

Malaysian Media and Public Service Perspective on Food Security and Food Terrorism During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

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Food security remains a global concern and with the recent health crisis in the form of a pandemic has unleashed the lack of awareness and understanding of the public, media included, on food security, especially with the potential of threats towards food security in the form of food terrorism. With that in mind, there is thus a growing necessity to analyse the understanding of media and public service personnel on food security in Malaysia where it will deliberate on the perspectives of media and public service personnel on food security policy and threats of food terrorism. By employing the phenomenology approach, significant findings were derived from conducting in-depth interviews with a sample size of 6 media and public service personnel experts in food security and food terrorism. The data was collected concurrently, and the data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis approach. It was found that both media and public service personnel managed to have basic understanding on food security elements albeit with adequate knowledge and comprehension on its policies, framework and approach. Furthermore, although quite foreign with the term, the informants felt that food terrorism has the ability to pose threats to the country if the threats are taken lightly. Essentially, food security may be employed as this country's firewall to prevent food terrorism threats, with the public to be sensitized on the subject of food terrorism first. Government must also optimize new media to protect this country's food security as well as prevention of food terrorism threats.

Contribution/Originality: This study supplemented the existing literature on Malaysia's food security and threats towards food security during crises in the form of food terrorism, with the main focus on exploring the understanding of both subjects amongst media and public service personnel. A comprehensive food security policy, sensitizing the public with food terrorism and adoption of new media are crucial in weathering threats against Malaysia's food security.

1. Introduction

Media has always been regarded as a crucial tool in disseminating information (Cheng et. al, 2022; Sutjipto et. al, 2022), shaping public opinion (Alawade & Obun-Andy, 2024; Pei, 2023; Ullah & Khan, 2020), influencing behavior (Enikolopov & Petrova, 2017; Liao, 2023) and fostering communication as well as engagement in society. In good and bad times, through thick and thin, the media in its various forms, platforms and channels manages to withstand the test of time.

Lin et al. (2018) and Schäfer and Taddicken (2015) all concurred that media reporting of certain pressing issues shapes how the public understands and reacts to changes in the world around them. Liao (2023), Happer and Philo (2013) discussed how the media possess the ability to draw connections and influence beliefs in a way that scientists do not have. Concurrently, Kenski et. al. (2014) also opined how people rely on the media to translate the oftentimes complex terminology, processes, and implications of environmental research and conclusions. This includes lawmakers and governing officials, who also rely on the media for updates and analyses on the current issues (Agaki, 2022).

Food security (FS) remains a global concern, as all international and local government agencies are putting various efforts to attain the Sustainable Development Goal number 2 of ending hunger by 2030 (Covic et al., 2021; Pawar, 2021). Having said that, it is thus important to firstly understand the approach of food security as outlined in 1996 during the World Food Summit, where it is described as:

“Food security is defined when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” (FAO, 1996)

With the definition of food security, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2013 further presented the dimensions of food security, which are:

“There are four (4) dimensions of food security namely the physical availability of food, the economic and physical access to food, food utilization and the stability of the other three (3) dimensions over time.” (FAO et al., 2013)

Threats against a country's food security encompasses of many attributed reasons, namely manmade or environmentally induced viruses and pathogens affecting human health which capable of causing wide spread plague just as what the whole world is experiencing now with COVID-19 pandemic. Manmade threats akin to terrorism has brought forth a new term called food terrorism as written by Taylor (2008) and Yoon and Shanklin (2008). In essence, the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2002 has given a definite definition on food terrorism which is as below:

“An act or threat of deliberate contamination of food for human consumption with biological, chemical, and physical agents or radio nuclear materials for the purpose of causing injury or death to civilian populations and/or disrupting social, economic or political stability.” (WHO, 2002)

Fundamentally, when it comes to food security and food terrorism, one may not be able to grasp the importance of having an outlet to communicate and disseminate information in the form of news, news reporting and exposure. That said, in recent years, there exists a growing necessity to analyse the experience and perspective of the media on the food security (FS) in Malaysia, especially with the potential of growing threats against FS during a crisis such as the COVID-19 global pandemic. This is actually where the media can play their part and role to ensure that it is relevant to be using the tools of media to promote or report on food security and food terrorism. Scholars like (Hendriks et. al., 2017; Khan, 2021; Kutyauripo et. al., 2021) have all discussed on the relevance of media in all dimensions of human security including food security. Khan (2021) even wrote that the nexus between food security and the role of the media has long been established, as Amartya Sen, hailed as one of the founders of human security and winner of the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, famously pointed out:

