

Conduct in the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*) Parliament Malaysia

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Abstract

The frequent occurrences of misconduct among Members of Parliament during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions highlight the importance of a code of conduct in ensuring the sessions are conducted in a constructive and conducive environment. Sexist, racist and immature remarks uttered during sessions, as well as acts of discrimination against youth and minority groups, indicate the inability of MPs to conduct themselves respectfully and directly influence the levels of diversity and inclusivity in the Malaysian Parliament. This research study was conducted in two phases, with the aim to assess the public's knowledge, attitude and perception of the behaviour of MPs during the sessions and identify different perspectives through the lens of MPs themselves on these issues. A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted with a total of 1071 respondents aged 18 years and above participating in the online public survey in the first phase. A semi-structured interview with a total of six MPs was done in the second phase of the study using purposive sampling. The results of the online survey confirmed that the public is more aware of the existence of misconduct among MPs and the discrimination faced by MPs who are members of marginalised groups such as women, youth, and minorities. Four themes emerged from the interview with the MPs; parliamentary reforms, discriminatory comments, the role of the speaker and journalism bias. Findings from the current study concluded that although there was a higher awareness rate among the public about the misconduct of MPs, there was contradictory opinion highlighted from the MPs' perspectives, indicating the need to look at the gap between the public and MPs' understanding of these issues.

Keywords: Age Discrimination, Code of Conduct, Dewan Rakyat, Racist Remarks, Sexist Remarks

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Introduction

A Code of Conduct is a distinct and formal document consisting of a set of principles and values that defines the expectations and standards of how an organization, government agency, corporation, an associated entity, or a person should behave. This includes the minimum levels of enforcement and disciplinary measures for the organizations, employees, and volunteers.¹ A code of conduct connects an organisation's mission, values and beliefs to professional conduct requirements. The code will help to express the values that the organization intends to reinforce in its leader and employees, with the aim of creating a better organization.² In politics, a code of conduct is intended to act as a tool that goes beyond the legal range of political choices. It seeks to express a standard of conduct that should be valued and practiced by those who practice politics, regardless of their political associations, be it a region, an agency, or a government.³

Malaysia is a country governed by a parliamentary democratic system with a Constitutional Monarchy as the head of state. Each of the 222 Members of *Dewan Rakyat* represents a distinct constituency. Every five years, members are elected via publicly held elections. In Malaysia, the latest code of ethics by the Prime Minister's Office was released in 2018, applicable to the administrative staff and members of Parliament. This includes Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretary, political secretary, administrative and parliament staff.⁴ It is important to note that this code of ethics is not applicable to the behaviour/conduct of Members of Parliament (MPs) during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions as it touches on the overall ethics and morality aspects.

*Kod Etika Peribadi yang merupakan tata kelakuan yang berlandaskan faktor nilai norma dalam masyarakat yang menjadi teras tata kelakuan Anggota Pentadbiran dan Ahli Parlimen yang menghasilkan peribadi integriti yang mulia serta diteladani oleh rakyat.*⁵

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- 1 See <<https://www.waterintegritynetwork.net/2015/12/03/code-of-conduct/>> accessed 10 November 2021.
 - 2 See <<https://www.ethics.org/resources/free-toolkit/code-of-conduct/>> accessed 10 November 2021.
 - 3 A. Argandoña and others, 'Code of Ethics for Politicians' (2012) 3 *Ramon Llull Journal of Applied Ethics* 9.
 - 4 Jabatan Perdana Menteri, *Kod Etika Bagi Anggota Pentadbiran dan Ahli Parlimen* (2nd edn, Vol. 2, Putrajaya, 2018) 3.
 - 5 *ibid.*

In addition, Parliament Malaysia has produced the Standing Orders of the Dewan Rakyat that cover all the rules during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions.⁶ However, there is no appropriate guideline that focuses specifically on the behaviour/conduct of parliament members. This has probably contributed to many incidents of misconduct among MPs as there is no guidance on how to properly conduct oneself, especially during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions. There were countless reports in the media on the misconduct of MPs, which had the tendency to overshadow their main duties as elected representatives of the people. Besides, there have been a steady number of reports in the media that reveal the dissatisfaction of Malaysians towards their country's politicians, whom they perceive to be immature, sexist, racist and unable to conduct constructive and progressive debates during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions.

It is reasonable to assume the behaviour/conduct issues of Members of Parliament have impacted the representatives of women, youth and minorities in the Parliament, where they are found to be disproportionately lower. Attitudes such as immature exchanges, making sexist and racist statements, and the inability to obey the Standing Orders of the Parliament do influence the levels of diversity and inclusivity in the Parliament. Lack of monitoring to ensure adherence to the Standing Orders and any other codes of conduct has contributed to misconduct among MPs. It also highlights the necessity of establishing a code of conduct focused on MPs' behaviour/conduct during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions that requires them to comply with and guides them in behaving respectfully with each other and treating everyone, including themselves, with dignity.

Looking at the research gap related to the public's knowledge, attitudes and perception of the behaviour/conduct of MPs during the *Dewan Rakyat* session, a study was proposed toward this aim by conducting a public online survey. This study also aimed to understand this issue from different perspectives; thus, a semi-structured interview was conducted with participating MPs. Through the findings from both public and MPs, this study intends to understand the impact of behaviour/conduct of MPs during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions and recommend a code of conduct that can serve as a guide for them during the parliamentary sittings.

6 Parliament of Malaysia, *Standing Orders of the Dewan Rakyat* (14th Publication, Kuala Lumpur, Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2018).

Literature Review

Definition of Code of Conduct

Generally, a code of conduct is a set of guidelines for employees to follow when they are working for a company or an organization. It establishes the expectations and guidelines for how an organization, government agency, corporation or an individual should conduct themselves.⁷ In an organization, a code of conduct can help create a committed environment because it not only establishes a solid cultural base for the organization but also assists in the enforcement and implementation of legal, ethical policies and procedures for all types of decision-making.⁸

In politics, a code of conduct serves a different purpose because it is normally a voluntary agreement on the rules and behaviours of the political parties and their supporters during the election campaign. The main objectives of this code in politics are to ensure all the political parties agree and obey the rules during elections and increase the trust in the electoral process, especially in transitional countries where the rule of law is not yet established and trusted.⁹ To be said, a code of conduct is intended to act as a potential tool that goes beyond the legal range of political choice that should be treated as a standard guideline for every political party regardless of their associations and choices.

The terms “Code of Conduct” and “Code of Ethics” are often used interchangeably, contributing to the misunderstanding about their goals and practices, as well as how their effectiveness should be evaluated. A Code of conduct is a legal document that aims to restrict, prevent or detect specific types of behaviours, whereas a code of ethics is a document that focuses on the ideals, beliefs and norms that should guide the behaviour of a person in carrying out their roles and responsibilities in the organization. Simply put, a code of conduct is used to address specific behaviours, whereas ethics provides a broader perspective and direction for organisational decision-making.¹⁰

7 See <<https://www.delta-net.com/compliance/code-of-conduct/faqs/why-is-a-code-of-conduct-important>> accessed 11 November 2021.

