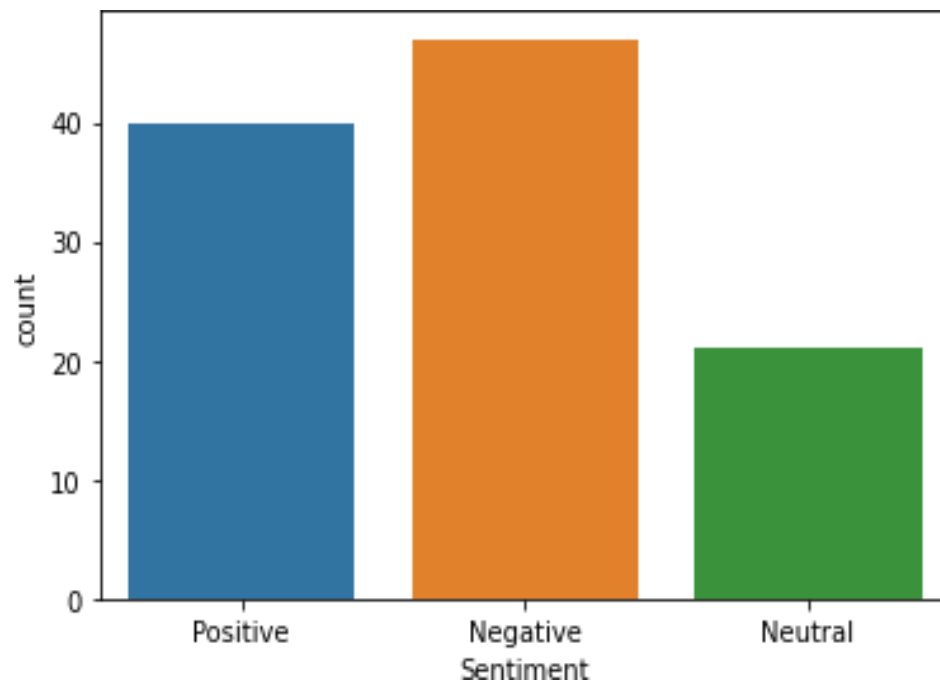
Furthermore, in relation to the concept of agenda setting, the priority of audience issues is influenced by the agenda setting of the mass media (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). This happens because the media must be selective in reporting the news. The media, as information gatekeepers, continuously make choices about what to report and how the reporting is to be

done. Therefore, what the audience knows at a certain time is the result of a selection made by the media. This theory elaborates on the relationship between the emphasis given by the mass media on an issue and the audience's response to that issue (Littlejohn and Foss 2009). The mass media becomes a determinant of truth because it is able to move two elements, namely awareness and information, onto the public agenda, by directing public awareness and attention to issues that are considered important by them.

Second-Level Agenda Setting: Attribute Saliency (Sentiment Analysis)

As shown in Table 1 and Picture 1, negative sentiment dominates coverage (50 articles, 43%), followed by positive sentiment (44 articles, 38%) and neutral sentiment (22 articles, 19%). This predominance of negative framing cannot be separated from numerous boundary disputes and the media's preference for highlighting conflicts and controversies to sensationalize issues.

Picture 1.



Sentiment Analysis of Reporting on Indonesian-Malaysian Border Issues

Picture 1 shows that news on Indonesian-Malaysian border issues continues to be dominated by negative sentiment. This cannot be separated from the existence of numerous boundary disputes between Indonesia and Malaysia. In actuality, this occurs because the media chooses the news discourse that it wants to present, and it often prefers to highlight conflicts and controversies in its reporting in order to sensationalize a particular issue. One example is the media coverage of the impact of the haze that engulfed numerous ASEAN nations as a result of forest fires in Indonesia. The national media in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore frequently employ crisis frames. It was found that more than 60 percent of the published media pieces discussed haze as a problem without significantly discussing its sources and solutions (Rochyadi-Reetz et al. 2020). The same pattern may be observed in the media's presentation of Indonesian-Malaysian border concerns. So often the media, especially in Indonesia, prefers to report negative news in the context of Indonesian-Malaysian border issues (Mahdi 2016; Budiawan 2017; Irwansyah 2017; Yaputra and Mulyana 2020).