“No democracy with a free press has ever endured famine.” (Sen, as cited in Khan, 2021)

To date, it can be deduced that most of the researches done pertaining to a country's food security stemmed on the discussions and implementations of policy, a narrowed focus on certain commodity such as rice and plan of action including the preparedness to overcome threats such as food terrorism (Bala et al., 2014; Dardak, 2020; Nor Le et al., 2024; Suffian & Suffian, 2021). Researches on media and food security, on the other hand, focused mainly on the reporting of agriculture and food insecurity as well as media coverage on food security itself (Kutyauripo et al., 2021; Soroka & Wlezien, 2019; Munene & Kebenei, 2021). There seems to be a lack of exploration on matters pertaining to the experience and understanding of the media as the entity and anchor behind the dissemination of these policies to the general public. That said, there is a crucial need for a developing country like Malaysia which already possesses an existing food security policy to analyse and review the understanding and experience of the media to gauge whether the reporting of food security and food terrorism by these outlets is effective in creating public awareness and comprehension.

RO1: To explore the Malaysian government policy and approach on food security as understood by the media and public service personnel.

RO2: To discuss how media and public service personnel define food terrorism as a threat towards Malaysia's food security.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mutualism of Malaysian Media and Public Service

The relationship between public service and media plays a crucial role in promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation (Vraga et al., 2012). Ismail (2013) characterized this dynamic as mutual influence and collaboration, as both sectors work together to improve governance and public welfare. Understanding this interaction is vital for addressing modern challenges and enhancing service delivery. The media acts as an intermediary between the government and the public, shaping public perceptions of government policies and actions, while also providing feedback to the government from society. Musa and Muhammad (2019) concurred that the

connection between the public service and media in Malaysia is impactful as the media function in disseminating information about the public service is critical for fostering transparency, accountability, and public trust.

Transparent governance is increasingly expected by citizens, who demand accountability from public officials. [Tan et al. \(2021\)](#) elaborated how effective communication by public service agencies helps build trust and ensures that the public is informed about policies and services. The media plays a critical role in informing the public about government policies, programs, and public services [\(ISPP, 2024\)](#). [Happer and Philo \(2013\)](#) discussed how this role is crucial in reaching out to a diverse population spread across urban and rural areas. [Ismail et al. \(2017\)](#) discussed how investigative journalism has played a role in exposing inefficiencies, corruption, and other malpractices within the public sector, which aligns with the public's expectations for transparency and accountability in governance. The media acts as a watchdog, holding the public service accountable for its actions [\(Ismail, 2013\)](#).

The relationship between the Malaysian public service and media is often marked by government control over media outlets [\(Kow & Khoo, 2023\)](#). Historically, the government has maintained strict control over the press through ownership and licensing regulations, limiting the ability of the media to freely critique government actions [\(Gomes, 2004; Sani, 2005\)](#). While recent reforms have aimed to promote press freedom, concerns about media independence remain. [Kow and Khoo \(2023\)](#) agreed that there is a perception of bias in Malaysian media, especially when it comes to reporting on government policies and public service performance as some media outlets are seen as overly favorable to the government, while others are critical.

The emergence of social media has introduced a novel aspect to the interaction between public service and media [\(Karakiza, 2015; Mahajan-Cusack, 2016\)](#). Social media platforms offer an unregulated environment in which information disseminates swiftly, frequently circumventing conventional media gatekeepers [\(Arjomand, 2021; Min, 2023\)](#). Facilitating a greater diversity of perspectives and critical discourse on public service matters, although it has also resulted in difficulties in addressing misinformation and disinformation [\(Firdaus et al., 2024\)](#). Government agencies are increasingly leveraging social media platforms to communicate directly with the public [\(Albert & Gisip, 2021\)](#). The relationship between the Malaysian public service and the media is vital for national governance and public engagement [\(Musa & Muhammad, 2019\)](#). While the media plays a key role in informing the public and holding the government accountable, challenges such as media control, bias, and the rise of social media continue to shape this relationship. A balanced and transparent media-public service relationship is essential for fostering trust, improving service delivery, and enhancing governance in Malaysia.