8 S. Mintz, ‘Using a Code of Conduct to Build Trust in the Workplace’ <<https://www.workplaceethicsadvice.com/2011/10/using-a-code-of-conduct-to-build-trust-in-the-workplace.html>> accessed 12 November 2021.

9 International IDEA, *Code of Conduct for Political Parties: Campaigning in Democratic Elections* (1st edn, Slovenia, Studio Signum, 1999) <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/code-conduct-political-parties-campaigning-democratic-elections>> accessed 12 November 2021.

10 P.G. Thomas, *A Code of Ethics or Code of Conduct for Political Parties as a Potential Tool to Strengthen Electoral Democracy in Canada: Discussion Paper on the Advantages and Disadvantages of a Code* (Canada, Elections Canada, 2014).

Malaysia's Political Representation Gap

Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) measures the gap between women and men in four areas: economic participation and opportunity, education attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. A score of 1.0 (100%) indicates that gender equality has been achieved.

Table 1. Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI), 2017 – 2019

Sub-index	2017	2018	2019
Economic participation and opportunity	0.726	0.727	0.717
Education attainment	1.040	1.054	1.053
Health and survival	0.961	0.958	0.958
Political empowerment	0.061	0.106	0.108
MGGI score	0.697	0.711	0.709

Source: Department of Statistics (2020)

Based on the data provided by DOSM in 2020, women surpassed men in the Education attainment domain with a score of 1.053 in 2019, albeit with a slight decrease from the previous year's score, 1.054 in 2018. Next, the Health and Survival domain recorded 0.958 in 2019, which remains consistent with the previous year. Following that is the Economic participation and opportunity, which recorded a score of 0.717. Generally, women's labour force participation rates for developed countries should exceed 60.0%, whereas Malaysia has yet to achieve the recommended rate; of 56% in 2019.¹¹ Out of the four domains, political empowerment recorded the lowest score at 0.108 in 2019, indicating that women were still lagging in the Ministerial, Parliament and State Elected Representatives (DUN) positions. The overall score for the MGGI score in 2019 is 0.709. This score ranked Malaysia 73rd globally, a drop of ten places compared to 2018; Malaysia ranked 63rd with a score of 0.711. In the Global Gender Gap Report, Malaysia was ranked 104th in 2020 (out of 153 countries), with an overall score of 0.677, dropping three places from 2019.¹²

11 See <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=444&bul_id=QlliTUxPQnhrR2tVa2kyOFpkWmhaZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09> accessed 12 November 2021.

12 World Economic Forum, *Insight Report: Global Gender Gap Report 2020* (Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2020) 8-13.

One of the reasons that contributed to Malaysia being low in the gender gap assessment was due to the low number of women in the Malaysian Parliament, and this figure was also significantly lower than their regional counterparts.¹³ In 2019, the number of women Members of Parliament (MPs) equaled 14.9% of the *Dewan Rakyat* seats, five female ministers (17.8%), four female Deputy Prime Ministers (14.8%) and nine women in the cabinet (16.4%).¹⁴ In conclusion, Malaysia has yet to reach the target of women's political representation of 30.0%.¹⁵ Additionally, the female candidacy rate in Malaysia's election remains low, although there is an increasing pattern from 8.0% in the 13th general election to 11.0% in the 14th general election.¹⁶ However, the lack of women's representation in politics, despite women making up 48.5% of the total population in Malaysia, indicates the existence of gender gap issues in the politics of Malaysia.¹⁷

The age gap is also one of the issues that is often related to political representation in Malaysia. Malaysians aged 40 and below account for more than 60% of the overall population, yet the majority of elected representatives in the *Dewan Rakyat* are over 50 years old. According to current data, the average age of *Dewan Rakyat* MPs is 55.89, with only 18.02% of the MPs aged 45 and under.¹⁸ This is significantly important because it tackles the age gap in Malaysian politics and the need for more youth members. One of the initiatives coming from the government's Youth Transformation Laboratory 2010 was the Malaysian Youth Parliament, or "*Parlimen Belia Malaysia*" (PBM), which was meant to act as a safe space and platform for Malaysian youth to showcase their ability. Despite this initiative, the youth in PBM faced numerous challenges that

13 S.J.S. Liu, 'Gender Gaps in Political Participation in Asia' (2020) *International Political Science Review* 6-14 <<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0192512120935517>>.

14 See <https://data.ipu.org/node/103/data-on-women?chamber_id=13454> accessed 12 November 2021.

15 See <<https://www.kpwkm.gov.my/kpwkm/index.php?r=portal/about2&articleid=TWNLFIOU0dxSlZqbjR3cUozWGJKdz09&id=b0J5ZFBERFhsalo2U05TWk1nSzVDQT09>> accessed 12 November 2021.

16 P.J. Yeong, 'How Women Matter: Gender Representation in Malaysia's 14th General Election' (2018) 107(6) *The Round Table* 771 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2018.1545943>>.

17 See <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=155&bul_id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09> accessed 12 November 2021.

18 See <https://data.ipu.org/node/103/data-on-youth?chamber_id=13454> accessed 12 November 2021.

hampered the program's effectiveness, including a lack of funds to carry out any program, a lack of youth representatives in Malaysia's political scene, a lack of awareness about the PBM, and negative responses from adults.¹⁹ Negative perceptions from the adults on the capabilities of the youth as leaders and the view that politics are only for older and more experienced persons will leave the youth feeling discouraged and hence not motivated to get involved in politics. It is important to acknowledge the experience and knowledge of the older section of society; however, at the same time, acknowledgment of the youth's contribution is also needed to further encourage their participation in politics.

Case study of Behaviour/ Conduct Issues among Parliament Members during Dewan Rakyat session

Below were some behaviour/conduct issues involving MPs during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions which were reported in the Malaysian media:

1. Racist remarks

During the *Dewan Rakyat* session, a few cases of misbehaviour/misconduct involving parliament members were obviously linked to racial statements. In one instance, one MP made a disparaging remark about another MP's skin colour.²⁰ It is wrong for the MPs to touch on this sensitive issue, especially since it is clear and definite racism.

2. Sexist remarks

In reference to a particular woman MP, one MP infamously alluded to women's menstrual cycle, calling it a "leak". Even after 10 years since the incident, the media still sensationalizes the behaviour of this MP.²¹

3. Immature remarks

The MPs have shown a lack of respect for youth and minority groups. A recent case involved an MP who made a remark belittling another MP in relation to his age.²² Media reports on this incident led to further public disappointment with the behaviour of MPs.

19 M.U.M. Sani and S. Saad, 'Pelaksanaan dan Cabaran Penglibatan Belia dalam Parlimen Belia Malaysia' (2018) 13(1) *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 1.

20 DR Deb 13 July 2020, Bil. 2, 75.

21 DR Deb 9 May 2007, Bil. 5.

22 DR Deb 13 July 2020, Bil. 2, 41.

The Dewan Rakyat Standing Order contains points on impolite language (rude) or sexist statements. Standing Order 36(4) touches on two important aspects: the use of impolite (rude) language or sexist remarks in Parliament. MPs are not allowed to make any immature or malicious remarks that can be considered *un-parliamentary language*.²³ Good behaviour/conduct is very important to enable constructive debates during Parliament sessions. Usually, all these misconducts happened when MPs attacked each other personally, either using words or through their behaviour. Although clearly stated in the Standing Order, the fact that misconduct of the MPs happens regularly indicates the lack of understanding and awareness of the Standing Order itself.

