

Understanding Public Perception in a Period of Political Volatility: A Multi-Theoretical Analysis of Malaysia, 2018–2022

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ABSTRACT

Public perception is a central determinant of political legitimacy, national stability and policy effectiveness. In Malaysia, the period from 2018 to 2022 witnessed unprecedented political turnover, multi-layered crises and contentious identity debates, resulting in highly volatile public assessments of national direction and leadership performance. This study analyzes the evolution of Malaysian public sentiment across five prime ministerial administrations—Najib Razak, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yassin, Ismail Sabri Yaakob and Anwar Ibrahim—using a convergent mixed-methods design that integrates time-series opinion poll data, economic indicators, media discourse and qualitative analysis of major political and social events. Guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining Agenda-Setting Theory, Political Trust Theory, Social Identity Theory and Crisis Management Theory, the findings demonstrate that public perception is shaped by (1) issue salience generated through hybrid media ecosystems; (2) shifting evaluations of governmental integrity, competence and legitimacy; (3) identity-based contestation surrounding ethnic and religious narratives; and (4) the government's effectiveness in managing overlapping crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic disruptions and climate-related disasters. Empirically, the article shows that Malaysians increasingly evaluate governments through a layered logic that combines communal identity, perceived procedural legitimacy and performance-based crisis delivery. The study validates core propositions within these theories but highlights the need to refine them for multi-crisis, hybrid media and identity–performance contexts. It proposes an integrated identity–performance model of public evaluation in hybrid regimes and contributes a contextually grounded framework for understanding how citizens in Malaysia and similar systems assess political authority under conditions of volatility. This research provides a comprehensive model explaining how Malaysians evaluate government performance and offers policy insights for strengthening institutional trust, crisis governance and societal cohesion.

Keywords: Public perception; political trust; agenda-setting; identity politics; crisis management; leadership approval; political instability; governance.

INTRODUCTION

Public perception plays a pivotal role in determining the legitimacy, resilience, and effectiveness of political systems. In contemporary governance scholarship, public sentiment is widely understood as both an outcome and a driver of political stability, shaping policy responsiveness, social cohesion and institutional trust.

In Malaysia—a plural, multiethnic democracy characterised by entrenched identity politics, uneven development and an increasingly contested information landscape—public perceptions of national direction and

leadership performance are especially dynamic. These perceptions respond rapidly to economic pressures, political realignments, policy failures and the broader socio-political environment.

The period from 2018 to 2022 represents one of the most consequential eras in Malaysia's post-independence history. It was marked by an extraordinary sequence of political events that reconfigured citizen–state relations and reshaped public expectations of governance. Among these developments were the collapse of Barisan Nasional's 61-year rule, the historic victory of Pakatan Harapan in the 14th General Election, the subsequent Sheraton Move that triggered the fall of the reformist government and the succession of three prime ministers within a four-year span. This period also included the 1MDB corruption trials, extensive elite competition, the devastating economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters such as the 2021 floods and the intensification of ethnic and religious contestations—especially concerning ICERD, the Rome Statute, Jawi script and Muslim–minority relations.

These developments were not only unprecedented but deeply interconnected, producing highly volatile public perceptions of national direction and governance performance. National survey data show dramatic oscillations in public confidence—ranging from moments of “reform euphoria” in 2018 to sharp declines in trust during episodes of political maneuvering, lockdown fatigue, economic distress and crisis mismanagement. This volatility underscores the importance of understanding how Malaysians evaluate their leaders, how political narratives shape public opinion and how crises and institutional fragilities interact to influence trust.

Against this backdrop, this article examines how key national events shaped Malaysian public sentiment between 2018 and 2022. The study adopts an integrated analytical lens by combining Agenda-Setting Theory, Political Trust Theory, Social Identity Theory and Crisis Management Theory. Together, these frameworks enable a multidimensional explanation of public perception by accounting for:

1. the salience of issues and narratives amplified by both mainstream and digital media (agenda-setting);
2. the role of perceived integrity, competence, legitimacy and fairness in shaping political trust;
3. the enduring influence of ethnic and religious identities on political judgments; and
4. the public's evaluation of government performance during overlapping crises.

By situating Malaysian public sentiment within this theoretical architecture, the study offers a comprehensive approach that recognises the complex, iterative relationship between information flows, identity dynamics, governance conditions and crisis moments. This is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where the intersection of political contestation, identity politics and institutional transitions produces distinctive patterns of public evaluation that differ from many other democracies.

To make its contribution explicit, this article advances three main claims:

1. Conceptual contribution: It proposes an integrated identity–performance model of public evaluation in hybrid regimes, showing how communal narratives, procedural legitimacy and performance-based expectations interact in shaping public sentiment.
2. Empirical contribution: It demonstrates, using longitudinal opinion data and crisis timelines, how public trust in Malaysia exhibits repeated “spikes and collapses” linked to political instability, economic shocks and multi-crisis governance.
3. Contextual contribution: It develops Malaysia as a critical case through which to understand public perception in hybrid media and hybrid regime contexts characterised by overlapping crises and rapid leadership turnover.

The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How did public perceptions of the country's direction and prime ministerial performance change across the five administrations between 2018 and 2022?
- RQ2: How are these shifts associated with political events, economic conditions, identity-based controversies and crisis management episodes?
- RQ3: How can an integrated framework combining agenda-setting, political trust, social identity and crisis management theories advance our understanding of public perception in a hybrid regime context?

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To provide a systematic understanding of the structural and event-based determinants of public perception, including political instability, economic pressures, identity contestation and crisis governance;
2. To construct an empirically grounded chronology of how public sentiment shifted across five prime ministerial administrations, drawing on national opinion polls, media discourses and socio-political events; and
3. To offer policy-relevant insights for strengthening institutional trust, political stability, and effective governance, based on the study's integrated theoretical and empirical findings.

In doing so, this research contributes to broader discussions on democratic consolidation, governance legitimacy and public opinion dynamics in Southeast Asia. It also provides a timely and rigorous analysis for

policymakers, scholars and political actors seeking to understand and respond to the evolving expectations of Malaysian citizens in an era defined by uncertainty, contestation and transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Perception and Political Trust

Political trust constitutes a foundational pillar of democratic legitimacy and effective governance. It reflects citizens' confidence that political actors and institutions will act in the public interest, exercise authority responsibly and implement policies fairly (Levi & Stoker, 2000). High levels of trust facilitate compliance with government directives, strengthen institutional resilience, and enhance policy effectiveness. Conversely, declining trust undermines legitimacy, fuels political disengagement and heightens susceptibility to populism or identity-based polarization.

In consolidated democracies, political trust typically develops over long periods and is influenced by institutional performance and stability. However, in hybrid or transitioning regimes—where institutions are less entrenched and political competition remains fluid—trust is significantly more volatile, responding sharply to scandals, leadership changes, crises and elite behaviour (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Hetherington, 2005). This volatility makes public perception strongly event-driven and more sensitive to sudden shifts in governance conditions.