2.2. Food Security – A Malaysia Experience

[Dardak \(2020\)](#) reiterated that Malaysia is generally a food secure country, ranking 28th out of 113 countries in accordance to the index by "Global Food Security Index" or "GFSI". The inclusion into this index shows that all staple foods are mostly available to sufficiently meet the demand. Having said that, our country has never had to deal with a big scale pandemic like COVID-19 pandemic that we are currently embracing. The repercussion from this global pandemic has not only affected or confined to the health sector, but has also had an impact on other sectors, resulting in economic, social, and

political crises around the world. COVID-19 preventive measures namely stay-at- home order, full and partial lockdown, mass quarantine as well as travel and transportation halt, although proved to be quite challenging to adhere to, must be obligated by nevertheless (Tan et al., 2022).

In terms of food security, Workie et al. (2020), Galanakis (2020), Shahidi (2020) reiterated that COVID-19 brought forth disturbances in food security whereby food supply chains and production came to a halt, followed by drop in earnings also remittances, contributing to strains and food insecurity worldwide. While there were enough food supplies initially, panic-buying by the public, all anticipating supply shortages during lockdowns, caused an imbalance in food supplies. Consequently, Dardak (2019) discussed that Malaysia has been using three (3) indicators to measure its food security namely the self-sufficiency ratio or SSL, the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) and by measuring the Rice Bowl Index (RBI). The SSL is calculated by dividing the total domestic production with the total available supply in the country with the formula $SSL = \text{Production} \times 100 / (\text{Production} + \text{import} - \text{export})$. The GFSI indicates the affordability of the people's purchasing food products, the availability of food and the quality as well as safety of the food supplied to the people. Lastly, RBI inspects the key enablers and disablers of food security which comprise of the farm-level and environmental factors, policy and trade as well as demand and trade factors.

With regards to food security policy after the pandemic, various ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, are actively involved in formulating policies that enhance agricultural productivity and ensure sustainable food supply. Dorairaj and Govender (2023) explained that Malaysia is currently at the phase of adopting the National Food Security Policy Action Plan 2021-2025 (DSMN 2021-2025), along with the National Agro-Food Policy, all of which are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS, 2024). Both policies received widespread media coverage, increasing awareness whilst signaling the relevance of the Malaysian media and public service involvement with food security especially during and after the pandemic. Baba (2024) elaborated on efforts to improve food security, which include initiatives aimed at increasing local food production, enhancing supply chain efficiency and promoting sustainable farming practices. Public service agencies collaborate with farmers, educational institutions, stakeholders, and the private sector to develop programs that support local agriculture and food distribution systems (BERNAMA, 2024).

2.3. Food Terrorism in the Wake of a Crisis and Pandemic

As terrorizing as it may sound, the use of the phrase "food terrorism" is comparatively recent, having gained popularity following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Razak et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the practise, or rather incidents involving food terrorism may be traced throughout human history. This is evident in the publication of a guidebook entitled: Food Safety Issues: Terrorist Threats to Food by WHO in 2003, hence becoming one of the initial literature and references for food terrorism. This has also led WHO (2002) to formulate a definition for such crime to be as follows:

"An act or threat of deliberate contamination of food for human consumption with chemical, biological or radio nuclear agents for the purpose of causing injury or death to civilian populations and/or disrupting social, economic or political stability." (WHO, 2002)

Intentional contamination can be characterised as food crime with the goal of making a profit, or as a terror act with the goal of causing absolute ruin, confusion, and panic among the general public. All of these acts of contamination have negative consequences for consumers in the short and long term, and they could seriously impact public health and even result in death. Consequently, threats from such terror act/s possess the ability to derange both local and global ecosystems. From 1951 to 2008, [Dalziel \(2009\)](#) reported that there were 391 deaths and 4,355 injuries relating to deliberate contamination within food supply chain. Malaysia has recorded quite a number of food crime cases which has the potential of paving the way to food terrorism. One example being the subsequent contamination of water resources in Sungai Kim Kim in Johor which shocked the nation to the state of unrest ([Yusof & Suhaini, 2019](#)). Schools were forced to close with some civilians reportedly to be injured from inhaling the chemical poisoning ([Razak et al., 2020](#)). Such incident may have sparked the awareness within Malaysian authorities to protect the country's food source and resources against terror acts as the consequences might be more severe and destructive.