In addition, members of parliament are generally immune from civil and criminal liability for any statements made or actions taken during the Parliamentary proceedings.²⁴ In parliamentary terminology, the word “privilege” refers to such privileges and immunities enjoyed by both the House of Parliament and its Committees collectively. Sometimes, it can be described as the amount of the unique privileges enjoyed by each House individually and collectively as a constituent part of the parliament.²⁵ The main purpose of having this privilege is to allow each House and its representatives to carry out their responsibilities effectively without any interference from anyone outside of the parliament and protect their independence and authority.²⁶

In Malaysia, the privilege is defined in Sections 3 and 7 of the Houses of Parliament (Privileges and Powers) Act 1952,²⁷ which is explained below:

1. Freedom of speech and debate

There shall be freedom of speech and debate or proceedings in the House and such freedom of speech and debate or proceedings shall not be liable to be impeached or questioned in any court or tribunal out of the House.

23 Standing Orders of the Dewan Rakyat, SO 36(5) & 36(6).

24 See <<https://www.parlimen.gov.my/fungsi.html?uweb=p&lang=en>> accessed 13 November 2021.

25 A. Masum, ‘Parliamentary Privilege and its Practice in Malaysia: An Overview’ (2012) 2 *Malayan Law Journal* 100.

26 H. Hassan, ‘Parliamentary Privilege, Convention, Tradition and Practice’ *Malay Mail* (1 June 2020) <<https://www.malaymail.com/news/what-you-think/2020/06/01/parliamentary-privilege-convention-tradition-and-practice-hafiz-hassan/1871209>> accessed 13 November 2021.

27 See <<https://www.parlimen.gov.my/kemudahan-ahli.html?uweb=dr&>> accessed 13 November 2021.

This means that a court will not be able to bring anything stated by MPs in Parliament into question (such as the High Court or the Federal Court). Expanding on this point, the courts will be unable to intervene if one MP chooses to hurl insults or harsh remarks at another MP.

2. Immunity of members from civil or criminal proceedings for anything done or said before the House

No member shall be liable to any civil or criminal proceedings, arrest, imprisonment, or damages by reason of any matter or things which he may have brought by petition, bill, resolution, motion, or otherwise, or have said before the House or any committees.

This ensures that MPs cannot be punished or penalised for activities like introducing motions (proposing new laws or amending current laws) or making contentious statements. In terms of where and when these privileges or immunities are accessible, it is evident that they are only available to MPs while parliament is in session.

Thus, in hope with these parliamentary privileges, MPs should carry out their duties as representatives for the public without fear of a lawsuit or any interruption from anyone, but it is not an excuse to justify any bad conduct/behaviour during the sessions. However, it is also important to address how much this privilege could affect the way the conduct/behaviour of MPs during the sessions, as it could be an excuse to behave inappropriately and a ticket to escape punishment, or it could truly help the MPs to carry out their duties effectively.

Currently, most of the MPs only need to apologise for their misconduct, as reported in the media. There have been a few cases of MPs being suspended from *Dewan Rakyat*: but the majority of these cases result in only a warning from the Speaker of *Dewan Rakyat* as redress. This begs the question - how effective is this action in terms of preventing future bad conduct/behaviour of MPs? In the context of these MPs' misconduct, it is critical to discuss the role of the Speaker of the *Dewan Rakyat* as the one that holds the responsibility of controlling the house.

Methodology

In order to gain a holistic perspective, this study applied a mixed research design. Mixed method research will help to get a better understanding of the connections or contradictions between qualitative and quantitative data and will allow us to answer the research problem in a more

comprehensive way.²⁸ This study used a quantitative approach in the first phase and a qualitative approach in the second phase of the study. An online public survey for Malaysians aged 18 years and above across Malaysia was conducted in the first phase. The aim of this survey was to reach out to a broad segment of the Malaysian population to gather public opinions on behaviour/conduct issues among MPs during sessions. The rationale for conducting an online survey was due to Covid-19 and the movement control order (MCO) because of the pandemic. Importantly, the online survey was a more cost-effective study and could be conducted in a short period of time.²⁹ Thus, considering all the factors, this study decided to use an online survey method to collect the quantitative data of the study.

A set of questionnaires was prepared using an online form for the public to access and answer the questions. The questionnaire is divided into two sections; Section 1: Personal and background information, and Section 2: Knowledge, attitude and public perception of MPs' behaviour/ conduct during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions. The Google form was available in dual languages; Malay and English. Before the survey was conducted, a pre-test was carried out among 30 respondents with similar characteristics; Malaysians aged 18 years and above. To reduce bias, these 30 respondents were selected using purposive sampling and comprised of All Women's Action Society (AWAM) Exco Members, AWAM staff, Exco members of partner NGOs and a selection of people from the public within AWAM's community.³⁰ All 30 respondents were excluded from the actual data collection.

The survey was conducted from 18th June to 18th July 2021 through a social media campaign³¹ and direct engagement.³² The survey continued

28 S. Almalki, 'Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data in Mixed Methods Research - Challenges and Benefits' (2016) 5(3) *Journal of Education and Learning* 291 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/jel.v5n3p288>>.

29 M.S.D.P. Nayak and K.A. Narayan, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of Online Surveys' (2019) 24(5) *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 31 <10.9790/0837-2405053138>.

30 Information and feedback from each member were collected including their understanding of the questions, duration to complete the survey and any further improvement before the actual survey was conducted.

31 Link for the google form to access the public online survey was shared through various social media platforms: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp.

32 Engagement with other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and selected Members of Parliament through voluntary participation were done to engage the survey with the public.

until 30th July 2021 as AWAM collaborated with Cent-GPS and gathered a total of 1071 survey respondents.³³ All data obtained for the public online survey was analysed using the IBM SPSS version 23. For Likert scale questions, internal consistency was determined by Cronbach's alpha. The Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were used to determine the normality of the data ($p > 0.05$ indicates that the data were normally distributed). The descriptive data was presented as percentages and frequencies for the categorical variables, while means and standard deviations were used for continuous data.

In the second phase of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of MPs that aimed to identify and understand these issues from their perspectives. These semi-structured interviews involved MPs from different political parties for a diverse range of information. Semi-structured interviews are one of the most common methods used in qualitative research. This method usually entails a discussion between the researcher and the respondents, which is guided by a flexible interview protocol and supported by follow-up questions, probes and comments. It will help the researcher collect open-ended data and explore the respondents' thoughts, feelings and opinions about the topic.³⁴ Thus, in the second phase, this study attempted to explore MPs' views and opinions about the behaviour/conduct of MPs during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions. MPs were invited to participate in this interview and given information sheets and consent forms prior to the interview sessions. Participation was entirely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

The interviews were conducted in three separate sessions with a total of six MPs; they were the elected representatives and served as active MPs in *Dewan Rakyat*. All of the sessions were conducted online using the Zoom application in three different sessions, considering the movement restrictions imposed by the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the availability of the MPs. The sessions were video and audio recorded as well as transcribed. The average length of each session was about one hour, and respondents were allowed to speak freely in English and Malay. A set of questions were carefully formulated

33 Cent-GPS or The Centre for Governance and Political Studies is a KL based political science and social behavioural research firm specializing in both quantitative and qualitative research.

