

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed the media landscape, reshaping how audiences consume and engage with entertainment content. In today's participatory media environment, audiences are no longer passive recipients of messages but have evolved into active contributors who create, share, and influence meaning. As Park (2018) have observed, searching, filtering, and locating information and content have become crucial skills that define how users access and consume media content, and the active use of media is no longer a choice nor a scholarly debate but a reality in the digital era. These changes reflect how audiences now navigate and control the flow of information available to them, using digital tools as filters to manage their media experiences. People have developed many ways to sort through the mass of content and information to get just what they want, and where in the twentieth century many felt overwhelmed by information, today, apps and search engines like Google serve as important filters for people to control the information that reaches them (Carey, 2001; Herrman, 2016). This illustrates a fundamental transformation in audience behaviour from passive reception to selective, interactive engagement and underscores the significance of studying audience participation in digital contexts.

In Malaysia, literary adaptations based on novels have been actively carried out across various media platforms, including television dramas (Kiffli et al., 2021) and have long held a special place among viewers. These adaptations attract loyal audiences who are emotionally

attached to the original written narratives and are eager to witness how the stories are brought to life on screen. Such attachment often extends beyond traditional viewing experiences to digital and social media spaces, where fans express opinions, compare scenes with the novel, and debate actors' portrayals. TikTok, in particular, has emerged as one of the most prominent platforms for these interactions, offering features that enable users to post reaction videos, commentary, and reviews in real time (Mullery, 2021). Consequently, TikTok has evolved into not only a site for entertainment but also a dynamic arena for collective audience discourse and participatory cultural expression.

Two recent drama adaptations that illustrate this phenomenon are *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure* and *Hilang Dalam Rindu*. Both were adapted from popular Malay novels and gained substantial attention online, yet their receptions were strikingly different. *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure*, adapted from Huda Najwa's novel *Thariq Ridzuwan Commando's: His Treasure*, faced public controversy when allegations involving the drama's director sparked discussions and calls for a boycott on social media. The negative discourse surrounding the production overshadowed the storyline itself, as audiences focused on moral and ethical debates instead. In contrast, *Hilang Dalam Rindu*, adapted from Mia Azwari's novel *Hilang*, received positive audience feedback and was celebrated for its emotional storytelling and faithful adaptation. TikTok users produced fan edits, review videos, and heartfelt commentaries that amplified the drama's success, contributing to its favourable online image.

These contrasting receptions highlight how online fan communities have become influential in shaping public narratives around drama adaptations. They also reveal how controversies and positive fan-driven narratives can coexist as competing forces that determine how a drama is perceived. What was once a private form of viewership has evolved into a highly public and participatory activity, where audience reactions can affect the reputation, popularity, and even the commercial success of a production. Through likes, shares, hashtags,

and video trends, fans now participate in a networked form of communication that transforms the traditional relationship between media producers and consumers.

Overall, this research seeks to bridge the gap between traditional audience studies and the realities of today's digital media environment. While previous studies on Malaysian drama adaptations have largely focused on production, storytelling, or audience ratings, less attention has been given to the online discourses that influence reception. In the current digital age, understanding these dynamics is crucial because public opinion is often shaped not by official reviews or advertisements, but by the collective voice of audiences online.

1.1 Background of Study

In Malaysia, the conversion of literary works into visual media has become a major cultural phenomenon, which reflects the people's increasing desire to turn written narratives into screen entertainment that is accessible to all. The trend of book adaptations is becoming progressively popular among local writers (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, 2023). As per the report by the National Library of Malaysia (2023), the total number of television drama series adapted from novels during the period from 2013 to 2023 reached 172, thus indicating a close relationship between the two industries of literature and broadcasting.

The excitement of seeing the characters that one loves and the scenes that are most often quoted being "re-created" on the screen has always attracted the Malaysian audiences (Nur Zulaikha Azam et al., 2024) as through these adaptations readers can get a new view of the stories and characters they have read. In addition to being a source of fun, the idea of Malay novels going to the screen, be it on television or digital platforms, is a big thing for the country's creative industry.

The process of these literary jewels can do a lot to not only enrich Malaysia's cultural heritage and diversify its cinematic landscape (Nur Zulaikha Azam et al., 2024) but also act as

a medium of cultural revision where new audiences get the chance to experience the re-creation of the original meanings, feelings, and values. The repeated success of these adaptations shows that literature still has a major impact on the popular media and the shared cultural imagination. The pace of the digital platforms and social media has changed drastically the manner in which the audiences get in touch with and react to these adaptations, so as to open new modes of audience involvement and interpretation.

