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## Perception towards Media Portrayals of *Janda* in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Since the term '*janda*', Malay for previously married women, is typically seen to carry a negative connotation, this study set out to investigate society's perceptions towards media portrayal of the word '*janda*' in Malaysia. It also aimed to examine the significant difference between gender on the perceptions towards the media portrayal. The quantitative approach was employed in this research and data for this study were questionnaire responses collected from 381 respondents of different backgrounds. The results showed that in general, the media in Malaysia portrays *janda* negatively. However, there are still positive portrayals of *janda* in the media as independent individuals especially when it relates to their children. Other than that, it was also discovered that there was a significant difference in the perception of media portrayals of *janda* in Malaysia between genders and it seemed that women felt that the media portrayed *jandas* more negatively compared to men. Future research could use qualitative methods to have an in-depth analysis and a further understanding of the reasons for negative media portrayal of *janda* and how it influences society, both directly and indirectly.

**Keywords:** Media Portrayal, Janda, Malaysian Media

### Introduction

'*Janda*' is the most commonly used term in Malaysia to describe a woman who was previously married but is currently single by divorce, separation, abandonment, or by the death of the husband (Creese, 2016). In essence, there is nothing wrong with being a divorced woman but it usually comes with the cost of being stigmatised by the society (Mahy et al., 2016; Sarawati, 2020), especially in a number of Southeast Asian countries (Khan & Hamid, 2021). It is interesting to note that media, e.g. news media, print media, and social media, is a prominent aspect in people's daily lives and plays an integral role in the development of identity, social, and perceptions of the world. Additionally, the common assumption about media is that it provides a truthful and objective portrait of social reality (Mazumdar, 2019; Liao & Ling, 2022). Given that in local movies, television drama series, news headlines, and

even lyrics in songs give such a highlight to the word '*janda*', the single use of the word '*janda*' tends to be followed by inappropriate jokes, remarks, and negative perceptions in the Malaysian society (Hakim, 2017; Affan, 2020). As such, this study sets out to find out the extent of influence the local media has on the development of such a perception.

A *janda* is constantly represented in the media with a negative stigma, typically portrayed as predatory, selfish, and spiteful (Parker, 2016). Such negative stigmatisation might have helped shape and develop the perception of society towards *janda* in a negative manner. Furthermore, various Malaysian media can also be seen to be using the word '*janda*' to carry negative connotations towards this particular group of women. This rather intriguing phenomenon is a common occurrence in the context of the local media, however, empirical studies to explain and further understand it seem to be lacking. As such, in an attempt to better understand such a portrayal, more studies should be conducted in the Malaysian context. Although studies have been done in nearby South East Asian countries, it is important to note that cultural contexts vary, especially in a country as diverse as Malaysia.

In exploring the relationship between the Malaysian media and society, this study aims to: i) identify the perceptions towards media portrayal of the word '*janda*' in Malaysia, and ii) investigate the significant difference between gender on the perceptions towards media portrayal of the word '*janda*' in Malaysia.

### **Perception of *Janda***

Parker (2016, p. 13) argues that the stigmatised perception of *janda* in Indonesia originate from an overall taboo perception of anything to do with women, marriage, and sex, and her "failure" to "measure up to the ideal of womanhood in Indonesia: the properly married, fertile *ibu* (mother/wife)". This ideology leads to a deep-seated suspicion of "sexual impropriety" as *jandas* are "sexually experienced but single" (Parker, 2016, p. 7). Although there seems to be a shift towards a more positive perception of *jandas*, the ideology Parker (2016) comments on continues to be replicated in society. Sendrataria et al (2022, p. 483) report that studies on selected Indonesian meme websites conducted by Nurlian et al. (2019); Suhan et al (2020) find that "divorcee memes" use the divorcee body as a "tool to be stared at so that it strengthens the predicate attached to the status of a divorcee, namely: sexy, seductive, always needs men to channel sexual desire, and great [in] bed". Not only is this a clear example of how *jandas* are portrayed in media, the portrayal focuses on the patriarchal view where the female body is treated as mere sexual objects for male consumption while ignoring the reality that most *jandas* are single mothers who are fighting hard to ensure their own and their children's survival (Sendrataria et al., 2022). These authors note that the stigmatisation of *janda* in contemporary Indonesia has its origin in Soeharto's New Order Policy that entrenched patriarchy and delegated women to the subordinate position (Mahy, 2015; Parker, 2016; Yusuf, 2020).

