

Seeking the Local, Streaming the Global: Television Uses and Gratifications and the Negotiation of Cultural Identity among Bajau Youth in Sabah, Malaysia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1013COM0042>

Received: 01 August 2026; Accepted: 06 August 2026; Published: 20 August 2026

ABSTRACT

The presence of a community's language and culture on television is never merely a matter of programming; it shapes how minority youth come to see themselves and their place within the nation. This study examines the viewing patterns of local television programmes among Bajau youth in Sabah, Malaysia, and the role such viewing plays in shaping their cultural-social identities. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications framework, which treats audiences as active selectors of media to satisfy felt needs, a structured questionnaire comprising 60 Likert items measuring gratifications sought, media needs and gratifications obtained, together with viewing and programme-interest measures, was administered to 331 Bajau youth aged 15 to 40 across 25 districts in Sabah. All scales were highly reliable (Cronbach's alpha of .98 and above). The findings reveal a clear gap between appetite and access: viewing was concentrated on global streaming platforms (YouTube, $M = 2.41$; Netflix, $M = 2.34$) and national commercial channels, while the dedicated local Sabah channels were the least watched, even though stated interest in Sabah-local content ($M = 3.76$) equalled or exceeded interest in national and international programming. Programme choices were driven by cultural-identity and surveillance gratifications rather than by demographic characteristics, and the pathway from cultural motives sought to identity gratifications obtained was large ($r = .77$, $p < .001$), with pride in seeing the Bajau language on screen emerging as the single strongest gratification obtained ($M = 4.04$). In other words, local television shapes the cultural-social identities of Bajau youth conditionally: it delivers pride, recognition and belonging when local culture appears on screen, yet this identity work is constrained by the scarcity of such content on the platforms that youth actually use. The study recommends that broadcasters and policymakers channel culturally grounded Sabah content onto the streaming platforms where Bajau youth already are, so that the demand for local representation is finally met with supply.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications; local television; cultural identity; media representation; Bajau youth

INTRODUCTION

Television has long been implicated in the making of cultural identity in Malaysia. From its inception, broadcasting in this country was assigned a nation-building role, and state television in particular has functioned as an instrument for fashioning a public culture, one that has tended to represent the nation in terms of the dominant culture while leaving the diversity within and between indigenous groups thinly represented (Khattab, 2006). Such a condition matters because what appears on screen is not a neutral inventory of programmes. Media representation tells communities who is seen, who is valued and who belongs, and its absence communicates just as forcefully as its presence (Tuchman, 1978; Leavitt et al., 2015). For minority and indigenous youth, therefore, the question of whether their language and culture appear on television is inseparable from the question of how they come to understand themselves.

This question has become more compelling, not less, in the midst of the streaming era. Young audiences across the region have migrated much of their viewing to global platforms such as YouTube and Netflix, and the motives that drive such viewing now sit alongside, and sometimes displace, the motives long associated with broadcast television (Steiner & Xu, 2020; Sukmono et al., 2025). This poses a problem for the cultural role of local television. If the channels most likely to carry local cultural content are no longer the windows through

which youth watch, then the representational work that local television is expected to perform may simply fail to reach its intended audience. Hence, the influence of the media on cultural identity can no longer be read from content alone; it must be read from the meeting point between what is available and what audiences actually seek.

Sabah offers a particularly instructive setting in which to examine this meeting point. The state is home to a mosaic of indigenous communities, among whom the Bajau constitute the second largest group, with the Bajau Samah of the west coast historically concentrated in the districts of Tuaran and Kota Belud. The community's position within Malaysia's ethnic order has been the subject of continuing negotiation (Majid Cooke & Acciaoli, 2021), and its language is under visible pressure, with studies reporting a shift away from Bajau Samah among younger speakers in Kota Belud (Renddan et al., 2023). At the same time, the native communities of Sabah continue to experience an uneven digital environment in which access to telecommunication services remains a rural-urban divide issue (Fang et al., 2022). Television, in other words, reaches Bajau youth through an infrastructure that is itself unequal, and their cultural identity is negotiated in the midst of both representational scarcity and platform change.