[Ariffin et al. \(2021\)](#) expanded on more distressing instances in this country that also warrant for the government's attention. Manipulation of fresh palm oil has been identified as a food crime issue in Malaysia. Artificial eggs and rice were allegedly sold in Malaysian markets between 2011 and 2015. All of this was followed by a government probe. However, it was discovered that the claims were false. Following that, cases involving food crimes were recorded in 2015, including misuse of the halal logo, adulteration of halal certificates and labelling, and even worse cases of the halal logo on products containing forbidden components, as well as sales of coffee containing pig DNA. Then there was the introduction of artificial honey manufactured from sugar, starch, and corn flour, fake zam-zam water and fake stevia in 2017 ([Ariffin et al., 2021](#)). The arrest of a 1,500-ton illegal meat cartel smuggling organisation from four foreign countries, notably China, Ukraine, Brazil, and Argentina, stunned Malaysia at the end of 2020 ([Sinar Harian, 2020](#)). The meat cartel syndicate has been exposed, and this criminal case has piqued the interest of a number of parties because it is thought to have operated in Malaysia for many years.

2.4. Media's Position in Food Security and Food Terrorism Reporting

[Isernia and Marcolin \(2018\)](#) reiterated that the role of media in food security has often been overlooked although one must agree that media is a powerful dissemination tool to report and expose news and information to the public at large. Aside from research on food security and food terrorism during a crisis such as a pandemic, this study also intends to look into the role of the media in dimensions of information, communication, innovation, and description, among others, as partners in promoting food security, sustainability, production and awareness. [Ssimbwa \(2015\)](#) wrote that the media may be regarded as significant building blocks in intercultural communication and human communication because it is important to integrate interpersonal communication, mass media organisation, small groups, and communication contexts of farmer requirements, nation food needs, and related emergencies. As a result, radio, television, newspapers, the internet, and other forms of communication, as well as journalism as a whole, have ambiguous roles to play in communicating and informing policy and society about the trends and dynamics of food, production, processing, and consumption for purposeful livelihoods.

For a start, the term media here will be divided into two (2) which are traditional media in the form of mass media as well as new media branch known as social media. [Hasa \(2021\)](#) deduced that mass media refers to media technologies that reach a large audience. Social media refers to computer-based technology that allows people to generate and share information or participate in social networking. Print media (newspapers and magazines) and broadcast media (television and radio) are the two main categories of mass media but social media platforms include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, Reddit, Wikipedia, and Pinterest. [Torossian \(2022\)](#) divided social media into six (6) types which are Social Networks, Social News, Microblogging, Bookmarking Sites, Media Sharing and Community Blogs.

Prior to the pandemic, reporting on food security by the Malaysian media was quite scarce with the public not displaying any interest or awareness on food security ([Kh'ng et al., 2022](#)). Food security gained traction during the pandemic as the public resorted to panic buying before the Movement Control Order (MCO) was put in place ([Gazali, 2020](#)). During the pandemic, [Charilaou and Vijaykumar \(2023\)](#) reported that the media in the form of mass media and social media played vital roles in providing information as well as stirring panic amongst the people with regards to food security. Excessive information and misinformation especially online caused the public to resort to hoarding, panic buying leading to food insecurity whereas in contrast, newspapers and government-run websites including social media handles were deemed trustworthy in times of crises ([Charilaou & Vijaykumar, 2023](#)).

The use of mass media has been identified as one of the channels to improve the dissemination of food security information due to the challenges that are associated with the traditional methods of agriculture extension ([Apata, 2010](#)). Newspaper coverage tends to be more inclined towards business, political news and other social issues at the expense of food security and agricultural developmental issues ([Rani, Kumar & Narayana, 2009](#)). The significant variations of the food security issues coverage might be influenced by the fact that climate change issues that constrain journalists in terms of the source of information might be lesser covered as compared to climate change issues that have plenty of sources ([Boykoff & Roberts, 2007](#)).