The Malaysian case illustrates this dynamic particularly well. Political trust is shaped not only by evaluations of governmental performance but also by ethnic considerations, patronage structures, and historical legacies of state–society relations. Pepinsky (2013) and Case (2019) note that political trust in Malaysia is both a normative expectation and a practical necessity, underpinning economic stability, policy coherence and long-term governance sustainability. Trust, therefore, becomes a central mediating factor that links policy outcomes, identity narratives and crisis responses to broader public perception.

Empirical studies reveal that dissatisfaction with government policy direction, leadership performance and institutional consistency contributes prominently to trust deficits in Malaysia (Khairul Azmi & Othman, 2020). Public trust is further eroded when political elites engage in manoeuvring or coalition-switching—seen most clearly in the Sheraton Move—which generates perceptions of democratic betrayal and weak procedural legitimacy.

Corruption perceptions also play a decisive role. The 1MDB scandal, for instance, profoundly damaged confidence in Malaysia's political institutions, revealing structural weaknesses in oversight and accountability mechanisms. Corruption perceptions continue to shape trust levels: the Global Corruption Barometer for Asia 2020 reported that 71% of Malaysians believe government corruption is a major problem, with Parliament (36%), the Police (30%) and government officials (28%) ranked as the institutions perceived to be most affected by corruption (Mohan, 2020). These figures highlight the persistence of public scepticism toward institutional integrity.

Taken together, the literature underscores that political trust is a central determinant of public perception in Malaysia. However, this trust remains fragile due to institutional fluidity, ethnicised political competition, and repeated crises of legitimacy. In such contexts, public sentiment is highly dependent on the interplay between performance evaluations, perceived fairness, and elite behaviour—making trust both a crucial resource and a persistent vulnerability in Malaysia's political system.

The Malaysian Political Context

Malaysia's political system is characterized by distinctive structural features that shape public perception: ethnic-based coalition politics, affirmative action policies and historically entrenched institutions (Means, 1991; Case, 2019). For decades, Barisan Nasional's dominance was sustained by a consociational model balancing Malay political primacy with multiethnic power-sharing arrangements (Welsh, 2018). This long period of stability fostered predictable political expectations among the electorate.

The 2018 General Election (GE14) represented a profound realignment in Malaysian political history. Pakatan Harapan's victory ended 61 years of uninterrupted BN rule, signalling heightened public demand for institutional reform, anti-corruption measures and a more accountable governance culture (Weiss, 2020; Welsh, 2019). The transition raised public expectations for transparency, reduced patronage and a shift away from ethnically segmented politics.

However, post-GE14 developments disrupted these expectations. The Sheraton Move in February 2020, which resulted in the collapse of the reformist coalition, triggered unprecedented political instability. Three prime ministers in four years undermined public confidence in political institutions, while elite fragmentation and shifting alliances deepened perceptions of unpredictability. Scholars argue that Malaysian voters have increasingly adopted a performance legitimacy orientation—evaluating governments based on economic competence, crisis

management and policy consistency rather than traditional party loyalty (Panneerselvam & Tayeb (2023; Pandian and Sulaiman, 2025).

This literature demonstrates the need to understand Malaysian public perception not only through electoral outcomes but through institutional fluidity, identity narratives and leadership performance.

Economic Determinants of Public Perception

Across political systems, economic conditions strongly shape public evaluations of government performance (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2013). Key economic variables such as inflation, employment, wage growth and cost of living form the basis of “economic voting” models, wherein citizens reward or punish incumbents based on perceived economic competence.

In Malaysia, economic pressures have been persistent drivers of public sentiment. Household debt has remained relatively high, youth unemployment rates have fluctuated above regional averages and wage stagnation has contributed to long-term financial insecurity. These structural issues were amplified by the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered business closures, job losses and increased reliance on informal labour (Bank Negara Malaysia Annual Reports 2018–2022).

Rising inflation and supply chain disruptions, particularly between 2021 and 2022, further intensified cost-of-living anxieties. Public frustration with government responses—such as relief measures perceived as insufficient or poorly targeted—played a significant role in shaping “wrong direction” sentiment. Malaysian studies consistently show that cost of living has surpassed corruption and ethnic concerns as a primary driver of dissatisfaction (Merdeka Center, 2018–2022). The economic literature therefore highlights economic security as a crucial component of perception formation.

Social Media, Public Discourse and Agenda Formation

The rise of digital media has transformed the dynamics of political communication in Malaysia. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and WhatsApp now play a central role in agenda-setting, enabling both elite actors and ordinary citizens to influence the issues prioritized in public discourse (Tapsell, 2021). In contrast to traditional media, which historically aligned with political elites, digital platforms allow for rapid mobilization, alternative narratives, and decentralized information flows.

Research on Malaysian online political behaviour reveals that social media significantly shapes public sentiment during moments of crisis. Liu, Yasin, Alsagoff, Ng & Li (2023) find that online political participation increases during periods of crisis, generating “viral accountability” pressures on the government. Hashtag movements such as #KerajaanGagal, #BenderaPutih, and #Lawan illustrate how grievances relating to pandemic management, economic hardship and political illegitimacy were amplified through digital activism (Panneerselvam & Tayeb, 2023; Leong & Rosli, 2023).

Digital misinformation, echo chambers, and partisan narratives further complicate perception formation, intensifying identity-based cleavages and shaping issue salience. As such, the literature demonstrates that social media not only acts as a channel of communication but also influences citizens’ emotional responses, political framing, and overall evaluation of national direction.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

While existing scholarship provides substantial insights into Malaysian politics and public sentiment, several limitations remain. First, most studies focus on single events—such as GE14, the Sheraton Move, or COVID-19—without systematically examining how these events collectively shaped public perception over time.

Second, research often focuses on one-dimensional explanatory factors (e.g., ethnicity, corruption, or economic performance) rather than integrating political, economic, social, and crisis-related variables into a multi-factorial model.

Third, very few studies analyse public perception across multiple leadership transitions, despite the fact that Malaysia witnessed an unprecedented sequence of prime ministerial changes between 2018 and 2022.

Fourth, existing research lacks an integrated theoretical approach combining agenda-setting, political trust, identity politics, and crisis governance, leaving gaps in explaining how citizens interpret overlapping crises and competing narratives.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a holistic, multi-theoretical, and empirically grounded approach, drawing together diverse strands of literature to provide a comprehensive explanation of Malaysian public sentiment across five administrations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applies a multi-theoretical framework integrating Agenda-Setting Theory, Political Trust Theory, Social Identity Theory and Crisis Management Theory to explain fluctuations in Malaysian public perception between 2018 and 2022.

These theories collectively capture the intersections between information environments, citizen–state relations, identity-based evaluations, and governmental responsiveness during periods of instability. The integrated framework is central to understanding how public sentiment evolved across five prime ministerial administrations.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory posits that media do not dictate what citizens think, but influence what they think *about* by emphasizing specific issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the Malaysian context, political scandals (e.g., 1MDB), government instability, and pandemic responses received intense coverage across mainstream and digital media. This theory explains why periods of heightened issue visibility correspond with sharp increases in “wrong direction” perceptions and declines in leadership approval.