The introduction of TikTok as one of the powerful social media platforms has increased the ongoing change of audience behaviour in both negative and positive aspects ((Jia Hao et al., 2022; Khadijah et al., 2025) Compared to traditional viewing modalities, Tik Tok provides its users with an opportunity to express their opinion, remix other works, and even directly engage with scenes, trailers, and reviews. The feed on the platform is algorithmically filtered, meaning that users are shown certain content, which includes discussions (Gilmore et al., 2022), and some of them are about the adaptations of dramas. As a result, the audiences cease to be passive consumers of the adaptations; they construct discourse, participate in fan-generated narratives, and become the main power behind the adaptation reception by the public. These interactions can take various forms, including short reaction videos, commentary posts, fan edits, and hashtag trends that can amplify or challenge dominant interpretations (Khadijah et al., 2025). This participatory culture is reflective of the shifting media culture, in which, the users assume the dual role of a consumer and producer and thus have significant effect on how the successful or unsuccessful a drama is perceived.

In recent times, there have been a few Malaysian drama adaptations which have become popular due to social media engagement. However, two productions, *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure* and *Hilang Dalam Rindu*, are different but complementary perspectives on the phenomenon. Both were adapted from best-selling digital novels and were turned into screen productions with great expectations from fan communities, which, in the case of these two

adaptations, were very popular. The contrasting social media engagements in the two cases are what make them perfect for studying the effect of digital fan communities on the reception of drama adaptations (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, 2023)

1.2 Problem Statement

This problem statement leads to an exploration of fan participation influence and social media discourse effect on the cultural perception of media content in Malaysia. It reminds of the significance of comprehending how audiences employing platforms such as TikTok for the creation, negotiation, and influence of the interpretation of drama adaptations. The following chapter will elaborate more on the Malaysian drama adaptation market, the online fandom trend, and the particular reasons for choosing *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure* and *Hilang Dalam Rindu* as the comparative cases for this study. Discussing these dramas against the backdrop of Malaysia's evolving media landscape will provide the debate with the necessary groundwork to understand how the online fan communities have risen to be a potent agency in the new audience reception culture.

The drama *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure*, based on a novel by Huda Najwa, conveys a message on how an online controversy can change the audience's perception of a drama enormously. The drama was mainly talked about because of its good cast and the popularity of the book (Umirah Halim, 2025). However, after a director-related controversy appeared on social media, the drama received a backlash of anger (Dini, 2025). Readers expressed their dissatisfactions in hashtag activities urging boycotts, moral critiques, and commentaries that condemned the ethical and professional misconducts most of all (mStar, 2025). The debate that followed became a public conversation about not only the story but also the issues of accountability, morality, and audience power. Even though these phenomena have become more visible on platforms like TikTok, there is a lack of academic studies to explore how the

interaction between online audiences and the adaptation of Malaysian drama affects its reception.

Whereas *Hilang Dalam Rindu*, a drama that is based on Mia Azwari's novel, was immensely popular on TikTok. The viewers were touched by the emotional storytelling, praised the actors for their outstanding performances, and lauded the drama for being a very close to the novel in both the story and the themes (Berita Harian, 2025). The fans, actually, were so fan-spirited that they decided to support the drama by their reaction videos, fan edits, and review content through which the drama got more people. The nonstop stream of positive engagement was like a fan club of the drama even after its broadcast period. It's a fan-driven narrative and participatory culture case study that shows how they can be a drama adaptation's success to create more positive talk and more community support.

These different instances emphasize the impact of online audiences on the reception of a drama, which goes beyond the usual measures like ratings or critical reviews. The contrast between a boycott-driven criticism and a fan-driven celebration implies that digital fan discourse can not only influence the perception of adaptations but also the way they become the public consciousness. Consequently, this study investigates on how online fan communities on TikTok influence the reception of drama adaptations in Malaysia. The study is particularly focused on the contrasting cases of *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure* and *Hilang Dalam Rindu*.

1.3 Research Questions

1. In what ways does online audience discourse influence the perception and reception of drama adaptations?
2. How are controversies and positive fan-driven narratives represented in TikTok audience discussions about drama adaptations?

3. How do online fan communities express engagement and participation through comments, captions, and hashtags on TikTok?

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To analyze how online audience discourse shapes the perception and reception of drama adaptations.
2. To examine how controversies and positive fan-driven narratives are reflected in TikTok discussions about drama adaptations.
3. To identify the forms of engagement and participation expressed by online fan communities on TikTok.

1.5 Significance of Study

This research is both scholarly and practical in nature, particularly given the growing impact of digital platforms on the interpretive and responsive nature of Malaysian audiences in the consumption of media content. It becomes a new source of insight into the ways online fan communities, particularly on TikTok, fans of drama adaptations engage in the process of meaning-making. Traditionally, meaning was understood as a process where the production of media content was viewed as a one-directional process in which media producers disseminated content while audiences simply consumed it. The dominance of a participatory digital culture has, however, changed the delineation of these boundaries, thereby, confirming the idea of Jenkins (2006) of a participatory culture, in which fans produce, remix, and circulate content to express their interpretations, critiques, or emotional responses. The participatory environment described here is very close to Reception Theory (Hall, 1980), which acknowledges the role of audience as social, cultural, and experiential contexts-based active interpreters who negotiate meaning. In the case of Malaysia, TikTok fan communities are

considered as dynamic online spaces where shared interpretations, emotional connections, and collective reactions toward drama adaptations become viable.