According to a study of evaluating social media's potential capabilities as a food terrorism monitoring system by [Newkirk et al. \(2012\)](#), it was found that the traditional method of health surveillance system cannot be substituted by social media. Nevertheless, incorporating current social media into public health surveillance, conversely, may improve early identification of food threats, food terrorism and foodborne disease outbreaks. Social media may also ease users to report and disseminate outbreaks while maximising detection period. Public health surveillance initiatives could benefit from social media's potential to link illnesses and exposures in ways that increase the sensitivity or timeliness of conventional approaches. [Pilipiec et al. \(2023\)](#) concurred how the advantages of social media in surveillance systems, such as timeliness, representativeness, and simplicity of epidemic self- identification, outweigh the disadvantages of specificity and analytical methodologies. Using social media data to supplement existing surveillance systems could lead to a reduction in further morbidity or even deaths relating to food safety and contamination.

3. Methodology

This research utilised a qualitative methodology, specifically phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Smith (2018) discussed that the strength of qualitative research is its capacity to offer comprehensive and nuanced insights into individual experiences and phenomena. Creswell and Poth (2018) also noted that a researcher's background affects interpretation, and it is their duty as an instrument to assess the effectiveness of the explication informed by cultural, personal, and historical experiences. The data inquiry phase involved conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews with informants, employing a series of semi-structured questions and follow-up probing techniques to obtain a thorough understanding of their experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge related to the study topic (Rosenthal, 2016).

3.1. Purposive Sampling

This study opted for purposive sampling as the mode of sampling. Purposeful sampling is a commonly employed technique in qualitative research, used to identify and select cases that are rich in information, ensuring the most efficient use of limited resources (Patton, 2015). In addition, purposive or non-probability sampling with criterion was utilised in the study as it is the most suitable sample approach to include persons who have experienced the phenomena. Palinkas et al. (2015) asserted that informants must have direct experience and knowledge of the phenomenon being studied. This makes criterion sampling the most fitting technique, as it specifically targets individuals who have directly observed the events under investigation (Merriam, 2014). In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the following criteria was established:

- i. Malaysian Citizens;
- ii. Regardless of race, gender or marital status;
- iii. Residing in Malaysia or overseas;
- iv. Actively working or possesses experience in mass media and/or government administration;
- v. Involved or possesses experience in food security and/or food terrorism

Morse (2015) argued that when more usable data is gathered from each participant, fewer participants are necessary. Additionally, the structure of questions in qualitative interviews significantly impacts the depth of data collected, with research indicating that open-ended questions asked later in the interview process tend to yield richer data. Additionally, Charmaz (2006) suggested that smaller studies are more likely to reach data saturation at a faster rate. For this study, a total of six interviews were performed and collected, which were subsequently categorised into two groups: the media and the public service personnel.

3.2. In-depth Interview and Thematic Analysis

This study utilized in-depth interviews to collect information about individuals' behavior, emotions, and perspectives. To ensure a smooth and effective interview process, a structured interview protocol was developed based on the research questions, providing a clear framework for the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A series of questions were created, and probing techniques, as suggested by Patton (2015), were employed to elicit responses from the participants. The questions addressed various topics, including demographics, experiences and behavior, opinions and values, emotions, and knowledge (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The semi-

structured interviews were conducted using online platforms such as Google Meet and Whatsapp video call to maintain confidentiality and security ([Silverman, 2016](#)) and were only carried out once all of the informants have signed consent forms indicating their voluntary participation in the interview.

Subsequently, thematic analysis (TA) was employed to analyse the data, a prevalent method in qualitative research designed to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes within the data ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). The process taken by this study using thematic analysis is as such:

- i. Familiarising self with the data
- ii. Generating initial codes
- iii. Searching for patterns and themes
- iv. Reviewing themes
- v. Defining and naming themes
- vi. Writing the analysis

4. Findings And Discussion

The dataset was pertinent to the research inquiry of exploring the perspectives of media and public service personnel on food security and food terrorism. Data was collected and analysed from the six informants affiliated with these subjects whom have established their own opinions derived from their utilisation and integration of many sources. The analysis identified key themes pertaining to the study, as illustrated in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Themes derived from in-depth interviews

No	Theme
1	FS Knowledge and Awareness
2	FS Involvement and Participation
3	FT Vigilance
4	Perception on FT Threats

4.1. Theme 1: Knowledge and Awareness on Food Security

Based on the interviews held, it can be deduced that most of media practitioners have adequate understanding and proficiency on food security (FS) as they were able to describe the core elements of FS as defined by the [FAO \(2022\)](#) under the United Nations (UN). The description for these elements, namely availability, accessibility and affordability are easily available ever since FS is established by the UN, hence the public in general may obtain information regarding this in various media reports, publications, policy dissemination and resources.