34 W.C. Adams, 'Conducting Semi-structured Interviews' in K.E. Newcomer and others (eds), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (4th edn, Jossey Bass, 2015).

after conducting the public online survey to gain a viewpoint on their perception of the behaviour and conduct of MPs during a Parliament proceeding in *Dewan Rakyat*.

The transcripts that were recorded verbatim were verified by the respondents to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Researchers considered using the inductive approach by analyzing the data to obtain emerging themes.³⁵ The verified transcripts were then analysed by using the six-phase guide method for conducting the thematic analysis; 1) Becoming familiar with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) Search for themes; 4) Review themes; 5) Define themes; 6) Write-up.³⁶

Results and Discussion

Phase 1: Quantitative approach: Public Online Survey

Demographic and Socioeconomic Background

68.3% of 1071 respondents from the public online survey were from the age group of 18 to 29 years old, with a mean age of 28.7 ± 10.3 years, indicating responses collected from this study were mostly from the perspectives of the younger generation (Table 2). As mentioned, this study was conducted using a web-survey method in which a Google form was created, and respondents could complete the questionnaire at their convenience by using different platforms such as computers and mobile devices.³⁷ However, the obvious drawback of using this method was the accessibility and familiarity of using the internet for certain populations. Generally, young people are the most frequent users than older people, which explains the higher proportion of younger age groups in the present study.³⁸

The majority of the respondents in this study were women (57.0%), and Malays constituted 55.2% of the overall respondents (Table 2). The distribution of respondents based on ethnicity was consistent with data provided by DOSM, in which the major ethnic group composition

35 M. Saunders and others, *Research Methods for Business Students* (5th edn, England, Prentice Hall, 2009).

36 V. Braun and V. Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' (2006) 3(2) *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 77 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>>.

37 M.P. Couper and P.V. Miller, 'Web Survey Methods: Introduction' (2008) 72(5) *Public Opinion Quarterly* 832 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfn066>>.

38 T.H. Shih and X. Fan, 'Comparing Response Rates from Web and Mail Surveys: A Meta-Analysis' (2008) 20(3) *Field Methods* 249 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1525822X08317085>>.

in Malaysia is *bumiputera* which consists of Malays, Orang Asli, the ethnicity groups of Sarawak and Sabah (69.6%).³⁹ The educational level of respondents was higher, with 1.4% having completed secondary school, 7.8% having completed matriculation/form 6 (STPM) level and the majority (90.8%) either already having completed or receiving their tertiary education; college or university. Malaysia's adult illiteracy rate decreased steadily from 16.1% in 1990 to 4.2% in 2012.⁴⁰ Overall, there was an improvement in educational attainment in Malaysia, which thus explained the probability those respondent in the present study had a higher awareness of the importance of education to create better employment opportunities and directly improve their living status.⁴¹

Most of the respondents (43.3%) worked in the private sector, while 35.3% were students, which is consistent with the distribution of the age group as the majority of the respondents were those aged 18 - 29 years old. The current study reported a higher employment status; 58.5% were employed in the public sector, private sector and self-employed. As mentioned, the education level of the respondents was higher and consistent with the employment status of the respondents in this study. Briefly, higher educational levels helped to create better opportunities for employment and perhaps explained the higher employment rate in this current study.⁴²

Income classification of the respondents was based on the Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report (2019) by DOSM.⁴³ More than half of the respondents (80.2%) were categorized in the B40 group with a monthly income below RM 4,850, 14.8% in the M40 group with an income ranging from RM 4,850 to RM 10,960 and the remaining 5.0% were in the T20 group; which is the highest group drawing monthly

39 See <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=155&bul_id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZkiWdzQ4TihUUT09> accessed 12 November 2021

40 See <<https://www.ilmia.gov.my/index.php/en/dashboard-datamart/kilm/indicators/item/education-attainment-illiteracy>> accessed 22 November 2021.

41 N.K.H. Singh, W.S. Lai and M.N.M. Saukani, 'Impact of Education Levels on Economic Growth in Malaysia: A Gender Base Analysis' (2018) 14(4) *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 13 <<https://ejournal.ukm.my/gmjss/article/view/23419>>.

42 W.S. Lai and I. Yussof, 'Impact of Higher Education on Income and Economic Growth: A Cross Country Evidence' (2018) 52(2) *Jurnal Ekonomi Malaysia* 189 <https://www.ukm.my/jem/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/jeko_522-15.pdf>.

43 See <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=120&bul_id=TU00TmRhQ1N5TUxHVWN0T2VjbXJYZz09&menu_id=amVoWU54UTl0a21NWmdhMjFMMWcyZz09> accessed 22 November 2021.

incomes above RM 10,960. However, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, many households experienced a decline in their monthly income and have seen households with higher income groups shifting to the lower-income group.⁴⁴

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents Based on Demographic Characteristics (n=1071)

Variables	n (%)	Mean ± SD
Age (years)		28.7 ± 10.3
18 – 29	732 (68.3)	
30 – 39	198 (18.5)	
40 – 49	79 (7.4)	
50 - 59	36 (3.4)	
≥60	26 (2.4)	
Gender		
Male	435 (40.6)	
Female	611 (57.0)	
Prefer not to disclose	25 (2.3)	
Ethnicity		
Malay	591 (55.2)	
Indian	290 (27.1)	
Chinese	125 (11.7)	
Ethnicity of Sarawak	8 (0.8)	
Ethnicity of Sabah	6 (0.6)	
Others	51 (4.8)	
Marital status		
Single	767 (71.6)	
Married	270 (25.2)	
Others ¹	34 (3.2)	

44 See <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=493&bul_id=VTNHRkdiZkFzenBNd1Y1dmg2UUlrZz09&menu_id=amVoWU54UT10a21NWmdhMjFMMWcyZz09> accessed 22 November 2021.

Variables	n (%)	Mean ± SD
Level of Education		
Secondary school	15 (1.4)	
Matriculation/ Form 6 (STPM)	84 (7.8)	
College/ University	972 (90.8)	
Occupation		
Public sectors	94 (8.8)	
Private sectors	464 (43.3)	
Self-employed	57 (5.3)	
Not-employed ²	66 (6.2)	
Students	378 (35.3)	
Retiree	12 (1.1)	
Household monthly income (RM) ³		
B40 (<RM4850)	859 (80.2)	
M40 (RM 4850 – RM 10960)	158 (14.8)	
T20 (>RM 10960)	54 (5.0)	

¹Others: divorced, widowed and separated (World Marriage Data, 2008); ²Not-employed included housewives; ³Income classification based on Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report (2019)

Knowledge about Dewan Rakyat and the behaviour/conduct amongst Members of Parliament during Dewan Rakyat sessions