In Malaysia, where both mainstream and digital media play increasingly influential roles, agenda-setting processes operate through a hybrid media system. Traditional media continue to shape national discourse, especially regarding corruption cases like 1MDB, leadership changes, parliamentary instability, and official pandemic data. However, digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp have transformed agenda-setting, enabling rapid amplification of alternative narratives, public grievances and emotional responses.

Hence, the Malaysian case highlights a crucial evolution: agenda-setting is no longer top-down. Social media movements—such as #KerajaanGagal, #BenderaPutih and public mobilisation during the ICERD controversy—demonstrate networked agenda-setting, where online communities, activists, and influencers collectively shape issue salience (Tapsell, 2021; Panneerselvam & Tayeb, 2023; Leong & Rosli, 2023).

This study therefore applies agenda-setting theory in its hybrid form, combining traditional media influence with digitally driven public discourse.

Between 2018 and 2022:

1. Media attention to corruption scandals, such as high-profile trials involving former leaders, heightened public scrutiny of government integrity.
2. Saturation coverage of political instability—the Sheraton Move, shifts in parliamentary majorities and leadership transitions—elevated perceptions of governance fragility.
3. Daily reporting of COVID-19 statistics, SOP changes and vaccination updates shaped perceptions of crisis handling and institutional effectiveness.
4. Continuous reporting on inflation, job losses and rising cost of living influenced evaluations of economic direction.

Agenda-setting is therefore crucial for understanding Malaysian public perception: it shows how information environments constructed narratives of crisis, incompetence, or reform, which in turn shaped the national mood.

Political Trust Theory

Political Trust Theory provides a second pillar of this study’s framework, focusing on how citizens form judgments about political leaders and institutions. Political Trust Theory contends that citizens’ evaluations of national performance are grounded in perceptions of political integrity, competence, and fairness (Hetherington, 2006; Levi & Stoker, 2000). In other words, citizens trust leaders who are honest, effective, and equitable in their actions.

Political trust theory is particularly valuable for this study because Malaysia’s volatile political transitions mean citizens constantly reassess legitimacy and performance.

In Malaysia, where trust is especially sensitive to corruption allegations, government legitimacy and policy delivery, the 2018–2022 period marked a shift toward performance-based trust. Public confidence rose or fell sharply in response to:

1. Integrity: scandals such as 1MDB significantly eroded trust in former Prime Minister Najib Razak;
2. Competence: the effectiveness of COVID-19 management influenced Muhyiddin’s early popularity and later decline;
3. Fairness and legitimacy: the Sheraton Move weakened trust in political institutions due to perceptions of mandate betrayal and elite manoeuvring.

This framework is used to interpret longitudinal shifts in approval ratings across prime ministers:

- Najib Razak suffered significant trust erosion due to 1MDB.
- Dr Mahathir (as 7th PM) enjoyed initial trust due to reform expectations, which later declined when reforms stalled.
- Muhyiddin Yassin benefited temporarily from crisis trust during early COVID-19 measures before performance dissatisfaction set in.
- Ismail Sabri faced shallow trust levels amid perceptions of administrative stagnation.
- Anwar Ibrahim experienced early trust recovery rooted in his long-term reform credentials.

Political trust theory is especially relevant in explaining why Malaysians responded so dramatically to leadership turnover. In moments of crisis or perceived betrayal, trust diminished; in moments of decisive leadership or reform promise, trust surged. This dynamic underscores the centrality of trust as a lens through which public perception is formed.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory asserts that individuals derive self-concept and evaluate political events through group-based affiliations, such as ethnicity, religion, or partisan alignment, leading them to interpret political events through ingroup–outgroup dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In Malaysia’s plural society, identity politics remain structurally embedded due to long-standing ethnic stratification and affirmative action frameworks (Means, 1991; Case, 2019).

Public perception is therefore influenced not merely by material performance but by how political actions align with or threaten identity-based expectations. For example:

1. Malay-Muslim communities may prioritise policies perceived as safeguarding Islamic institutions, Malay privileges or national sovereignty.
2. Non-Malay groups may evaluate fairness through inclusivity, equality or minority rights.
3. East Malaysian voters often interpret events through regional autonomy and development equity.

During 2018–2022, identity-politics flashpoints such as debates over ICERD and Rome Statute, concerns over Jawi script in vernacular schools, controversies surrounding figures like Zakir Naik, fears of eroded Malay-Muslim dominance/rights and minority anxieties over inclusivity and reform promises all intensified political identity boundaries and influenced public perceptions of national direction.

Malaysia’s public evaluations are increasingly *hybrid*: identity-based considerations interact with performance-based judgments on economy, cost of living and governance. The study therefore applies social identity theory alongside political trust theory to reflect this dual logic of public evaluation.

Social Identity Theory helps explain why reforms that are economically or institutionally rational may nevertheless generate negative reactions among segments of society: they are evaluated through identity-based filters before being judged on merit.

Crisis Management Theory

Crisis Management Theory argues that public approval is highly sensitive to how governments handle emergencies. Successful crisis response can generate short-term boosts in legitimacy, known as “rally-round-the-flag” effects (Boin, ‘t Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2016). However, if crises are prolonged or poorly managed, these gains quickly reverse, leading to steep declines in support.

Malaysia between 2020 and 2022 experienced overlapping crisis cycles, including the COVID-19 pandemic, repeated economic lockdowns, rising inflation and job insecurity, major floods, including the 2021 Klang Valley disaster, global economic disruptions and domestic political crises.

Muhyiddin Yassin’s leadership illustrates this pattern vividly: he initially enjoyed unprecedented approval (87%) due to decisive early pandemic measures, but his popularity plummeted as infections rose, SOPs fluctuated, and economic hardship intensified. Likewise, Ismail Sabri’s administration suffered declining sentiment following criticism of 2021 flood response and persistent cost-of-living pressures.

Crisis Management Theory therefore helps explain the rapid, event-driven fluctuations in public sentiment, demonstrating how crisis performance became a critical determinant of political trust.

The Malaysian case suggests an expanded understanding of crisis management: crises are not isolated events but overlapping crisis cycles (health, economic, climate, political). Thus, crisis management theory is applied in a multi-crisis governance context.

Integrated Theoretical Approach

Rather than applying these theories in isolation, this study adopts an integrated framework because Malaysian public perception is shaped by the *interaction* of multiple forces:

1. Agenda-setting shapes which issues dominate national consciousness.
2. Political trust determines how citizens interpret those issues and assess leadership.
3. Identity politics influences which groups respond most strongly (differential responses happen across ethnic, religious and regional groups).
4. Crisis management affects evaluations of competence, care and responsiveness.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive and context-sensitive explanation for why Malaysian public sentiment fluctuated so sharply across five administrations between 2018 and 2022. They illuminate how

Malaysians *absorbed, interpreted and evaluated* political reality through a blend of cognitive, emotional and identity-driven processes shaped by both long-standing structures and real-time crises.