While audience research on Malaysian television is well established, it has concentrated largely on Peninsular Malaysia and on the Malay audience, whose engagement with local television fiction has been read as a rediscovery of the Malay 'local' (Idrus et al., 2016). Elsewhere in Sabah, studies of the Kadazan-Dusun community have documented shifting television consumption patterns in the digital society and the dissatisfaction of youth with how their cultural identity is portrayed in local productions (Modili et al., 2022; Modili, 2025). Yet the Bajau, despite their demographic weight and the pressures on their language, have rarely been the subject of systematic audience research. Do the viewing patterns and identity gratifications documented among other Malaysian audiences extend to the Bajau youth of Sabah as well? Therefore, a survey was undertaken to investigate how Bajau youth use local television, why they choose the programmes they do, and what role such viewing plays in shaping their cultural-social identities.

Background of Study

The Malaysian television environment that Bajau youth inhabit is a layered one. The national free-to-air channels, led by the public broadcaster RTM and the commercial network TV3, share the screen with the satellite provider Astro, with dedicated Sabah-based channels such as TV Sabah and Borneo Times TV (BTV), and with an expanding array of streaming and over-the-top services. Each layer carries a different proportion of local content. The dedicated Sabah channels are the most likely to broadcast programmes in local languages and about local cultures, while the global platforms carry the least, even as they command a growing share of youth attention. Such a configuration means that the cultural value of television for indigenous youth is conditioned by access and availability rather than by exposure alone (Modili et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2022).

This study approaches the problem through the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework, which treats audiences not as passive receivers of media influence but as active selectors who turn to media to satisfy felt needs (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). It operationalises the conceptual framework advanced earlier for this audience, which theorises local television as a site of representation and identity negotiation for Bajau youth and calls for its propositions to be examined empirically (Modili et al., 2026). Three constructs organise the analysis. Gratifications sought refer to the motives that bring Bajau youth to television, ranging from entertainment and information to the desire to learn about their own culture. Media needs, or dependency, refer to the extent to which television is felt to be necessary for informational and identity-related purposes. Gratifications obtained refer to the outcomes that youth report from viewing, including the affective and identity outcomes of pride, recognition and belonging. By measuring all three, the study is able to trace the classic U&G pathway from what is sought to what is obtained, and to ask whether that pathway runs through local content in particular.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the viewing of local television programmes among Bajau youth in Sabah and its relationship with their cultural identity. The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To investigate the viewing patterns of local television programmes among Bajau youth in Sabah.
2. To investigate the factors influencing their programme choices and the correlation of these factors with the formation or reinforcement of cultural boundaries.
3. To investigate the role of watching local television in shaping their cultural-social identities.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is threefold. Theoretically, it extends the Uses and Gratifications tradition, and in particular the study of social identity gratifications (Harwood, 1999; Harwood & Vincze, 2015), to an indigenous Bornean audience navigating a media environment in which broadcast and streaming platforms coexist. Empirical work of this kind remains scarce for the indigenous communities of East Malaysia, and the findings allow the identity-gratification mechanisms documented among minority audiences elsewhere to be tested in a new setting. Practically, the study offers broadcasters and content producers evidence of the actual demand for Sabah-local content among Bajau youth, evidence that speaks directly to programming and platform decisions. In terms of policy, the findings inform the continuing debate on local content in the Malaysian media industry, since the cultural objectives of local content policy can only be achieved if such content reaches the platforms where young audiences are found. Most crucially, for the Bajau community itself, the study documents the role that television can play in sustaining language pride and cultural attachment among the younger generation.

Limitation of the Study

The scope of this study is confined to Bajau youth aged 15 to 40 in Sabah, and its data are drawn from a self-report survey. The findings are correlational, and no causal claims are made about the direction of influence between viewing and identity. Although respondents were drawn from 25 districts, the four largest district clusters were used for between-group comparisons, so the district findings speak most confidently to Kota Marudu, Kota Kinabalu, Kota Belud and Tuaran. The reliability of the instrument was very high, and alpha values at this level can signal a degree of item redundancy (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011), a measurement caveat revisited in the conclusion. Finally, the survey did not distinguish community-authored content from externally authored content about the community, and this distinction is recommended for future measurement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uses and Gratifications in a Changing Television Environment

The Uses and Gratifications perspective begins from a deceptively simple premise: audiences are active, and they select media to satisfy socially and psychologically felt needs (Katz et al., 1973). Within this tradition, television research has repeatedly distinguished between ritualised viewing, undertaken to pass time and to be entertained, and instrumental viewing, undertaken to seek information and content of personal relevance (Rubin, 1983). The distinction matters because the two orientations carry different consequences. Rubin (2009) pointed out that the gratifications audiences seek shape both what they select and what they take from it, which means that the same medium can perform very different cultural work for different viewers. Hence, any claim about the influence of television on identity must first establish what viewers are seeking when they switch it on.