Seven questions regarding respondents' knowledge of *Dewan Rakyat* and the behaviour/ conduct of MPs during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions were asked (Table 3). Overall, the majority of the respondents were able to answer all the questions correctly and categorized as having higher knowledge of these issues. There was no prior study that could be used as baseline data in comparing the level of public knowledge about *Dewan Rakyat* and its role. As discussed previously, higher knowledge about these issues may be linked to the higher educational levels and higher accessibility to the internet among the respondents that enabled them to learn and obtain information via online. The Internet is widely used as a learning

tool for enhancing knowledge and skills.⁴⁵ However, it is also important to address the possibility of receiving incorrect information, thus, it was not solely guaranteed that respondents have an understanding of *Dewan Rakyat* and its role, despite the current study reporting higher knowledge among respondents.⁴⁶

Table 3. Respondents' knowledge about *Dewan Rakyat* and the behaviour/conduct amongst Members of Parliament during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions (n=1071)

No.	Questions	n (%)	
		Yes	No
1.	Have you ever heard of the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> in the Parliament?	1038 (96.9)	33 (3.1)
2.	Do you know the role of <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> ?	983 (91.8)	88 (8.2)
3.	Have you ever followed/watched any <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions? (even if you have watched only parts of the session, you may answer Yes)	920 (85.9)	151 (14.1)
4.	Are you aware of the existence of misconduct among Members of Parliament during <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions?	957 (89.4)	113 (10.6)
5.	In your opinion, do the Members of Parliaments in <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> conduct themselves respectfully during the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions?	60 (5.6)	1011 (94.4)
6.	As a Malaysian citizen, are you satisfied with the standards of behaviour/conduct of Members of Parliament in the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> ?	9 (0.8)	1062 (99.2)
7.	Are you aware of the discrimination faced by women, youth and minorities Members of Parliament in the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> ?	885 (82.6)	186 (17.4)

45 E. Papanis, P. Giavrimis and E.M. Papani, 'The Contribution Of The Internet Into Learning' (2010) 2(1) *Review of European Studies* 54.

46 F.P.B. Mota and I. Cilento, 'Competence For Internet Use: Integrating Knowledge, Skills, And Attitudes' (2020) 1 *Computers and Education Open* <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2020.100015>>.

Mean \pm SD	6.40 \pm 1.09
Overall Score of Knowledge Status	n (%)
Low (0-4)	76 (7.1)
High (\geq 5)	995 (92.9)
Min – Max	1 – 7

Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents' answers to four open-ended questions that were asked subsequently in the knowledge domain (Table 3). All of these short questions mainly revolved around assessing the respondent's initial views on the conduct/behaviour of MPs during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions and their ability to give examples of misconduct and discrimination faced by MPs who are women, youth and minority groups. About 85.9% of the respondents shared that they have followed or watched at least one session of the *Dewan Rakyat*. As a result, the majority of respondents provide varied yet consistent responses based on their initial assessment of the situation in *Dewan Rakyat*. Out of all the responses, three main points can be discussed; unprofessional behaviour, behaviour/conduct issues and Speaker of *Dewan Rakyat*.

Respondents mainly expressed their disappointment over the lack of good debating skills, such as being ill-prepared without proper facts to support their contention during debates, in addition to irrelevant topics and subjects, unnecessary bickering, shouting and fighting with each other during the sessions.⁴⁷ However, as the sessions can be watched live through various platforms, there was a higher possibility that the media would only highlight the unsavoury exchanges or incidents that served to sensationalise the sessions further to attract the public's interest. For example, various short video clips were circulated on social media like Twitter, Facebook and Youtube and the fact that these short videos were widely shared instead of the full session can deepen the public's distrust and misunderstanding of the sittings in *Dewan Rakyat*.

47 Z. Manzor, 'Dewan Rakyat: Ramai Kesal Jadi Tempat Bergaduh' *Kosmo* (27 July 2021) <<https://www.kosmo.com.my/2021/07/27/dewan-rakyat-ramai-kesal-jadi-tempat-bergaduh/>> accessed 22 November 2021; A.Tarmizi, 'YB, Tolonglah Jaga Adab Ketika Berbahas' *Sinar Harian* (29 July 2021) <<https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/152535/SUARA-SINAR/Analisis-Sinar/YB-tolonglah-jaga-adab-ketikaberbahas>> accessed 22 November 2021.

Table 4. Distribution of responses on knowledge about *Dewan Rakyat* and the behaviour/ conduct amongst Members of Parliament during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions

No.	Question	Responses
1.	If yes to question 3, what is your initial opinion on the behaviour/conduct of Members of Parliament during the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="565 331 936 354">i. Unprofessional behaviours <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="616 363 1012 522">• Failed to use parliament as a medium for them to express/ debate on the real issues for public – personal and political aspects. <li data-bbox="616 530 1024 654">• Low quality of debating skills – failed to prepare proper data/ facts/ points to back up their point during debating. <li data-bbox="616 663 1018 822">• Bring up irrelevant topics/ subjects – debates usually revolve about personal attacks, unnecessary bickering and shouting with rude words. <li data-bbox="616 830 1030 919">• There is no listening involved – interrupted with each other and too many mixed opinions. <li data-bbox="565 927 842 950">ii. Behaviour/conduct <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="616 959 824 982">• Racist remarks <li data-bbox="616 991 824 1014">• Sexist remarks <li data-bbox="616 1023 953 1084">• Rude languages/ words – swearing <li data-bbox="616 1093 1012 1181">• No respect between each other – shouting, fighting, body shaming, name-calling <li data-bbox="565 1190 906 1213">iii. Speaker of <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="616 1222 1018 1245">• Not neutral – unfair and biased <li data-bbox="616 1254 1018 1342">• Disrespect of speakers during the session – especially women speakers <li data-bbox="616 1351 1018 1525">• Speaker of <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> failed to play his role as he should – give the opportunity to the Members of Parliament to act recklessly during the sessions

No.	Question	Responses
2.	If No to question 5, can you give an example of misconduct by any Members of Parliament during <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Racist remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch on sensitive issues – skin colours ii. Sexist remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dirty jokes • Insulted other MP’s name • Made jokes about women iii. Disrespectful attitude of the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> Speaker iv. Unethical attitudes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Vaping’ during the session • Interrupt others – shouting and fighting v. Rude languages/ words vi. Disrespectful of young MPs vii. Disrespectful of women MPs
3.	If yes to question 6, please state your reason (s).	–
4.	If yes to question 7, can you give examples of acts/behaviours that you consider to be discrimination against women, youth and minorities Members of Parliament in <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Age discrimination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion from young MPs were often belittled – deemed too young to give their opinion and express their stand ii. Racist remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not respecting cultural differences • Being insensitive – skin colour, name-calling with rude words iii. Sexist remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion from women MPs were often belittled/ usually rejected – deemed women too emotional to express their rationale opinion • Unfair treatment – less time to talks/ debates • Women’s issues are not a priority iv. OKU discrimination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insensitive toward this group • Lack of issues/ policy pertaining to this group v. Lack of women and youth representatives in Parliament