In relation to this, Tempo.co has been identified as the media which has projected the most negative sentiments. Tempo.co reports a lot of negative news on the policies of the Indonesian government regarding the Indonesian-Malaysian border issues. As highlighted by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), there are several factors that can influence the direction of news reporting, such as individual journalists, media routines, organizational factors, advertisers, target audiences, government control, technology, marketplace, and ideology. Referring to the concept put forward by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), one of these factors is the media's relationship with the government. Tempo was originally established as a media enterprise that prints magazines and newspapers, and it has always been critical of the government since the New Order era to date.

Tempo was even banned during the New Order era for criticizing the government in its reporting. Tempo applies the concept of watchdog journalism, namely a style of journalism that acts as a guardian of government policies and actions, both individually and institutionally (Alyatalathaf and Putri 2022). The findings are also in line with previous studies on the topic of the MalaysiaIndonesia relationship, where the media in Indonesia has been found to be much more independent and free from government control. News reported by Tempo.co are considered more vulgar and provocative in terms of their style of reporting (Harun 2009; Priyowidodo and Indrayani 2014; Yaputra and Mulyana 2020).

Meanwhile, Republika online has a positive relationship with the government, therefore the news published by Republika online tends to be positive. Reinforcing this finding, research conducted by Rosemary et al. (2022) on the reporting of COVID-19 in national online media in 2020 showed that Republika online mostly reported positively on the Indonesian government's policies in relation to COVID-19 (Rosemary et al. 2022) in order to preserve its good relationship with the government.

Meanwhile, Tribunnews positions itself in the middle and uses a language style that does not attack the government. Tribunnews shares the same owner with Kompas, therefore its policy is in line with the approach adopted by Kompas. During the New Order era, the principle of journalism applied by Kompas was known as crab journalism. When the published reports are critical of the authorities, the Kompas newspaper will conduct introspection to reassess the political attitude of its reporting (Waluyo 2018). Like a crab, if it stumbles on a rock, it will find another way. This style has been described by Benedict Anderson as maintained boredom (Sen and Hill 2007). Kompas owner, Jakob Oetama, described Kompas' special caution as follows: "Inevitably, we implement a kind of sensor, a kind of brake, on what we can do, so that we are not ridiculed—a concept referred to as Crab-Journalism" (Keller 2009). Crab journalism is described as a condition where the media is subject to state power; namely, if the power allows it to move freely and forward, it will advance, but if not, the crab will step back.

It can be said that the relationship between the peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia, both individually and in specific groups or institutions, is well-established (Saefudin 2017). These positive social relations should be supported by accurate reporting on Indonesian and Malaysian border issues. Thus, the media's coverage of border issues plays a crucial role in bolstering these facets. The results of the word cloud analysis are presented below. Picture 2 reveals which word has the highest frequency and outperforms others.

II Immigration Office of Nunukan, Kaltara, Hanton in Nunukan, in connection with the non-operation of the Immigration Post in Krayan, Seimenggaris and Sei Pancang Sebatik Districts.

Picture 3.



*Reporting on the Indonesian and Malaysian Borders by the Indonesian National Media:
Tribunnnews.com, Republika.co.id and tempo.co*

Negative aspects, especially regarding conflicts in the Indonesia-Malaysia border areas, are more dominant in the media compared to positive issues that encourage peace. Given that the border is an administrative necessity for Indonesia and Malaysia, the border areas must be managed properly. It should be highlighted that Indonesia and Malaysia have many similarities in terms of culture, religion, and language, and therefore have the potential to cooperate with each other in various fields. However, the media does not report on this positive aspect intensively and even if it is reported, the coverage will tend to have a negative slant. For example, in Picture 3, the Indonesian media (Tribunnnews.com, Republika.co.id and tempo.co) mostly reports on the border areas in a biased way, displaying nationalistic sentiments which would contribute to increased tension between the two countries. When it comes to reporting on border issues, the military approach is more dominant compared to other approaches which focus on culture, religion, language, and race. The images chosen by the media in reporting are those of soldiers in uniform who are guarding the security of the border area. Security is attached to the army or the police, therefore a militaristic approach is always used to resolve border issues such as human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, illegal immigrants, and others.