The arrival of streaming has renewed rather than retired this framework. Steiner and Xu (2020) found that the motives of streaming viewers, including catching up, relaxation and cultural inclusion, both extend and challenge the motive structures documented for broadcast television, and they argued that contemporary viewing is best described along a spectrum of attentiveness rather than a passive-active dichotomy. Similarly, a recent comparative study of youth in Indonesia and China confirmed entertainment and escapism as universal motivations for streaming platform use while showing that cognitive and social motivations vary with cultural context (Sukmono et al., 2025). These developments carry a clear implication for the present study: broadcast television and digital platforms should be treated as complementary parts of a single media repertoire, and the gratifications framework applied across both.

Social Identity Gratifications and Minority Media

A significant extension of the U&G tradition concerns the gratifications that flow from social identity. Harwood (1999) demonstrated that television viewing can serve identity needs, with viewers selecting content featuring their own group and deriving identification-related gratifications from it. Applied to ethnolinguistic minorities, this line of research has shown that identification with one's language group predicts the choice of ingroup-language television, and that diversion and ethnolinguistic identity gratifications are the strongest mediators of this relationship (Harwood & Vincze, 2015). In other words, minority viewers do not merely happen upon media in their own language; they seek it out precisely because it feeds a valued identity.

Subsequent studies among minority youth reinforce this, where Ellithorpe and Bleakley (2016) found that adolescents in the United States gravitate toward programmes featuring characters who share their race and gender, consistent with the idea that media characters serve as tools for identity development. Martins, Gonzales and Mastro (2022) reported that Latino teens navigate a difficult trade-off, tolerating a measure of disrespect in mainstream content because alternatives are scarce, while Spanish-language programming offers a positive resource for identity needs. Meanwhile, longitudinal evidence among Muslim American adolescents indicates that native-language entertainment media positively influence identity centrality and private esteem over time (Saleem & Ismail, 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that the identity gratifications of minority audiences are real, measurable and strongest where content in the community's own language is available, a proposition that this study carries to the Bajau case.

Cultural Representation, Symbolic Annihilation and Representational Belonging

If identity gratifications depend on representation, then the absence of representation is consequential. The concept of symbolic annihilation, first advanced in relation to women, describes how media omission, trivialisation and condemnation communicate to a group that it does not matter (Tuchman, 1978). The concept has since been applied to racial and ethnic minorities, whose portrayals have historically been confined to narrow, stereotyped or past-tense images (Coleman & Yochim, 2008). Merskin (1998) found that Native American viewers judged television portrayals of their communities to fall well short of accuracy, and Fitzgerald (2010) showed that American Indian television representations have tended to oscillate between non-recognition and relegation to the distant past. The psychological stakes of such absence are considerable. Leavitt et al. (2015) argued that the relative invisibility of Native Americans in contemporary media narrows the identity prototypes available to Native youth and undermines self-understanding.

Yet representation, where it occurs on the community's own terms, carries an equally documented positive charge. Caswell, Cifor and Ramirez (2017) termed this 'representational belonging', the affective experience of encountering complex and autonomous representations of one's community, which counters the negative consequences of symbolic annihilation. This pair of concepts frames the expectations of the present study: where Bajau language and culture appear on screen, viewing should yield pride and belonging; where such content is absent, the identity work of television simply cannot take place.