¹ Refer to Table 3 for the question

More than half of the respondents (89.4%) were aware of the existence of misconduct by the MPs and discrimination faced by MPs who are women, youth and minority groups (82.6%) (Table 3). These findings confirmed the public's increased awareness of MPs' behaviour/ conduct during sessions. Overall, more than 90.0% of the respondents' believed MPs were unable to conduct themselves respectfully and expressed their dissatisfaction with the standard of behaviour shown during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions. Consistently, racist and sexist remarks uttered by certain MPs during the sessions formed the highest number of MP misconduct by MPs from the survey. Racist and sexist remarks are referred to as un-parliamentary language that is strictly prohibited and clearly stated in the current Standing Orders of the *Dewan Rakyat*, Standing Order 36(4) indicated the lackadaisical attitude of MPs to familiarise themselves with the Standing Order.⁴⁸

It is important for MPs to display good behaviour and strictly refrain themselves from making any racist or sexist statements, especially during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions. It was utterly astonishing how a racist remark made by an MP was taken lightly during the session and had not evoked any public outcry.⁴⁹ In a country with multi-diverse ethnic groups, it is important for us to always respect cultural differences and be aware of sensitive issues like skin colour.⁵⁰ The lack of women and youth representatives in the Parliament was one of the main concerns expressed by the respondents, especially seeing some misconduct by the MPs clearly expressed towards these groups. Respondents were clearly disappointed with the discrimination against younger MPs in the past sittings.⁵¹ It clearly showed disrespect towards the younger generation when the elder MPs, without any shame or guilt, mocked them, despite them being elected representatives and carrying the same responsibility.

Malaysian youth are more politically aware today than in the past, with a growing desire to participate in and contribute to the political scene as much as possible. For instance, the establishment of the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) - a new political party consisting of young people, and the rise of social movements such as *Undi18* proved the increasing interest of the younger population in being involved in

48 Standing Orders of the Dewan Rakyat, SO 36(4).

49 S. Suyi, 'LETTER | Put Racists To Shame' *Malaysiakini* (16 July 2020) <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/534720>> accessed 22 November 2021.

50 DR Deb 13 July 2020, Bil.2, 75.

51 *ibid.* 41.

politics and the decision-making process.⁵² A party led by young people will help to set the platform for them to have the opportunity to contest in the next election and possibly increase their chances of being elected as the people's representatives in Parliament. A new set of fresh ideas and energy from the youth would benefit Malaysia's democratic processes as a whole; however, it lacks a platform to channel and express these ideas.

The Speaker of *Dewan Rakyat* holds the biggest responsibilities, including maintaining the order of the House, ensuring the discussions are relevant and focused, and enforcing the Standing Order in the event of a disagreement.⁵³ The Standing Order grants the Speaker full authority, and any decision or ruling by the Speaker is final, and the Speaker chairs all four standing Committees – House Committee, Standing Orders Committee, Committee of Privileges and Committee of Selection (The Standing Committee). Above all, the important key aspect of a Speaker of the *Dewan Rakyat* is impartiality and non-partisan in his/her action. However, findings from the current study believed there was inequality shown by the Speaker. When the Speaker of *Dewan Rakyat* failed to ensure all the MPs obeyed the Standing Order, it led to reckless behaviour and misconduct during the sessions.

Attitudes of respondents on the behaviour/conduct of Members of Parliament during Dewan Rakyat sessions

A total of four statements were made in assessing the attitudes of respondents on the behaviour/conduct of MPs during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions by using the four Likert-scale responses (Table 5). The majority of the respondents (80.0% to 90.0%) strongly agree and agree across all four statements.

More than half of the respondents (85.0%) believed the behaviour/conduct issues among MPs greatly influenced the participation of women, youth and minority groups in Parliament. In 2021, the fact that the women composed of 15.9 million or 48.6%⁵⁴ of the total Malaysian

52 F. Zaidi, 'An Emergence of Youth Participation in Malaysian Politics' *IDEAS* (25 August 2021) <<https://www.ideas.org.my/an-emergence-of-youth-participation-in-malaysian-politics/>> accessed 22 November 2021.

53 See <<https://www.parlimen.gov.my/yang-di-pertua.html?uweb=dr&lang=en>> accessed 22 November 2021.

54 See <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=155&bul_id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09> accessed 12 November 2021.

population argues the proposition for more women representatives in politics and decision-making positions. Despite the increasing interest of the youth population in political aspects, currently, there is largely a lack of youth representatives in politics and Parliament. Despite the government's numerous initiatives, such as *Parlimen Belia Malaysia* (PBM), *Parlimen Digital*, and others, there was no discernible impact on the number of youth representatives in *Dewan Rakyat*.

The prevailing stereotype that younger people need to respect the older generation resulted in the youth losing their respect and trust in Malaysia's politics and political establishment. The same situation is observed in women's participation in politics. The misconduct, including sexist remarks and name-calling toward younger MPs, might cause people to view the political culture in Malaysia as toxic and out of bounds for them to actively participate. However, further comprehensive research is required to further understand the relationship between the misconduct of MPs and the lower participation of these groups in politics and decision-making positions.

The majority of the respondents believed that it was critical for each MP to understand their role and responsibility as elected representatives and to consistently improve their standard of conduct in order to maintain their credibility. As government officials elected by Malaysians, their main role is to deliver to public needs and represent people's voices in Parliament. Conversely, an Ipsos survey in 2021 revealed about 63.0% of Malaysians believed politicians in Malaysia have a lack of understanding of the real situation that happened at the grassroots of society.⁵⁵ The dissatisfaction of the public towards Malaysian politicians was primarily because they believed the MPs failed to understand their role, as they clearly failed to deliver the issues of their constituencies during the sittings. All of the misconduct of these MPs would eventually affect the overall ecosystem of politics in Malaysia. As MPs, they should act as a role model to society, displaying a professional set of behaviour as leaders. However, when some MPs recklessly disregarded all of these, it allowed the public to focus more on their misconduct rather than on their capability as an elected leader.

55 See <<https://www.ipsos.com/en-my/press-release-fracturing-societies-and-systems>> accessed 22 November 2021.

Table 5. Attitudes of respondents on behaviour/ conduct of Members of Parliament during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions (n=1071)

No.	Statements	n (%)			
		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	The behaviour/conduct issues of Members of Parliament have an influence on the participation of women, youth and minorities in politics.	547 (51.1)	359 (33.5)	99 (9.2)	66 (6.2)
2.	The behaviour/conduct of Members of Parliament in <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> affects the level of public confidence in them	786 (73.4)	214 (20.0)	37 (3.5)	34 (3.2)
3.	It is important for every Member of Parliament in <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> to improve their standards of conduct to ensure their credibility as an elected government official.	923 (86.2)	100 (9.3)	12 (1.1)	36 (3.4)
4.	It is important for every Member of Parliament in the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> to understand their roles and responsibilities as an elected government official.	905 (84.5)	114 (10.6)	17 (1.6)	35 (3.3)
	Mean \pm SD	14.48 \pm 2.20			
	Overall Score of Attitude Status	n (%)			
	Low (0 – 8)	37 (3.5)			
	High (\geq 9)	1034 (96.5)			
	Min – Max	4 – 16			

Perception of respondents on behaviour/conduct of Members of Parliament during Dewan Rakyat sessions

A total of four statements were asked to the respondents to gather their perception of the behaviour/conduct of MPs during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions with four Likert-scale responses (Table 6). The majority of the respondents (72.0%) disagree and strongly disagree with the first statement that touches on the ability of MPs to always be ready to listen

to the public opinion on this issue. The Ipsos survey in 2021 revealed that 70.0% of Malaysians believed Malaysian politicians did not really care about public opinion.⁵⁶ Despite this, the public still believed some MPs were actually able to conduct themselves professionally without creating any irrelevant provocation during the session. To ensure the sessions were productive, MPs should always be prepared with the proper data and facts to hold constructive debates. In the Standing Order, there was a list of orders that explained the rules of debate, including the time and manner of speaking, the contents of the speech, interruptions, scope of debate and many more. As an example, Standing Order 37 explained the rule on interruptions during debating. Thus, if the MPs truly acknowledged and obeyed this Standing Order, a conducive environment could be created during the debates.