This integrated model provides a richer, more context-sensitive explanation of Malaysian public perception during 2018–2022 and forms the analytical backbone of the study’s discussion and conclusion.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a rigorous mixed-methods methodological framework to analyse how political events, economic conditions, identity-based issues, and crisis governance influenced Malaysian public sentiment between 2018 and 2022.

A mixed-methods strategy is appropriate because public perception is shaped not only by measurable socio-economic indicators but also by discursive narratives, elite framing, and identity-based interpretations—elements that require both quantitative and qualitative evidentiary approaches.

Research Approach

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design is used, wherein quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analysed simultaneously but interpreted together. This approach enables the study to capture both:

- macro-level trends (e.g., approval ratings, economic indicators, COVID-19 case surges), and
- micro-level narratives (e.g., elite discourse, media framing, identity politics, public reactions).

The convergence of these two strands allows for a holistic explanation of public perception shifts and ensures that the analysis is theoretically aligned with and empirically grounded in Agenda-Setting Theory, Political Trust Theory, Social Identity Theory and Crisis Management Theory.

Quantitative Component

Data Sources

The quantitative analysis relies on nationally representative and empirically validated datasets, including:

- Merdeka Center public opinion polls (2018–2022)—tracking “country direction” sentiment and prime ministerial approval ratings.
- Administrative data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)—including GDP growth, inflation rates, unemployment statistics, household debt levels and youth unemployment trends.
- COVID-19 epidemiological data from the Ministry of Health (MOH)—daily case counts, mortality rates, vaccination rates and mobility restriction periods.
- Policy and governance indicators, such as fiscal stimulus allocations, movement control measures and emergency declarations.

These datasets allow for systematic analysis of turning points in public sentiment relative to measurable national conditions.

Analytical Techniques

The quantitative component involves three key analytical strategies:

1. Time-Series Analysis: Sentiment data are plotted against major political and economic events to identify inflection points—e.g., GE14 (May 2018), Sheraton Move (February 2020), MCO lockdowns, flood disasters, and GE15 (November 2022).
2. Correlation and Covariation Testing: Bivariate and multivariate correlations are used to examine the relationship between:
 - a. economic pressures and sentiment,
 - b. COVID-19 case surges and approval ratings,
 - c. leadership changes and public trust fluctuations.
3. Comparative Leadership Analysis: Cross-administration comparisons evaluate how five prime ministers—Najib Razak, Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yassin, Ismail Sabri Yaakob and Anwar Ibrahim—performed relative to each other based on approval and perception trends.

This component directly addresses Political Trust Theory by empirically testing how competence, integrity, fairness and crisis performance shape public opinion.

Qualitative Component

Data Sources

To contextualize and interpret the quantitative findings, the qualitative strand draws from a comprehensive corpus of narrative and discursive materials:

- Mainstream news media: The Star, New Straits Times, Berita Harian, Utusan, Malaysiakini, Astro Awani.
- International reporting: Reuters, Al Jazeera, South China Morning Post.
- Parliamentary records: Hansard debates, confidence motions and special session transcripts.
- Government documents: press statements, economic packages, health guidelines, reform announcements.
- Social media ecosystems: trending hashtags, Twitter debates, TikTok political commentary, and viral activist movements (#BenderaPutih, #KerajaanGagal, #Lawan).

These materials allow the research to evaluate shifting narratives, crisis framing and identity-based contestations.

Methodological Procedures

Three qualitative analytical methods are employed:

1. **Thematic Coding (NVivo-based):** Themes such as *political legitimacy*, *economic insecurity*, *ethnic framing*, *crisis management*, and *leadership narratives* are identified. Coding categories are predefined based on the theoretical framework but expanded inductively based on emerging data.
2. **Discourse Analysis:** Media and political narratives are analysed to identify how agenda-setting processes shaped public perceptions of corruption, government competence, and national stability. This includes examining tone, framing devices, issue prioritisation, and identity cues.
3. **Event-Based Trigger Analysis:** Key events (e.g., ICERD protests, 2021 floods, Sheraton Move, MCO announcements) are analysed to determine how they functioned as perception-shifting triggers, consistent with Crisis Management Theory.

This qualitative component illuminates how identity politics, media narratives, and crisis framing influenced public sentiment—aligning closely with Agenda-Setting and Social Identity theories.

Validity, Reliability, and Triangulation

Ensuring methodological robustness is crucial for the credibility of mixed-methods research. The following procedures were implemented:

- **Data Triangulation:** Quantitative findings from polls and administrative datasets are cross-checked with qualitative observations (e.g., media narratives, public discourse trends).
- **Method Triangulation:** Time-series analysis, correlation testing, thematic coding, and discourse analysis produce convergent findings.
- **Researcher Triangulation:** Multiple coders independently coded qualitative data to ensure inter-coder consistency; discrepancies were resolved through consensus meetings.
- **Source Triangulation:** Findings are validated using academic literature, policy analyses, and cross-referencing between local and international news reporting.
- **External Validity:** The study focuses on nationally representative data, increasing generalisability of findings to Malaysian public opinion patterns.

These measures strengthen the reliability and internal validity of both quantitative and qualitative results.

Limitations

Despite the study's methodological rigour, several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. **Polling Coverage Constraints:** Merdeka Center's surveys, though highly credible, are not conducted monthly for every variable, leading to temporal gaps. Some sentiment shifts may therefore occur between datapoints.
2. **Non-Response Bias During Crises:** During COVID-19 lockdowns, survey reach was uneven, potentially underrepresenting certain demographic groups (e.g., rural elderly, low-income groups without internet access).
3. **Media Framing Effects:** Interpretation of qualitative materials may be influenced by the inherent biases of media outlets or social media echo chambers. Although triangulation reduces this risk, framing cannot be fully neutralised.
4. **Complex Causality:** Public sentiment is shaped by overlapping factors that cannot always be isolated in statistical analysis. The mixed-methods approach mitigates this but does not eliminate complexity.

These limitations do not undermine the study's findings but highlight the need for cautious interpretation, particularly regarding causation and generalisation.

ANALYSIS: ISSUES AND EVENTS SHAPING PUBLIC PERCEPTION (2018–2022)

Public sentiment in Malaysia between 2018 and 2022 was shaped by an unprecedented period of political transitions, overlapping crises, and intensified identity-based contestation. The combined effects of these developments produced one of the most volatile public opinion landscapes in the country's modern political history.

This section synthesizes major political, economic, and social events to explain why sentiments shifted across five prime ministerial administrations.