However, it is also important to note that, in the Jokowi era starting from 2014, Indonesia's vision for development places emphasis on infrastructure development, so that in relation to border reporting, it prioritizes infrastructure development in border areas rather than establishing cooperation in terms of culture, education, and the issue of migrant workers. As seen in Picture 4, some of the words that appear refer to keywords related to massive development occurring in border areas during the Jokowi era, such as *pembangunan* (development), *dibangun* (infrastructure), and *bangun* (develop). In contrast to the Indonesian media, security issues take center stage in the Malaysian news. The keywords Troops, Police, and Army appeared in several news reports related to border security issues between Malaysia and Indonesia. The border areas are always associated with 'security' compared to 'development', especially infrastructure development. As is the case with media coverage in Indonesia, the areas that are of primary concern and widely mentioned are the regions in Sabah that are directly adjacent to Nunukan and Sebatik.

Picture 4.



Reporting on the Indonesian Malaysian Borders in the Malaysian National Media

It is important to note that the coverage of border-related topics by both Indonesian and Malaysian media is significantly influenced by geopolitical apprehension. Military terminology is sometimes used to refer to border sites. The prevalence of tension and friction in the border areas is largely responsible for the perception of danger. According to certain parties, this friction is a result of the emergence of kindred nationalism that has wrapped itself around the two countries with expectations that are frequently unmet by either party (Fakih

2017). Depending on the ebb and flow of ties between Indonesia and Malaysia, it is possible to formulate an optimal composition that is most likely to be realized in demographic, geographical, cultural, and economic terms (Ilkodar 2012).

The Indonesian media pays more attention to border areas that have high potential for conflict, such as the Sebatik and Nunukan areas. Sebatik is an archipelago located on the border between Indonesia and Malaysia, nestled between Nunukan as the capital of Nunukan district and Tawau city in the state of Sabah, East Malaysia. Given its location, Sebatik was once a territory disputed between the two countries. Such territorial disputes have occurred since 1967, as seen in the cases of Ligitan and Sipadan Islands, the Ambalat Island, and the Sebatik Islands (Siti Febrianti et al. 2020). The defeat experienced by Indonesia in its struggle to obtain the territory has caused the Indonesian media to give wide coverage to Sebatik. Meanwhile, Nunukan is the only border that can be accessed by Indonesian workers coming to Malaysia, both legal and illegal, thus it is also one of the main spots for the Indonesian media in reporting border issues, other than the Sebatik Islands.

Based on issues in the border areas of Indonesia-Malaysia, the media has arranged an agenda according to its interests. Media readers are “heavily influenced” by the media in contemplating which issues are considered strategic and suitable to become public agendas. In other words, it can be said that public interest is heavily influenced by the media agenda. In the case of border area issues, topics that are considered important by the media include the dispute over islands located between Indonesia and Malaysia, such as the Sebatik Islands, and cases of Indonesian migrant workers, especially in the Nunukan border area of West Kalimantan. During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant cases have become a media agenda in terms of the handling of both legal and illegal migrant workers in Malaysia. The media convinces readers that the important issue in regards to the Indonesian-Malaysian border areas during the COVID-19 pandemic is the handling of migrant workers’ entry and exit through border areas. The media determines which agenda is considered important, and this may not reflect the actual reality but instead the reality drawn up by the media. Other cases of Indonesian Malaysian relations in border areas are not considered important because they have not been reported by

the media. Both the media in Indonesia and in Malaysia have their own media agendas drawn up.

Third-Level Agenda Setting: Issue Networks

The third level of agenda setting integrates the first and second levels, examining how media communicate relationships and correlations among various issues as a network (McCombs et al., 2014). Analysis reveals that Indonesian online media construct border issues as interconnected networks linking: (1) territorial sovereignty (Sebatik, Ambalat) with (2) migrant worker protection (TKI cases in Nunukan) and (3) national dignity narratives. These connections are rarely made explicit but emerge through co-occurrence patterns in reporting. Malaysian media construct different networks: (1) security threats (illegal immigrants, crime) connected to (2) social vulnerability and (3) domestic political stability. The absence of development framing in Malaysian coverage relative to Indonesian coverage indicates divergent agenda networks shaped by national interests and media-government relationships.