Besides social mores and ideology, religion is also a source of double standards against previously married women. Creese (2016) traces the rights and fates of divorcees and widows in Bali from the days of Dutch administration and notes that practices such as sati and absorption of widows without sons and their daughters into the *puri* (palace) have their origins from Hindu traditions. The widows largely lacked agency and may have to endure a life of "drudgery and often sexual slavery" (Creese, 2016, p. 91). Although women seem to

have more rights in instigating divorces, they may suffer from financial setbacks following the divorce (Creese, 2016). Moreover, they may lose custody of their children or, in cases where the children stay with her, they may be ostracised as their participation in society depends on their patrilineal connection (Creese, 2016). In a similar vein, Waseem et al. (2020) note that although divorce is generally stressful for both parties, negative stigma in Pakistan's orthodox Muslim and deeply patriarchal culture is attached to female divorcees only. So strong is the stigma against divorced women in Pakistan that some women would rather endure unhappy marriages instead of being viewed as "ill-fated", "untouchable", immoral, or dishonourable (Waseem et al., 2020, p. 301-2).

In their analysis of the film *Zawarawa* ("women who used to be married") (2014) from a geographic perspective, Adamu and Ibrahim (2018) argue that Hausa women of Nigeria occupy three spheres in society, namely the sphere of innocence (comfortable and uncomfortable spaces); sphere of marriage (happy and unhappy spaces); and the sphere of waiting (uncertain and unholy spaces). Although all divorced women, which are the focus of the film, are in the sphere of waiting, some occupy the uncertain space and hope to discard their status as a divorcee while others revel in the unholy spaces whereby they "illegally enter the intimate bubbles of another man" (Adamu & Ibrahim, 2018, p. 7). Even though there is a higher level of stigma attached to unmarried ladies of the sphere of innocence who enter the unholy spaces, those in the sphere of waiting are treated with apprehension by married women of the sphere of marriage as rivals who may seduce their husbands since the Muslim Hausa is polygamous (Adamu & Ibrahim, 2018). Worse, the film depicts divorcees as predatory opportunists who are not beyond exploiting fellow divorcees for personal gain, as in the case of Hajiya Gado, who uses her NGO that is supposed to champion widows, divorcees, and orphans to basically recruit courtesans. In short, it can be said that *jandas* across cultures in the world face negative perception, if not downright stigma, and challenging conditions following their divorce.

Clearly, some of the negative association is reproduced and reinforced by portrayal of *janda* by the media. This study will explore the portrayal of *janda* by Malaysian media and its perception by the public.

### **Media Portrayal of *janda***

Whether deliberately or unintentionally, the way women have been portrayed in the media is an exaggerated form of real life circumstances and assumptions, and it has very little relationship with real life. In fact, Yusuf's (2020) detailed analysis of representations of *janda* in Indonesian popular media, including films, novels, songs, and articles discussing those artworks, confirms that the negative stereotype of *jandas*, especially that of sexy temptresses who wreak havoc in their communities by competing with married women for the attention and affection of the latter's husbands, is a long-standing tradition that can be traced back to the 1950's. In one of the many feature articles in the *Female* magazine, a single mother is associated with being economically-challenged (Fong & Nyathi, 2019). This is one of the many stereotypical perceptions that the society has on any word that could be associated with *janda*. Being economically-challenged would mean that a *janda* is in desperate need to find a man to financially support her, hence creating the perception that a *janda* might be promiscuous (Morris & Munt, 2019; Zhang, 2022). Another popular, albeit negatively constructed, belief is that a *janda* who seeks a romantic relationship is engaging in