Overview of Public Sentiment: Key Trends and Influencing Events

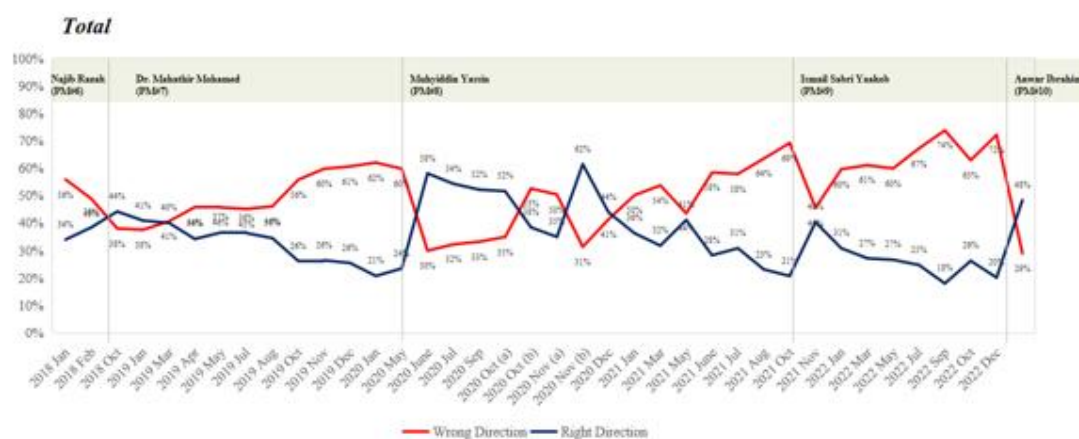
Between 2018 and 2022, national perception data—particularly indicators on the “direction of the country” and public satisfaction with the Prime Minister—show clear relationships between political upheaval, governance performance, and public evaluations. The two primary metrics show:

- “Right direction” sentiment increased during moments of reform optimism or decisive crisis management,
- “Wrong direction” sentiment spiked during periods of instability, economic distress or elite conflict.

The following subsections detail these trends across administrations.

Country Direction: Trends and Turning Points

Country Direction < 2018 -2022 >



Graph 1: Country Direction, 2018-2022

The first graph illustrates the fluctuating public opinion about the country's direction between 2018 and 2022. The “right direction” ratings (blue line) and “wrong direction” ratings (red line) diverged substantially, reflecting the public's response to key political and economic events.

(1) The Mahathir Administration (2018–2019): From Reform Euphoria to Growing Disillusionment

Pakatan Harapan's historic victory in May 2018 marked a watershed moment in Malaysian politics. Under Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's return as 7th Prime Minister, “right direction” sentiment surged as voters celebrated the fall of Barisan Nasional and anticipated deep institutional reforms.

However, by late 2019, this optimism dissipated and the public's perception of the country's direction shifted negatively due to several factors:

- **Slow Pace of Reforms:** The public grew increasingly frustrated as major reform promises—such as abolishing oppressive laws, restructuring institutions, and improving governance—were delayed or softened.
- **Economic Pressures:** The removal of GST and introduction of SST unsettled revenue stability, while cost-of-living concerns—especially housing affordability, stagnant wages, and rising food prices—weighed heavily on public sentiment.

- **Identity-Based Tensions:** Controversies such as the introduction of Jawi script in vernacular schools, the ICERD and Rome Statute debates, and the government's handling of Zakir Naik created anxieties across ethnic communities and sharpened political polarization.
- **Coalition Infighting and Succession Uncertainty:** Tensions between Bersatu, PKR, DAP, and Amanah undermined the government's credibility. The unclear timeline for Mahathir's handover to Anwar Ibrahim further reduced trust.

By early 2020, "wrong direction" sentiment had overtaken "right direction," setting the stage for political turbulence.

(2) The Muhyiddin Administration (2020): Initial Pandemic Optimism Followed by Sharp Decline

Muhyiddin Yassin assumed office in March 2020 following the "Sheraton Move," a political realignment perceived by many as a betrayal of the GE14 mandate. Initially, public opinion was mixed: although concerns over legitimacy were high, the government's early COVID-19 response produced a sharp spike in approval.

Key dynamics include:

- **Rally-Around-the-Flag Effect:** The first Movement Control Order (MCO) successfully slowed infections, leading to a 62% "right direction" rating in May 2020.
- **Legitimacy Questions and Slim Majority:** Muhyiddin governed with a razor-thin majority, postponing Parliament sittings and relying heavily on executive powers. Critics viewed this as undermining democratic accountability.
- **Prolonged Lockdowns & Economic Distress:** As MCOs extended into 2021, unemployment rose, businesses closed, and informal sectors suffered. Public patience deteriorated as SOP inconsistencies created confusion and economic pain deepened.
- **Public Campaigns Against the Government:** Movements such as #BenderaPutih and #KerajaanGagal symbolised widespread distress and frustration, amplifying negative sentiment through social media.
- **Emergency Declaration (Jan–Aug 2021):** Seen as a politically motivated move to maintain power, the Emergency further eroded trust.

By late 2020 and into 2021, "wrong direction" sentiment surged dramatically. Muhyiddin's eventual resignation in August 2021 reflected the collapse of both political support and public confidence.

(3) The Ismail Sabri Administration (2021–2022): Transition Leadership Amid Economic and Disaster Crises

Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob's tenure represented a caretaker-style government formed to stabilise a fractured political system. Public sentiment, however, continued its downward trajectory. The economic fallout of the pandemic, coupled with political uncertainty and frequent changes in government leadership, led to dissatisfaction. Public trust in government remained low due to perceived inefficiencies and delays in addressing pressing socio-economic challenges.

Key issues shaping perception include:

- **Persistent Political Instability:** Ismail Sabri governed with a fragile coalition, facing internal tensions within UMNO and dependence on Perikatan Nasional. Public dissatisfaction grew as governance appeared constrained by elite bargaining rather than national priorities.
- **Cost-of-Living Crisis and Inflation:** Malaysians faced significant price increases in food, fuel, and essentials due to global inflation and supply-chain disruptions. Despite subsidy efforts, public sentiment remained negative, particularly among low- and middle-income groups.
- **Youth Employment and Wage Stagnation:** Youth unemployment and stagnant salaries continued to fuel perceptions of weak economic direction.
- **Flood Management Failures:** The catastrophic December 2021 floods, which displaced tens of thousands and caused severe economic losses, were a turning point. The slow governmental response was widely condemned, worsening the perception that the administration was unprepared and reactive.
- **"Keluarga Malaysia" Narrative:** Intended to promote unity, the narrative was criticised as symbolic rather than substantive, gaining limited traction in shaping sentiment.
- **Anti-Party Hopping Law (2022):** This notable achievement contributed positively to institutional reform efforts, though it did little to reverse overall dissatisfaction.

By September 2022, "wrong direction" sentiment reached 74%, one of the highest levels recorded in the period under study.

(4) The Early Anwar Ibrahim Administration (Late 2022): Renewed Hope and Cautious Optimism

Following the 15th General Election, Malaysia formed its first-ever unity government, led by Anwar Ibrahim. While "wrong direction" ratings initially spiked due to lingering concerns over political stability, "right direction" ratings saw an increase toward the end of the year, reflecting renewed hope in Anwar's unity government.