The public service personnel group on the other hand also possessed similar knowledge on the concept of FS as the media personnel, with the exception of H1 and H2 whom were able to delve deeper on describing the newer policies and elements ingrained in FS especially with the recent commitment and outlook on FS by the government after the pandemic putting very substantial focus on the people's individual sustenance and the country's economy.

This clearly shows that the understanding on FS by both parties, media and public service is satisfactory. Having said that, the informants also emphasized on the

importance to distinguish the concept and differences between the food security (FS) and food safety. These terms may sound similar but both carry different meanings in this broad spectrum pertaining to food, as discussed by [Balan et. al. \(2020\)](#) whom defined the latter as an umbrella term that encompasses many facets of handling, preparation and storage of food to prevent illness and injury, and [Ene \(2020\)](#) whom stated that the latter (food safety) is an aspect of FS.

When we discuss/talk about food security, we may segregate it into 3 distinctive levels or phase, from the global or international aspect, food security is very much a subject of interest and is always under the radar of the WTO. Fundamentally, food security is the responsibility of a country to ensure that supply is enough in the market. Secondly is the national or county level where the country has the ability to provide food and food produce for domestic consumption. Finally, the individual aspect. An individual is deemed food secured when he/she is able to have access to affordable and nutritious food supply anytime anywhere. Having said that, we can conclude that the concept of food security is very dynamic from one place to the other. (Informant 1)

Ok, first of all, food security has its own definition and when we talk about food security it is mostly related to food supply chain. So food security itself refers to the availability, accessibility and affordability of sufficient and nutritious food....(Informant 4)

In terms of awareness, the public service informants had mixed reactions when it came to the awareness of FS. Although this group personally felt that the awareness on FS is there, all agreed that this was further heightened during the pandemic. Pre pandemic, the informants opined that the awareness was low compared to during and post pandemic. This concurred with [Awang \(2015\)](#) whom have expressed the lack of awareness of Malaysians with issues pertaining to food security. For the media informants, most are aware of FS even before the pandemic as they were given tasks to cover news and reporting on FS both locally as well as internationally. Having said that, in any given circumstance, most issues will gain exposure and awareness if there exist occurrences that require people to act on them.

The awareness is definitely there. This is evident from the responses and reactions of the public when it comes to price hikes, inflation, food shortages that were expressed via social media. That is one indicator of the awareness on food security, what more with the pandemic that we were facing. (Informant 1)

The awareness of food security among Malaysians can vary based on factors such as education, socioeconomic status, and exposure to information. While some segments of the population may be well-informed about food security issues, others might have limited awareness. (Informant 6)

4.2. Theme 2: Involvement and Participation in Food Security

Subsequently, according to the informants interviewed, the involvement and participation of the public on FS framework and policy making are mostly limited to those who are directly related to the government via the Ministry of Food Security such

as the industry players and stakeholders. The media group is usually put in the loop to disseminate information after all the policy making phase is completed. The public in general, whom are the ones directly affected by these policies are at the receiving end whereby they are provided with aids and assistance also after the policies are in full effect.

But in terms of policy formulation just as other policies before, yes government does consider public involvement but to some extent. We need people's feedback and when we say people, there are levels and not just public at large. There must be experts and those with certain background and experiences to assist the government in making policies. (Informant 3)

The engagement with these stakeholders are done via townhall. Townhall or public consultation is part of the policy making process. Each and every ministry is responsible for their own policy making and will usually take into account the effects on all the stakeholders. (Informant 4)

4.3. Theme 3: Vigilance on Food Terrorism

Concisely, all of the informants from both groups concluded that the mass is unaware of FT simply because there has never been any event involving FT and thus making the public not keen to learn or be aware of this threat. This coincided with [Khairatun \(2022\)](#) whose study found that the awareness pertaining to food terrorism amongst Malaysians is still low to average. Moreover, [FDA \(2021\)](#) published a report as well as a manual on the link between food terrorism being a threat towards food security. Having said that, being vigilant is key as we cannot afford to wait until an occurrence befalls on us for us to react but instead, the government and the public must be proactive in preparing for FT incidents.