inappropriate behaviour. This is because this act of seeking romantic relationships for a *janda* is often-times perceived as irresponsible, i.e. neglecting their role when as a mother, and sex-seeking only (Karupiah, 2020). Such portrayals may not be true but, unfortunately, they have helped shape the portrayal of *janda* for the society. Indeed, Yusuf (2020) points out that news articles about *jandas* frequently blur the line between facts and the writers' opinions even though the practice is prohibited.

Although empirical studies on the ways in which the Malaysian media portrays a *janda* is scarce, there are a number of studies that have been conducted in Indonesia, a country that has many cultural similarities with Malaysia (Suharnomo & Hashim, 2019). In Indonesian media, a *janda* is portrayed in such a negative light, but a *duda* (a male who was previously married) is portrayed as a respectable human being in the society (Setiawan et al., 2022). In addition to that, 'Rangda', a very famous classic Balinese (an island in Indonesia) tale portrays a *janda* in such a horrific manner: as a frightening widow who is the embodiment of an evil witch (Nadeau, 2020). This is very clear evidence that a *janda* is seen as a negative entity in society. However, despite being stigmatised in the media and by the society, in 2022, the movie, "*Tiga Janda Melawan Dunia!*" was released in Malaysia. This movie portrayed *janda* as strong, independent, and resourceful women who were able to achieve their dream, albeit as trivial as buying concert tickets (Asri, 2022). The movie received positive reviews from film critics in the Malaysian movie industry. Therefore, this study intends to contribute to the body of literature by exploring the ways in which *janda* is portrayed in the local media context.

### Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach and the research design used was descriptive quantitative or survey. The simple random sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents. The respondents were from different backgrounds and social status. A set of questionnaires was distributed and data from 381 respondents were collected. The questionnaire used was adopted and adapted from (Manuoglu et al., 2021). There were 16 items in the questionnaire and a 4-likert scale was used for this questionnaire, which were 4 - Strongly Agree, 3 - Agree, 2 - Disagree, and 1 - Strongly Disagree. The interpretation of the 4-likert scale for the results later would follow Chua and Yunus's (2020) interpretation. In order to know the reliability of the items in the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha analysis was tabulated. Cronbach's Alpha's value is to look for the internal consistency value among the items (Singh et al., 2009) and based on Table 1, the value is  $r=.766$ , signifying high reliability. The data then were analysed via Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 28 (SPSS v28). The data were tabulated and reported in the form of mean and standard deviation.

Table 1  
*Reliability Statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.766	16



### Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results obtained from the study.

#### **RQ1: What are the perceptions towards media portrayal of the word janda in Malaysia?**

The results addressing RQ1 are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*People's perceptions towards media portrayal of the word janda in Malaysia*

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' is able to destroy families.	2.50	.860
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that the family concept is not important for a 'janda'.	2.15	.721
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' is more keen to have sexual relationships with married men.	2.60	.887
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' does not care for her children.	1.88	.705
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' cannot raise her children properly since there is no man as the head of the family.	2.09	.846
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' cannot manage her family as good as a man can.	2.04	.818
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' would seduce married men.	2.57	.839
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' would be a bad example for their children's future marriage.	2.24	.870
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' is an independent woman.	3.04	.702
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that 'janda' is a woman who is able to defend her rights.	2.91	.713
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that 'janda' is a strong-willed woman.	3.05	.694

Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should be socially distant from all men in general.	2.34	.763
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should be socially distant from her male colleagues.	2.31	.763
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should not stay out until late hours.	2.48	.783
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' will be viewed negatively when she gets in and out of her home late at night.	2.85	.836
Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should only visit her married female friends when their spouses are not at home.	2.51	.807
Overall People's perceptions towards media portrayal of the word <i>janda</i> in Malaysia	2.47	.413