More than half of the respondents (85.4%) believed that an action or punishment should be taken against MPs if they commit an act of misconduct. However, despite all the series of misconduct that had already happened and reported in the media, there was no absolute punishment or action taken against the MPs. Most of the misconduct that took place was resolved with the utterance of apologies from the offending MPs. According to Standing Orders 80 and 80(A), the Committee of Rights and Privileges is responsible for conducting an investigation if MPs violate any Standing Order, which is further explained through Standing Order 44(2).⁵⁷ However, through this order, the discretion lies with the Speaker of the House either to suspend the MPs, or close the cases through acknowledgment and apology from the offending MP. Often, when any misconduct happens, the Speaker will issue a warning to the MP. However, opinions were divided on whether the warning by the Speaker was truly being respected by the members of the House.⁵⁸

56 *ibid.*

57 The Speaker has the power to dismiss any members that commit any misconduct to be suspended for at least 10 days or less and needs to withdraw from the House immediately.

58 I.H. Kamilan and M. Saari, 'Mekanisme Pengawalan Bahasa Kurang Sopan (*Unparliamentary Language*) di dalam Dewan Rakyat: Perspektif Perundangan' (2021) 1 *Journal of the Malaysian Parliament* 98 <<https://journalmp.parlimen.gov.my/jurnal/index.php/jmp/article/view/33/18>>.

Table 6. Perception of respondents on behaviour/conduct of Members of Parliament during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions (n=1071)

No.	Statements	n (%)			
		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	Members of Parliament are always ready to listen to public opinion about their behaviour/conduct during <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions.	184 (17.2)	116 (10.8)	443 (41.4)	328 (30.6)
2.	Members of Parliament are able to conduct themselves in a professional manner without any unwanted and/or irrelevant provocation to other members during any <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions.	364 (34.0)	182 (17.0)	292 (27.3)	233 (21.8)
3.	Action/ punishment should be taken against Members of Parliament if they commit acts of misconduct during the <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> sessions.	915 (85.4)	120 (11.2)	15 (1.4)	21 (2.0)
4.	A revamp in <i>Dewan Rakyat</i> is needed to encourage a higher number of Members of Parliament who are women, youth and minorities.	793 (74.0)	220 (20.5)	36 (3.4)	22 (2.1)
	Mean ± SD	12.69 ±2.12			
	Overall Score of Perception Status	n (%)			
	Low (0 – 8)	9 (0.8)			
	High (≥9)	1062 (99.2)			
	Min – Max	7 – 16			

Phase 2: Qualitative Approach: Semi-structured interview

Parliamentary Reforms

Parliamentary reform was an umbrella term that was used in almost all the questions asked during the interview to describe the current situation that is taking place within the *Dewan Rakyat* and how it can revamp the structure and procedure of conducting business in the House. Over six

codes were assigned to this theme, in which all the respondents mentioned at least one of the descriptors for the umbrella term of Parliamentary reform. Parliamentary reform is an overhaul process of scrutinizing legislation, and according to the Oxford Reference, it covers a variety of proposals for alterations to the composition, power, procedure, and structure of Parliament. Malaysiakini published an online report on 31 August 2021, which claimed that reforms of Parliament in Malaysia are long overdue.⁵⁹

When respondents were asked to give their opinion on the behaviour/conduct among MPs during the *Dewan Rakyat* session, their responses were mostly about the insufficient number of days for Parliament proceedings to discuss issues and the very little time allocated for MPs to raise the issues and speak, which results in MPs interrupting debates in order for them to be heard. A comprehensive reform to allocate more days to convene and discuss issues, as well as allocating more time for MPs to speak, is necessary to ensure that issues are well discussed and debated in a conducive environment. Apart from that, there may be a need to submit issues to the Select Committee for a pre-review before bringing them to the *Dewan Rakyat* for a decision because it will inevitably save a lot of time and avoid interminable and long-drawn proceedings, which can exhaustively adjourn in the wee hours of the morning.

Two of the respondents concurred that when MPs are well prepared and address all inquiries to them, the session becomes automatically more pleasant and conducive for constructive discussions in a civil manner. One respondent was quoted as saying, “Everybody was okay because he took our questions and was honest and straightforward with us. He gave us what we wanted instead of saying that he will respond with a written answer”... (translated to English). It was important for MPs to provide reasonable explanations with concrete facts and not to divert or avoid the subject matter of discussion, which is usually deemed important and serious.

Moreover, a salient point that was brought up under this umbrella theme was to retract the statement “*mohon maaf dan tarik balik*” verbatim, which means “I apologize and I retract the statement”. This statement, which is found in the Standing Order, grants MPs the leeway to deliberately make an offensive comment and, if found guilty, be acquitted of the offence. As such, this does not prevent MPs from making discriminatory

59 W.M. Tangau, ‘MP SPEAKS | What’s Next For Parliamentary Reforms?’ *Malaysiakini* (31 August 2021) <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/589372>> accessed 22 November 2021.

comments, i.e. sexist, racist, ageist slurs, and name-calling, which have been prevalent, especially during the 14th Parliament sitting. Two out of six respondents suggested that the Speaker is within his rights to take immediate action to punish and impose a minimum fine of RM500.00 on MPs that are convicted rather than wait for the Rights & Privileges Committee to decide after calling for a meeting. This is because although these meetings with this Committee take place in parallel with the Parliament proceeding, it is up to the availability of the Speaker as he chairs those meetings too.

Role of the Speaker

All the respondents delineated the difference between the Standing Order and Parliamentary Immunity, which has grey areas in certain subjects. One of them is not sparing MPs who loosely use discriminatory comments that are destructive to the viewers who follow the live broadcast and also disruptive to the entire session of the House. Most of the respondents suggested that punishment and suspension of offenders be mandatory to prevent this phenomenon from escalating. From the interviews, one respondent said that *“Parliamentary Immunity is actually intended to allow the MPs to raise controversial issues pertaining to misuse of power, corruption ...and that nobody can take legal action against you”* (the MP). And another respondent added that *“However, when you talked about the Standing Order, the sexist remarks, the discriminatory remarks, I think it’s about how the way they enhance the rule in Dewan Rakyat and make sure whoever making those remarks they would be punished or they will be suspended in the Dewan Rakyat”*.