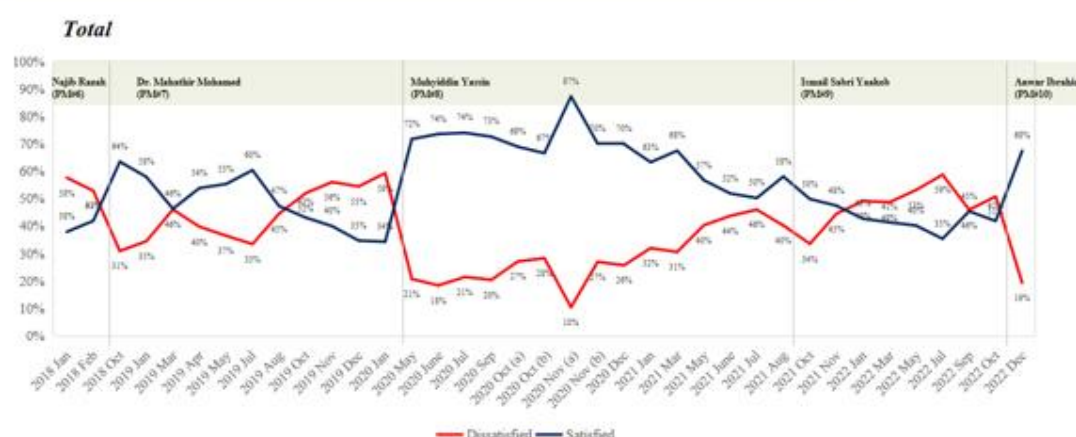
Initial public sentiment reflected:

- **Renewed Hope in Reform:** Early promises of anti-corruption, fiscal prudence, and inclusive governance elevated "right direction" sentiment.
- **Leadership Approval:** Satisfaction rose to 68% in December 2022, driven by Anwar's longstanding reformist reputation and symbolic gestures around integrity and multiracial unity.
- **Lingering Concerns:** Despite early optimism, skepticism persisted regarding whether structural reforms and political stability could be sustained long-term.

Prime Ministerial Approval Ratings: Leadership Perception Across Administrations

The second graph highlights public satisfaction with each Prime Minister, offering deeper insights into how leadership styles and policies influenced public trust.

Prime Minister's Approval Ratings < 2018 -2022 >



Graph 2: Prime Minister's Approval Ratings, 2018-2022

Leadership approval ratings mirror the trends in national direction sentiment:

1. Najib Razak (Pre-2018): Najib Razak's tenure ended with extremely low approval ratings (31% satisfaction). The 1MDB scandal and rising public dissatisfaction with corruption and economic mismanagement were pivotal in shaping negative sentiment, setting the stage for the 2018 political shift.
2. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (2018-2020): Mahathir began his term with a high approval rating (64%), driven by the public's anticipation of reforms and the historic ousting of Barisan Nasional. However, declining satisfaction over time reflected growing disillusionment with the government's ability to deliver on its reform agenda while identity politics intensified.
3. Muhyiddin Yassin (2020-2021): Muhyiddin's tenure saw a high initial satisfaction rating (87%), fueled by his decisive pandemic response. Over time, public satisfaction fell as prolonged lockdowns, economic hardship and political maneuvering overshadowed initial gains.
4. Ismail Sabri Yaakob (2021-2022): Approval ratings under Ismail Sabri remained relatively low, hovering around 40-50%, with dissatisfaction peaking due to mounting economic pressures and continued political instability. His inability to unite the fractured political landscape further eroded public confidence.
5. Anwar Ibrahim (Late 2022): Anwar Ibrahim's early days as Prime Minister saw satisfaction rise sharply to 68% by December 2022. His reputation for reform and inclusivity instilled hope among many Malaysians, although skepticism about his ability to deliver tangible results remained evident in the data.

Key Findings

Across the analysis, several core dynamics emerge:

- Political volatility—three governments in four years—was the most powerful driver of negative sentiment.
- Economic hardship—especially inflation, wage stagnation, and youth unemployment—consistently influenced perceptions of national direction.
- Identity politicization sharpened societal divisions, particularly during the Jawi controversy, ICERD protests, and Zakir Naik debates.
- Crisis governance—COVID-19, floods, and inflation—was central in shaping approval and public confidence.
- Leadership legitimacy and communication—especially during crisis moments—proved decisive:
 1. Muhyiddin's early surge and later collapse exemplify this pattern.
 2. Anwar's early months show the opposite: improvement tied to renewed legitimacy and reform hope.

Integrated Interpretation

Overall, public perception between 2018 and 2022 was shaped by an interplay of:

- Agenda-setting dynamics, with both mainstream and digital media amplifying issues.
- Political trust fluctuations, tied to competence, integrity, and legitimacy.
- Identity-based interpretations, especially during culturally sensitive controversies.
- Crisis management performance, especially regarding health, economy, and disasters.

The Malaysian public became increasingly sensitive to policy delivery, transparency, competence, and fairness—indicating a shift toward performance-based evaluations layered atop enduring identity-based political alignments.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that Malaysian public perceptions between 2018 and 2022 cannot be understood through a single explanatory lens. Instead, it has demonstrated that Malaysian public perceptions of the nation between 2018 and 2022 were shaped by an intricate interplay of mediated issue salience, trust in political leadership, identity-based evaluations and crisis governance. By applying an integrated framework consisting of agenda-setting, political trust, social identity and crisis management theories, the analysis has shown that no single theoretical lens is sufficient to explain the volatility of public sentiment during this period.

Empirically, the findings confirm that public opinion responded sharply to:

- the salience of corruption scandals, political manoeuvres and governance failures (agenda-setting),
- shifting evaluations of integrity and competence across successive prime ministers (political trust),
- persistent contestations over race, religion and national identity (social identity), and
- the perceived effectiveness and fairness of responses to health, economic and environmental crises (crisis management).

From an agenda-setting perspective, the trajectories of “right direction” and “wrong direction” sentiment align closely with the prominence of specific issues in both mainstream and digital media. Periods dominated by coverage of corruption scandals (1MDB), elite political manoeuvres (the Sheraton Move) and governance controversies (the Proclamation of Emergency, inconsistent COVID-19 SOPs and flood mismanagement) coincided with significant deterioration in public assessments of the country.

This supports classical agenda-setting theory, but the Malaysian case suggests an important extension: agenda-setting is now hybrid and networked as social media campaigns such as *#KerajaanGagal* and *#BenderaPutih* allowed citizens themselves to elevate issues and frame the government as ineffective or uncaring. Issue salience was therefore co-produced by the state, media and online publics rather than imposed from above.

The results also strongly validate political trust theory. Across five prime ministers, public sentiment shifted in ways consistent with changing perceptions of integrity, competence and fairness. Najib Razak's low approval ratings reflected deep erosion of integrity-based trust amidst the 1MDB scandal. Dr Mahathir Mohamad's initial popularity as the seventh Prime Minister reflects a trust premium based on expectations of reform which gradually declined as institutional change stalled and intra-coalition conflict intensified. Muhyiddin Yassin's dramatic approval surge at the onset of the pandemic shows how rapid and decisive crisis response can temporarily restore performance-based trust whereas subsequent declines underscore the fragility of trust when economic hardship persists and political legitimacy is questioned. Ismail Sabri Yaakob's relatively modest and stagnant approval levels, in turn, illustrate the limitations of leadership that is perceived as transitional rather than transformative. Early data

on Anwar Ibrahim suggests that long-standing reformist credentials and a unity government narrative can renew trust but this trust is conditional on demonstrable delivery.