Table 2 illustrates the mean score for each item on people's perceptions towards media portrayal of the word *janda* in Malaysia. The highest mean score is  $M=3.05$  and it is obtained by '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that 'janda' is a strong-willed woman.*' followed by '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' is an independent woman.*' with the mean score of 3.04. It can be inferred that the majority of the respondents agreed that *janda* was portrayed as a strong-willed and independent woman by the media in Malaysia. Next, the mean scores for '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that 'janda' is a woman who is able to defend her rights.*', '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' will be viewed negatively when she gets in and out of her home late at night.*', and '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' is more keen to have sexual relationships with married men.*', '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' is more keen to have sexual relationships with married men.*', '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' would seduce married men.*', '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should only visit her married female friends when their spouses are not at home.*', and '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' is able to destroy families.*' are  $M=2.91$ ,  $M=2.85$ ,  $M=2.60$ ,  $M=2.57$ ,  $M=2.51$ , and  $M=2.50$  respectively. This means that the respondents agreed that the media in Malaysia portrayed *janda* as being able to defend their rights, being viewed negatively if they went in and out from their house at night, more keen to have sexual relationships with married men, would seduce married men, should only visit her married female friends when their spouses are not at home, and are able to destroy families.

Based on Table 2, it can be seen that the mean score acquired by '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should not stay out until late hours.*' is  $M=2.48$  followed by '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should be socially distant from all men in general*' and '*Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a 'janda' should be socially distant*

*from her male colleagues.*' with the mean scores of  $M=2.34$  and  $M=2.31$  respectively. This indicates that the majority of the respondents agreed that a *janda* was portrayed by the media in Malaysia as someone who should not stay out until late hours, and should be socially distant from all men in general, and even her male colleagues. Next, 'Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a *janda* would be a bad example for their children's future marriage.' obtains the mean score of 2.24. This means that the respondents agreed that a *janda* would be a bad example for their children's future marriage as being portrayed by Malaysian media. Next, the mean scores obtained by 'Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that the family concept is not important for a *janda*.', 'Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a *janda* cannot raise her children properly since there is no man as the head of the family.', and 'Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a *janda* cannot manage her family as good as a man can.' are  $M=2.15$ ,  $M=2.09$  and  $M=2.04$  respectively. This can be inferred that most respondents agreed that the Malaysian media portrayed the family concept as being unimportant for a *janda*, a *janda* cannot raise her children properly since there is no man as the head of the family, and a *janda* cannot manage her family as well as a man can. The least mean score is  $M=1.88$  which is obtained by 'Media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that a *janda* does not care for her children.'. This means that the respondents disagreed that the media in Malaysia portrayed a *janda* as not caring for her children. The overall mean score of peoples' perceptions towards media portrayal of the word *janda* in Malaysia is  $M=2.47$ . Generally, it can be said that Malaysians perceive that the media in Malaysia portrayed the word *janda* in a negative light.

**RQ2: Is there any significant difference between gender on the perceptions towards media portrayal of the word *janda* in Malaysia?**

Table 3  
Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Perception towards <i>janda</i>	Male	127	2.4119	.39625	.03516
	Female	254	2.5030	.41809	.02623



Table 4  
*Independent Samples Test*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
JandaPerception	Equal variances assumed	.764	.383	-2.038	379	.042
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.075	264.497	.039

Tables 3 and 4 depict the results of the Independent Sample T-test conducted to determine the significant difference between gender. The results indicate that there was a significant difference in the perceptions towards media portrayal of the word '*janda*' in Malaysia between males and females,  $t(379) = -2.075$ ,  $p\text{-value} = .039$ . The average mean score of males' perceptions towards media portrayal of the word *janda* in Malaysia ( $M=2.4119$ ,  $SD=.39625$ ) was significantly different from females' ( $M=2.5030$ ,  $SD=.41809$ ). Based on the independent sample t-test conducted, it can be said that women have more negative perceptions of jandas compared to men. However, this may be due to the imbalance in the numbers of respondents between male and female.