If we were to demand the government to develop policies on food terrorism I do not think that the government would take that into consideration because it has not become a problem for us yet.... (Informant 1)

We have never heard of food terrorism amongst ourselves.... (Informant 5)

To assess the current level of awareness of Malaysians on food terrorism, it is quite obvious that the people are not very aware of food terrorism as much as food security. There are not many studies or research done on food terrorism especially in Malaysia. (Informant 6)

4.4. Theme 4: Perception of Food Terrorism Threats

The informants agreed that the threats of FT on Malaysian soil are minimally low, due to the fact that our country's stance on diplomacy and neutrality ([Gilley, 2024](#)). Our country's long history and participation with the Non-Aligned Movement or NAM proved to be beneficial in ensuring the security and safety of the people as well as our commodities and sovereignty ([Milner et al., 2018](#)). That said, some of the informants

have expressed a certain degree of wariness and requested the government to always be vigilant in detecting future threats involving FT.

Regarding food terrorism, we may not be able to ascertain its impacts yet since we do not face any threats that can cause the government to take measures of prevention... (Informant 1)

If we look at the current outlook and the commitment being shown by the current ruling government and ministry, it is difficult for food terrorism to cause problem to our food security....(Informant 3)

5. Conclusion

The collective experiences and insights of media and public service personnel about food security and food terrorism during the pandemic shaped their perspectives on these matters, which can be classified into several themes.

Firstly, when it comes to food security, both media and public service personnel have almost equivalent knowledge and awareness on the policies and approach of the Malaysian government albeit the exposures towards food security for both groups vary whereby the former have hands-on experiences deduced from their role as media practitioners while the latter are either involved directly or indirectly obtain the information from the available resources. This demonstrated how relevant media is to the government as concurred by [Zou \(2024\)](#) whom asserted that the media is a powerful tool for disseminating and implementing public policy.

Additionally, the involvement and participation of both groups on the country's food security approach by the Malaysian government differ in terms of whether these informants are included in the loop by the government or otherwise. The media group is constantly updated on the current situation and well-being of the country's food security as well as quite well informed if there exist threats towards food security. This is in accordance with [Shanahan et al. \(2011\)](#) as well as [Soroka and Wlezien \(2019\)](#) who discussed that the media can increase public participation, thus influencing policy formulation as the media can not only inform and facilitate public feedback, but also promote accountability by monitoring the implementation of policies through reporting and analysis ([Braman, 2004](#); [Olper & Swinnen, 2013](#)).

Next, the media and public service are in agreement that food terrorism remains unfamiliar to most Malaysians as asserted by [Khairatun \(2022\)](#). Nevertheless, such threats must not go to deaf ears as there are concerns on the capabilities of food terrorism in times of crises such as pandemics and more. To ensure the vigilance of the public, government must work on sensitizing the public on food terrorism by way of including it in our current food security policy. This is in line with [Bellinger and Kattelman \(2021\)](#) whom have emphasized the strong tie between food security and terrorism.

Finally, as both groups perceived food terrorism threats as non-existent in this country, much of this is contributed by the stability and Malaysia's diplomatic stance on being non-aligned and neutral hence deemed as a non-threat by the world. Evidently, [Kharel \(2020\)](#) also mentioned that being non-aligned has contributed to establishing an environment favourable to global peace, security, justice, equality, and cooperation.

This study provides implications on the analysis of perspective and understanding of both food security and food terrorism by the media as well as public service personnel. The knowledge, awareness, involvement, participation, vigilance and perception on food security and food terrorism provided depth to assist the government to take measures in spreading awareness and better set of policies.

This study employed a purely qualitative approach. Consequently, future research could opt for quantitative or mixed methods, potentially contributing to significant implications for media professionals, public service and educational institutions. Moreso, this study presents several recommendations for subsequent studies. For instance, future research might effectively delve deeper into this study by exploring Malaysia's media coverage on food security policy, food sovereignty and to leverage on the policies to further protect us from food terrorism threats.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This research complied with all ethical standards applicable to studies involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the UiTM Research Ethics Committee, which operates in accordance to the ICH Good Clinical Practice Guidelines, Malaysian Good Clinical Practice Guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed consent following a briefing on the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no conceivable conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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