This study enhances the limited corpus of Malaysian research about audience reception in algorithmic, interactive media contexts. In contrast to local reception studies that have mostly concentrated on traditional television viewership and moral readings of content, very few have looked into the way in which the construction of meaning takes place in fast, interactive social media platforms. This research, through the use of Reception Theory and Participatory Culture Theory to TikTok discourse, illustrates the way user-generated activities such as comments, captions, hashtags, stitches, duets, and fan edits as interpretive acts help to uncover dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. This, in turn, paves the way for a more profound comprehension of how Malaysian audiences decode drama adaptations in participatory digital spaces.

The study offers significant information for media producers, broadcasters, and content strategists. Knowing how audiences decipher and participate in drama adaptations digitally allows the industry to predict audience reactions, handle possible controversies and create content strategies that resonate and respond to the culture. As fan fiction online can shape how the public perceives, trusts, and even financially benefits a product, identifying fan communities as the ones creating the meaning, rather than just receiving, provides them with a strategic leverage. Besides that, public relations practitioners and media strategists can employ these insights to address issues related to their reputation and deepen the connection with their audience. Besides that, cultural policymakers and institutions can also be better off if they consider the influence of digital fan communities on the evolution of cultural discourse while Malaysia is progressing with its national digital transformation agenda.

In fact, the research has a major impact as it represents an importance inquiry of the effect of online communities on fans of the reception of the dramatized adaptations of Malaysian local stories, with the examples of *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure* and *Hilang Dalam Rindu* as two different scenarios. The study through the use of TikTok discourse-analysis (comments, captions, hashtags, and engagement patterns) reveals the ways in which consumers sociably create the sense and determine the general cultural beliefs in the current media environment in Malaysia.

1.6 Scope of Study

This research analyses on the impact of online fan communities on TikTok on the reception of Malaysian drama adaptations. Besides, it is limited to the study of only two cases: *Thariq Ridzuwan: His Treasure* and *Hilang Dalam Rindu*. The research is specifically limited to the Tik Tok application, which offers an ideal site of interest due to its visibility algorithm, participatory nature, and extensive reach among Malaysian youth, making it an important platform to explore the subject of real-time audience discourse. It has limited itself to user-generated content such as comments, captions, hashtags, stitches, duets, and fan edits because these forms of engagement are the most reflective of how audiences comprehend, negotiate, and share interpretations of drama adaptations in digital environments.

The research focuses on talk that happened while both dramas were being aired, i.e., from 17 July to 11 September 2025, so the results would reflect the highest viewer engagement, initial reactions, and continuous audience feedback. Only those pieces of content that explicitly point to or talk about the two research dramas are considered, which have been located by purposive sampling of hashtags and search terms. The study has not investigated other social media platforms, the reaction of the audience offline, the views of the production, or the motives of the audience, as these areas are beyond the researcher's framework.

The research mainly derives its theoretical background from both Reception Theory and Participatory Culture Theory. Hence, its emphases are on the practices of creating meaning, the participation patterns of fans, and the different forms of interpretive engagement. The study refrains from performing audience effect measurements, to quantifying viewership trends, or to evaluating production quality. Consequently, the results are context-dependent, illustrating how TikTok users collaboratively create and disseminate interpretations of the two chosen drama adaptations within a given timeline and platform setting.

1.7 Conclusions

To summarize, this chapter has laid down the groundwork for the research by first presenting the research topic, background, and the problem statement, then the theoretical frameworks which help in the analysis. The chapter has pointed out the significant changes in how the audience in Malaysia perceive media within digital media environments, where online fan communities especially on a platform like TikTok, are the main agents that influence the public perception of drama adaptations. Through the lens of Reception Theory, and Participatory Culture, this research locates itself at the audience studies and digital fandom research intersection, thus opening up a multidimensional approach to the comprehension of the creation of meaning and the involvement in the online sphere.

The chapter also highlighted the main features that the research aimed to fill up the theoretical and methodological gaps in communication studies in Malaysia and the practical contributions to the creative and media industries. The study takes note of its limitations, especially in terms of data scope and generalisability. However, these limitations are explained by the study's exploratory and qualitative approach.

Essentially, the first chapter acts as a detailed guide which outlines where the research fits within the learning and cultural surroundings. Next, the chapters will open up more about

the approach, data examination, and results, thus, they will be instrumental in unveiling the ways in which online fan communities talk over, challenge, and influence the acceptance of Malaysian drama adaptations in the time of participatory media.