At the same time, social identity theory remains indispensable for understanding how different segments of Malaysian society interpret political events. This study shows that certain flashpoints—such as the ICERD and Rome Statute controversies, the introduction of Jawi in vernacular schools and debates over Zakir Naik—cannot be fully explained by economic or governance concerns alone. These episodes revealed how Malay-Muslim identity narratives, minority insecurities and regional sensibilities shape perceptions of whether the country is moving in a “right” or “wrong” direction. However, the period under review also indicates that identity-based loyalties now coexist with growing performance-based expectations. Many citizens, including within the Malay majority, penalised governments perceived as failing on cost of living, job creation and crisis management, even if those governments claimed to defend their communal interests. This suggests that while social identity theory remains valid, it must be integrated with political trust frameworks to capture a more hybrid identity–performance model of public evaluation.

Finally, the experience of 2018–2022 offers compelling evidence in support of crisis management theory. The initial rally-round-the-flag effect during Muhyiddin’s early pandemic management confirms that effective crisis framing and decisive restrictions can generate short-term gains in approval. Yet the subsequent decline of satisfaction as infections surged, economic support proved inadequate and emergency measures were perceived as politically motivated illustrates how mismanaged or prolonged crises reverse these gains. The December 2021 floods under Ismail Sabri’s government similarly demonstrate that failures in disaster preparedness and response become powerful catalysts of negative sentiment. In this sense, crises functioned as stress tests of political trust and institutional competence. However, the Malaysian case also reveals that crises are no longer discrete events but overlapping cycles—health, economic, climatic and political—which suggests that classical crisis management theory must adapt to multi-crisis environments where governments are seldom out of crisis mode.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the proposed multi-theoretical framework is largely validated but requires refinement. Agenda-setting, political trust, social identity and crisis management theories are complementary rather than competing in explaining Malaysian public perceptions. Their integration allows for a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of how Malaysians evaluated the nation and its leaders during a period of extraordinary turbulence.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Public sentiment in Malaysia between 2018 and 2022 was shaped by a complex interaction of political instability, economic pressures, identity-based contestation and the government’s ability to manage multiple overlapping crises. Leadership turnover—occurring three times in four years—exposed the fragility of political trust in contexts where legitimacy is constantly renegotiated through performance, identity narratives and media-driven issue salience. At the same time, the findings reveal that Malaysians increasingly expect competent, transparent and fair governance that addresses structural economic and institutional weaknesses. Based on these insights and the integrated theoretical framework, several policy implications emerge.

1. Build Institutional and Procedural Stability to Strengthen Political Trust

Political trust theory underscores the importance of integrity, competence and legitimacy in maintaining public confidence.

The turbulence of 2018–2022 demonstrates the need for:

- robust constitutional and political reforms that reinforce procedural legitimacy beyond the Anti-Party-Hopping Law;
- clearer rules on government formation, confidence votes and dissolution of Parliament; and
- predictable, rule-driven governance, reducing perceptions of elite manoeuvring.

This would directly address the trust deficit revealed during the Sheraton Move, Emergency Proclamation and frequent leadership changes.

2. Enhance Crisis Preparedness and Multi-Crisis Governance

Crisis Management Theory shows that approval spikes and collapses were tied to how leaders managed the pandemic, floods, inflation and economic shocks.

Malaysia needs:

- a permanent national crisis coordination framework that integrates health, economic, climate and social response beyond The National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA);
- coherent, evidence-based SOPs communicated with clarity;

- rapid-response disaster units for climate-related emergencies.

Improved multi-crisis readiness would stabilise public sentiment and reduce the volatility associated with shifting administrations.

3. Improve Government Communication Through Hybrid Agenda-Setting Awareness

Findings linked to Agenda-Setting Theory reveal that both mainstream and digital media greatly influenced issue salience and perception shifts.

Therefore:

- the government must adopt integrated communication strategies that align messaging across traditional media and digital platforms;
- communication should be transparent, timely and consistent to avoid confusion during crises;
- ministries should monitor networked public discourse (hashtags, online mobilisation) to anticipate sentiment trends and prevent misinformation.

Effective communication not only informs citizens but also enhances trust and mitigates unnecessary perception shocks.

4. Promote Inclusive National Narratives and Reduce Identity-Based Polarisation

Social Identity Theory explains that ethnic and religious narratives significantly shaped public assessments of the nation, particularly during the ICERD, Jawi and Zakir Naik controversies.

To build social cohesion:

- political leaders must craft inclusive national narratives that recognise Malaysia's diverse communities while avoiding zero-sum framing;
- policies should be consultative, engaging minority groups, civil society and state-level stakeholders;
- education and media strategies should emphasise intergroup understanding rather than ethnocentric competition.

Reducing identity polarisation would not only stabilise public sentiment but also enhance long-term nation-building.

5. Address Structural Economic Pressures to Sustain Performance-Based Trust

Economic anxiety—particularly inflation, youth unemployment, wage stagnation and pandemic recovery—was a major driver of “wrong direction” sentiment.

To strengthen public perception:

- the government should prioritise long-term structural reforms (labour market modernization, social protection redesign, wage floor improvements, industrial upgrading);
- cost-of-living measures should shift from short-term cash transfers to systemic interventions such as supply-chain reforms and affordable housing initiatives.

These measures reinforce performance-based trust and policy credibility.

6. Strengthen Digital Governance and Online Engagement Capacity

Given the findings on hybrid agenda-setting and online mobilisation:

- the government must enhance digital policy literacy,
- modernise cyber governance frameworks, and
- build capacity for proactive online engagement to counter misinformation and capture public concerns in real time.

This aligns policy processes with contemporary modes of political communication and perception formation.

8. Theoretical Refinement

Theoretically, the results validate the core propositions of all four frameworks but also suggest several refinements:

1. Agenda-setting theory remains highly relevant but must incorporate the role of networked publics and social media, recognising that issue salience in Malaysia is co-constructed by state actors, legacy media and digitally mobilised citizens. Agenda-setting theory therefore requires refinement to incorporate networked, bottom-up and interactive agenda dynamics, in which the state is one actor among many in a contested information space.
2. Political trust theory is reinforced as Malaysians clearly rewarded and punished leaders based on perceived competence, integrity and legitimacy. However, the Malaysian case indicates that trust is shaped not only by policy performance but also by the mode of government formation (electoral mandate versus elite defection), suggesting the need to more explicitly theorise how procedural legitimacy interacts with

- performance-based trust. This indicates that future refinements to political trust theory should more explicitly theorise the interaction between performance-based legitimacy and procedural legitimacy, recognising that citizens judge “how well” governments perform and “how rightly” they came into power.
3. Social identity theory continues to explain the enduring salience of ethnic and religious cleavages in political evaluation. Nonetheless, the findings point to the emergence of a dual logic of evaluation, where identity-based considerations coexist with pragmatic assessments of economic management and institutional reform. This suggests the need for an integrated identity–performance perspective in future studies of Malaysian political behaviour, where social identity theory is complemented by political trust and economic voting insights to explain how Malaysians weigh communal narratives against material and governance outcomes.
 4. Crisis management theory is supported but should be extended to account for overlapping and continuous crises. Rather than discrete episodes, Malaysian governments during 2018–2022 faced a cascading sequence of health emergencies, economic downturns, natural disasters and political instability. The persistence of these crises underscores the importance of institutional resilience, learning capacity, transparent communication and sustained support mechanisms in maintaining public confidence. Crisis management theory therefore requires extension towards a multi-crisis, long-duration model that foregrounds institutional resilience, learning capacity, transparent communication and sustained support mechanisms as key determinants of enduring public confidence.