The Speaker presiding over a *Dewan Rakyat* session should be impartial and enact the Standing Orders when necessary while maintaining the rights and privileges of the MPs. It is imperative that the Speaker remains impartial and just in maintaining the rights and privileges of every MP in the House. It is the duty of the Speaker to identify, acknowledge, and take action promptly when an MP violates the Standing Order. A respondent retorted by describing that complacency among MPs, especially those who have retained their seats for too long, tend to abuse the Parliamentary Immunity privilege more often than others by making these discriminatory comments. *“It’s not the Parliamentary Immunity that allows some MPs to behave like that. But I think the number one reason is the complacency because this Government, many of them have been part of the system, spending over more than 20 years being an MP...”* the respondent quipped.

Discriminatory Comments

According to the online public survey, most Malaysians felt that MPs must improve their standards of conduct to ensure their credibility as elected government officials in order to earn the confidence of the people. Among the many examples of acts or behaviours of MPs that the public indicated as misconduct and unprofessional were racist and sexist remarks, age discrimination, disrespectful of the Speaker, disrespectful to women and youth MPs, as well as foul language. These incidents have occurred and repeated over the years because the Speaker did not address them for their actions at the time. There were no severe punishments meted out immediately, and most of the time, the Speaker was seen as biased against the MPs, especially the Opposition. By the time the Rights & Privilege Committee convenes and makes a conclusion to take action on an MP that was found guilty of making the derogatory remark, the session would have been adjourned. As a result, the majority of the respondents agreed that a more non-partisan and honorable Speaker is required in Parliamentary reforms.

While a respondent quoted that *“I think there are various examples such as disrespectful remarks made against my colleagues for sexism and ageism (YB Kasthuri was name called dark and YB Syed Saddiq was name called grandson)”*, another quipped *“The Speaker should able to manage the ecosystem in the house”*. When the researcher asked for examples of discrimination in Dewan Rakyat, another respondent stated that *“...the Speaker and Deputy Speaker, I think failed to control the Parliament”*.

Journalistic Bias

In Malaysia, the entire *Dewan Rakyat* session is broadcast on the TV1 channel on national television. But because of its long sessions, most people tend to watch its highlights on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. This is where media reporting and journalism play a significant role in reporting the unbiased truth of these proceedings. Instead, what is showcased are usually snippets of heated debates and ruckus, which are not only distasteful but do not give the entire narrative, given that it has been edited to increase views and subscribers to their channels on YouTube. This is very impactful as even a person who is not staying abreast with the current political scenario will absolutely be made to believe the misconduct of MPs is unprofessional and loathe the nation’s governance.

This vicious cycle has not only caused a public outcry questioning the professionalism of the elected government officials, but they have

lost their confidence in these leaders that represent their constituency. What has made it worse is that these snippets have also made a mockery of the Parliament and its integrity and sanctity. Consequently, this will affect the younger generation, women and minorities to join politics, fearing that they will be ill-treated in Parliament and broadcast on national television.

Thus, when the respondents were asked if they felt the behaviour/conduct of MPs during *Dewan Rakyat* sessions was acceptable or not, a respondent said, *“I think the current angle that you always see is, 1) we have live telecast the whole time, but obviously the (press) picks up the sensational or heated arguments. So, as a result, people would only see the five minutes of the heated argument instead of the 6 – 7 hrs of debates. So, people probably have the impression that all we do during the session is only shout, which is only 5 – 6 mins”*. To which another respondent concurred, *“Actually Parliament sitting even though like we only have sitting until 5 or 5:30 pm, during the 5 – 7 hrs, many MPs raised many good and important points as well. But, it’s always those heated arguments being highlighted. But I think eventually, when people see the video (online) which showcases us quarrelling and shouting at each other, it makes people feel that Parliament is not a respectable place and then it doesn’t inspire them to become politicians or inspire them to get involved in politics”*.

In an age where every aspect of our lives revolves around the Internet, the Malaysian press particularly must play a more responsible role as a significant partner in communicating accurate news while maintaining their independence and freedom. This is imperative in a democracy like Malaysia. They must create public awareness by being transparent in reporting government activities, being a source of sound information, and doing thorough investigations before reporting unbiased news. Moreover, it is critical to examine the quality of reporting among the journalist fraternity at present in order to curb the sensationalism that sells. Presenting the information to the public must be within the core principles of journalism; otherwise, it could be detrimental to the progressiveness of the country, whether deliberately or not.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendation

The conclusion that can be drawn from the findings suggests that unbiased journalism and Parliamentary Reforms must be given due consideration by incorporating the recommendations from the concerns raised by the public as well as the issues highlighted by the MPs. Through the public online survey, although there was higher knowledge of the role of *Dewan*

Rakyat and the issues related to the behaviour/conduct of MPs during the sessions, there was a prominent gap in the public's knowledge and understanding of these issues. The public understanding was a mere basic set of knowledge, which was in contradiction with that of the MPs. By institutionalizing this integrated approach to political reforms collectively, the constitutional rights of every citizen, be it an MP or a layperson, will be protected, thus promoting harmonious living in a multiracial democracy such as Malaysia.

The most prominent strength of this timely project was the fact that it was a two-phase study which utilized both methods, a quantitative followed by a qualitative approach. First, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted in an attempt to obtain data from the general public on their knowledge and perception of the behaviour/conduct of MPs during the *Dewan Rakyat* sessions. Subsequently, a qualitative approach was adopted where semi-structured interviews with MPs from different political parties were performed to identify and determine the issues within the *Dewan Rakyat* through an inductive method; the data obtained were analyzed to define the themes of the case study. To the best knowledge of the researchers, this study is the first attempt to assess the public's opinion on the behaviour/conduct of MPs as well as to identify the issues from the perspective of MPs themselves.

The qualitative approach of this study had the challenge of sourcing a wider pool of respondents. The number of invitations sent out to the MPs for the qualitative approach was limited due to AWAM and Cent-GPS' networking capacity among Malaysian MPs. Out of 15 invitations that were sent out, only six MPs agreed to voluntarily participate. All six are from the Opposition party. Due to this factor, this study takes into account that their responses might have been tainted with bias and must be interpreted with caution so as not to generalize them to all members.

The existing Standing Order is in dire need of being reviewed, revised, and amended by all means necessary to explicitly delineate the rules and regulations of the MPs and Speaker during a *Dewan Rakyat* session. It is, after all, a set of procedural rules that is agreed by the *Dewan Rakyat* to govern the conduct of business within the *Dewan Rakyat*. And therefore, when it comes to imposing penalties and fines as mechanisms to rectify poor conduct, it cannot afford ambiguity. Explicit terminologies and definitions construed as discriminatory comments are warranted in order to ensure a fair and just ruling during sessions. This could significantly improve biased ruling when it comes down to the ruling of the House Speaker.

It is imperative for the *Dewan Rakyat* to re-examine the Standing Order, scrutinize the legislation and make substantial provisions to not only guard its traditional rights and privileges but also its members for effective governance. Taking into account that Malaysia is a developing multiracial democracy, reviewing the relevance of certain terminologies and definitions in a timely fashion is essential. In the last general elections, Malaysia has seen more groups of minorities join politics. Distinct terminologies and definitions for women and youth must be carefully included to ensure nobody is ill-treated during sessions. Imposing fines and suspensions on members convicted of violating the Standing Order must be explicitly described to ensure that members, as well as the Speaker, are made aware and well informed when considering making such a ruling.

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