### Discussion

Generally, it can be inferred from the result shown that the media in Malaysia portray *jandas* negatively. This may be due to the negative associations of *janda* following media portrayals of them being more open to socialising late into the night, keen on having sexual relationships with married men, and having no qualms about destroying marriages and families. This is supported by Karupiah's (2020) research which found that if a *janda* seeks romantic relationships, she would be viewed as having inappropriate behaviour and is considered as an irresponsible individual. Besides that, most respondents agreed that the media portrayal of *janda* depicted that the family concept is not important for a *janda* and she cannot raise her children properly. This result is parallel with Karupiah's (2020) research in which she mentioned that a *janda* as a mother is perceived as neglecting her children when seeking a man's attention.

Based on the findings, most respondents agreed that media portrayals in Malaysia suggest that *janda* is a strong-willed and independent woman. This is highly likely because after a divorce, *jandas* have to take care of themselves, both financially and emotionally since they no longer have the support of a husband. This contrasts with the stereotypical perception of *jandas* as financially weak and thus is looking for masculine support (Morris & Munt, 2019; Zhang, 2022). The current study's finding also indicates that a majority of the

respondents agreed that the media in Malaysia portrayed *janda* as being able to defend their rights. However, despite the emergence of some media contents that portray *jandas* in more positive lights such as the film '*Tiga Janda Melawan Dunia*', it should be noted that the positive depiction is limited to more trivial matters such as buying tickets to a concert (Asri, 2022) suggesting that the capabilities of *jandas* are limited and may still require input from men.

Another thing to note from this study is the significant difference between gender in the perceptions towards media portrayal of the word '*janda*' in Malaysia. The result suggests that women perceive that portrayals of *janda* in Malaysian media were more negative compared to men. Since there are more societal expectations placed on women than men regardless of their marital status (Parker, 2016; Setiawan et al., 2022), it is possible that female respondents perceive more negative portrayals whereas men are more oblivious to them. In fact, some men fail to register that *jandas* are portrayed in a negative light since they are viewed as entertainment (Yusuf, 2020; Sendrataria et al., 2022). In short, although there have been shifts in the way *janda* is portrayed in the Malaysian media towards a more positive light, such shifts are small and it may require a lot more time and effort before a consistently positive portrayal of *jandas* can be achieved.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study show that media portrayal towards the word '*janda*' in Malaysia is a little pessimistic and negative. This portrayal by the media may influence the society to also have a negative perspective towards a *janda*. However, it can also be seen that Malaysians have a positive view and perception towards certain attributes of *jandas* such as being strong-willed, independent, and able to defend their rights. This indicates that society may perceive that being a *janda* will face challenges in their life. At the same time, there is also a difference in perceptions towards the word *janda* between genders which may be attributed to different expectations and perceptions towards gender roles in relationships. This may result from the different gender having different experiences, backgrounds, and social expectations.

However, the results of this study could not be generalised as the use of simple random sampling means that there are over- and underrepresented groups from Malaysia's diverse population. Besides, the current study is also quite limited as it only employed quantitative research methods. Hence, it is suggested that future research explores society's perceptions by drawing from qualitative methods allowing researchers to delve into more in-depth data and analysis. This could further increase the understanding of the effects of the negative perception that a society holds on *jandas* because the implications would not only affect the *janda* but the whole family, especially the children. Other than that, future research could look into ways on how media could positively portray a *janda*, thereby eliminating society's negative perspectives towards a *janda*.

In Malaysia, there is a dearth of research on *janda* in general, and the portrayal of *janda* in the media specifically. Therefore, this present study provides empirical evidence that contributes to the body of literature towards the understanding of society's perceptions about media portrayal towards *janda* in the Malaysian context. The findings could mark the start of new studies that explore society's perceptions on issues that are sensitive in nature.

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