In sum, this study does not reject the existing theoretical frameworks. Rather, it demonstrates that they must be adapted, contextualised and combined to capture the complexity of public perception in contemporary Malaysia. Agenda-setting must be reconceived for a hybrid, networked media ecology; political trust must integrate procedural legitimacy with performance; social identity must be linked to pragmatic, performance-based evaluations; and crisis management must account for overlapping, prolonged crises.

The integrated framework proposed here offers a more holistic and context-sensitive explanation of how citizens evaluate the direction of the country and the performance of its leaders in times of uncertainty and turbulence. It also provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical and comparative work on public perception in hybrid regimes facing simultaneous political, economic and societal shocks.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has proposed and empirically illustrated an integrated framework linking agenda-setting, political trust, social identity and crisis management to explain public sentiment in Malaysia between 2018 and 2022. While the findings are robust at the aggregate level, several avenues remain open for future research to deepen, diversify and extend this contribution.

First, future studies should move beyond national-level averages and employ disaggregated survey data to examine variations across ethnic, regional, age, gender and class lines. The present analysis suggests that identity narratives and economic pressures are unevenly experienced, but it does not fully unpack how, for example, Malay, Chinese, Indian and Bumiputera Sabah–Sarawak respondents may weigh identity, performance and legitimacy differently. Longitudinal survey designs, cohort analyses and multilevel modelling could be used to identify whether younger voters, urban residents or specific income groups exhibit distinct patterns of trust formation, media reliance and crisis sensitivity. Such work would refine the identity–performance hybrid model suggested by this study.

Second, the role of digital information ecosystems warrants deeper, methodologically innovative investigation. While this article has highlighted the importance of hybrid agenda-setting and hashtag-based mobilisation, future research could systematically analyse large-scale digital trace data (e.g., Twitter, TikTok, Facebook and WhatsApp-forwarded content where accessible) using tools such as network analysis, sentiment analysis and topic modelling. This would allow scholars to map how specific narratives (e.g. #KerajaanGagal, #BenderaPutih) spread, which actors (politicians, influencers, media outlets, civil society) drive those narratives and how online discourse interacts with offline events and survey-measured public opinion. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs could also test how exposure to different information frames—performance-based, identity-based or crisis-based—shapes trust and evaluations of national direction.

Third, there is clear value in extending the temporal scope and building panel or repeated cross-sectional datasets that track Malaysian public sentiment beyond 2022, capturing the consolidation or erosion of support under the unity government and any future political realignments. Such extensions would allow researchers to examine whether the patterns identified in this study—rapid trust surges and collapses, identity–performance trade-offs and multi-crisis fatigue—are temporary artefacts of an exceptional period or indicative of a new, more fluid regime of public evaluation in Malaysia. Comparative work across electoral cycles (GE14, GE15 and beyond) could also help test the durability of the proposed integrated framework.

Fourth, future research could benefit from deeper qualitative engagement at the micro level. In-depth interviews and focus groups with different segments of the electorate—youth activists, civil servants, rural voters, urban precariat groups, East Malaysian communities—would shed light on how ordinary Malaysians subjectively experience political instability, economic stress and crisis governance. Elite interviews with policymakers, political strategists, journalists and civil society leaders could further clarify how they perceive public sentiment, design communication strategies and respond to online and offline criticism. Such qualitative inquiry would complement the present study's media and document analysis by illuminating the lived meanings and everyday reasoning behind survey responses.

Fifth, there is substantial scope for comparative and regional research that situates Malaysia within the broader Southeast Asian and Global South context. Similar periods of political volatility, multi-crisis governance and digital mobilisation have occurred in other countries, including Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. Applying and testing the integrated framework developed here across multiple cases would help determine which aspects are context-specific and which travel more broadly as generalisable propositions about public perception under conditions of hybrid media, identity politics and prolonged crisis. Comparative work could also help refine the conceptualisation of performance-based legitimacy in hybrid regimes.

Sixth, future studies might explore the policy and institutional dimensions more explicitly by linking public sentiment data with specific policy reforms and programme outcomes. For instance, researchers could examine whether particular anti-corruption initiatives, social protection reforms, youth employment programmes or disaster management improvements measurably affect trust and “right direction” perceptions over time. Mixed-method policy evaluation—combining impact assessments, process tracing and perception analysis—would help identify which types of reforms are most effective in rebuilding confidence among different social groups.

Finally, future research should deepen the theoretical and methodological integration proposed in this article. On the theoretical side, scholars could formalise the integrated framework into testable models that specify causal pathways—e.g. from crisis events to media salience, to perceived competence and fairness, to shifts in trust among different identity groups. On the methodological side, advanced techniques such as structural equation modelling, sequence analysis or Bayesian time-series models could be employed to capture the complex, recursive nature of perception formation in a multi-crisis environment. Such refinements would not only advance the study of Malaysian politics but also contribute to global debates on public opinion, trust and governance in an age of uncertainty.

Taken together, these directions suggest that the study of Malaysian public perception is far from complete. Future research that combines disaggregated data, digital methods, micro-level qualitative inquiry, comparative perspectives and rigorous policy evaluation will be essential for understanding how citizens navigate turbulence and how governments can design institutions and practices that earn—not assume—public confidence.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the period from 2018 to 2022 represents one of the most turbulent chapters in Malaysian political history. Public perception during this era was not shaped by isolated events but by an interlocking sequence of political instability, economic pressures, identity-based contestation and multi-crisis governance.

By employing a multi-theoretical, mixed-methods framework, this study demonstrates that Malaysian public sentiment is shaped by:

- agenda-setting processes across hybrid media ecosystems,
- trust evaluations grounded in integrity, competence and legitimacy,
- identity-based interpretations of sensitive political issues, and
- crisis management performance under conditions of overlapping emergencies.

The results reaffirm the relevance of all four theoretical perspectives while highlighting the need for contextual refinement. Public opinion in Malaysia now emerges at the intersection of identity narratives, performance-based expectations and a rapidly evolving information environment.

This study provides not only an empirically grounded narrative of Malaysian public opinion across five administrations but also a theoretical contribution relevant to hybrid regimes worldwide—where media ecosystems are fragmented, political transitions are fluid and crises increasingly overlap.

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Ethical Statement

This study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data, including published opinion surveys, media reports, government documents and academic literature. No human subjects were directly involved and no personal or identifiable data were collected. Ethical approval was therefore not required. The research adheres to the principles of academic integrity, transparency and responsible scholarship.

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