The findings demonstrate agenda setting operates differently across national contexts. Indonesian media, particularly Tempo, exhibit stronger first-level agenda setting (higher issue salience) and more negative second-level attributes. Malaysian media display weaker first-level salience but distinct second-level attributes emphasizing security over development. This aligns with Zhang et al.'s (2024) observation that agenda setting often lacks effective integration across research contexts—this study provides an integrated application.

McCombs and Guo (2014) noted agenda setting's traditional focus on how media shape public perceptions. This study confirms that Indonesian and Malaysian online media significantly influence public understanding of border issues through their coverage patterns. The predominance of negative sentiment and military framing shapes public priorities toward conflict rather than cooperation. The three-level framework proves particularly valuable: the first level reveals coverage asymmetry; the second level reveals sentiment and thematic biases; the third level reveals how issues are networked differently across national media systems. This represents methodological advancement over previous studies that examined only single incidents or employed framing without multi-level analysis.

CONCLUSION

Within the complex interplay of Malaysia-Indonesia relations, the media plays a significant role that can unite and foster mutual comprehension and collaboration. This article has discussed how the media's capacity to influence narratives, promote cultural interaction, and fill gaps in knowledge can greatly strengthen bilateral relations between the two adjacent countries. The media's perception of the relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia varies due to historical and geopolitical considerations. The pre-existing official link between the two countries, predating their attainment of independence, becomes increasingly intricate as the emotional aspect deepens. This has been shown by numerous examples documented by both the Indonesian and Malaysian mainstream media.

The study results show that the border issues predominantly covered by the media are related to territorial disputes, cultural identity, namely the recognition of Indonesian cultural identity, which was later recognized as belonging to Malaysia, and the issue of migrant workers. In addition to these issues, the media reported on the similarities between Indonesia and Malaysia, which share cultural ties and are both ASEAN members. In terms of framing various issues regarding this border, the spirit of nationalism is one factor in how the media frames the Indonesia-Malaysia border issue. The implication is that when the media frames the border issue from a nationalistic perspective, it will exacerbate the existing historical conflict and perpetuate anti-Malaysian sentiment even though many Indonesians are migrant workers in Malaysia. When comparing Malaysia and Indonesia, the framing of the Indonesian media is more conflict-oriented, compared to the Malaysian media, which frames the border conflict from a more neutral perspective.

Thus, this study suggests that media outlets from both Malaysia and Indonesia may remove preconceptions, debunk misconceptions, and promote better awareness of the common histories and aspirations of the two countries by promoting nuanced reporting, fostering people-to-people interactions, and providing space for open conversations. In an era of unrestricted information exchange, media organisations must prioritise the fostering of trust and mutual respect by promoting precise and impartial reporting. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integrated application of the three-level agenda-setting framework to

cross-national analysis of online media in Southeast Asia. By demonstrating how agenda setting operates differently across national contexts, shaped by media-government relationships, historical legacies, and domestic priorities, the study extends agenda-setting theory to international border dispute coverage. The methodological contribution involves systematic sentiment analysis combined with word cloud visualisation to operationalise both first and second-level agenda setting.

The practical implication is that media outlets from both countries could remove preconceptions and promote nuanced reporting by balancing negative coverage with positive developments in cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and people-to-people interactions. During diplomatic visits, leaders from both nations have committed to enhancing bilateral relations (Jalli and Setianto 2020). The media plays a crucial role in constructing a future where collaboration prevails over conflict, and where the connection between these two nations continues to grow stronger for the benefit of everyone. This can be achieved by highlighting similarities, embracing diversity, and promoting a collective sense of accountability.

Limitations of this study include the relatively small corpus (116 articles) and focus on only five media outlets. Future research should expand to include social media platforms, regional/local media, and audience reception studies to examine whether media agendas translate to public agendas. Additionally, cross-national comparative studies with other Southeast Asian border disputes (e.g., Malaysia-Thailand, Indonesia-Philippines) would illuminate whether patterns observed here reflect generalizable phenomena or Indonesia-Malaysia-specific dynamics.

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