Local Television and Cultural Identity in Malaysia

The Malaysian literature situates these general mechanisms within a specific broadcasting history. Television in Malaysia has been closely tied to the state's nation-building project, and Khattab (2006) argued that state television has tended to reflect the dominant culture in hegemonic terms while under-representing the diversity of the country's ethnic and indigenous groups. Studies of Malaysian audiences, meanwhile, have documented how young people negotiate between global and local content in their everyday consumption, with preferences continuing to run along cultural and ethnic lines (Pawanteh et al., 2009). Idrus et al. (2016) showed that Malay youth engagement with local television fiction amounts to a rediscovery of the Malay 'local' in the midst of global cultural flows. The stakes of local broadcasting are visible even beyond the border: communities on the Indonesian side of the Malaysia-Indonesia frontier who rely on Malaysian television have been found to develop a mixed national identity shaped by the broadcasts they receive (Briandana & Azmawati, 2021).

For Sabah specifically, research on the Kadazan-Dusun community found that youth television consumption has shifted markedly toward digital platforms while the appetite for local cultural content persists (Modili et al., 2022). A subsequent study of a local telefilm found that Kadazan-Dusun youth valued the effort at cultural preservation yet were dissatisfied with the portrayal of their native language, attire and music, concluding that local productions do not yet fully represent local cultural identity (Modili, 2025). These findings suggest that in East Malaysia the question is not whether indigenous youth care about local representation, but whether the representation on offer is adequate and reachable. The present study extends this line of inquiry from the Kadazan-Dusun to the Bajau.

The Bajau of Sabah in a Digital Media Environment

The Bajau are far from a homogeneous community, and their identities have been positioned and repositioned within Malaysia's ethnic categories over time (Majid Cooke & Acciaioli, 2021). Two conditions of the community's present situation bear directly on this study. The first is linguistic. Renddan et al. (2023) reported a shift away from the Bajau Sama language among younger generations in Kota Belud, with mass media identified among the domains through which the shift proceeds. The second is infrastructural. Fang et al. (2022) found that the native communities of Sabah continue to face a digital divide across motivation, physical access, skills and usage, with rural communities saddled with poor connections despite a clear willingness to adopt digital technologies. Such conditions echo the broader observation that digital development in rural areas proceeds unevenly, compounding existing disadvantage (Salemink et al., 2017).

At the same time, digital media are not simply a threat to minority cultural identity; they can serve as sites for its development. McKenzie (2022) found that Hmong American emerging adults used digital media to learn about and enact their heritage culture, a reminder that the platforms drawing youth away from broadcast television can, in principle, carry cultural content to them. Whether they do so in practice depends on availability. This is precisely the tension the present study measures among Bajau youth: strong identity motives on the demand side, and an uneven supply of local content across the platforms they use.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a quantitative survey design. The instrument was a structured questionnaire administered in Bahasa Melayu to Bajau youth in Sabah aged 15 to 40. A total of 331 completed responses were obtained and all were retained for analysis. Although the study was originally scoped to the Bajau Samah heartland districts of Tuaran and Kota Belud, the realised sample spanned 25 districts across Sabah, and this full geographic spread was preserved. The realised sample size also exceeds the thresholds conventionally applied in survey research for populations of this kind (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Because some districts contained only one or two respondents, the four largest district clusters, namely Kota Marudu, Kota Kinabalu, Kota Belud and Tuaran, were used for inferential group comparisons, while all cases contributed to the descriptive and correlational results. Free-text district entries were standardised for spelling and case before coding.

Instrument and Measures

The questionnaire comprised 60 Likert items and a set of viewing and interest measures. The Likert items form three theoretically distinct blocks mapped directly onto the U&G framework. Gratifications Sought (GS) consists of 20 motivational items introduced by the stem 'Saya menonton televisyen untuk...' ('I watch television to...'), covering surveillance and information, cultural-identity learning, entertainment and diversion, and social integration. Media Needs and Dependency (MD) consists of 20 items introduced by 'Saya memerlukan televisyen untuk...' ('I need television to...'), covering identity-cultural needs and informational-developmental needs. Gratifications Obtained (GO) consists of 20 affective and identity-outcome items introduced by 'Saya berasa...' ('I feel...'), covering cultural pride and identity as well as social and family integration. All Likert items were scored from 1 (disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with 3 as the neutral midpoint. Channel and genre viewing frequency was measured on a 0 to 5 scale ranging from never to more than six hours weekly, and programme

interest was measured on a 1 to 5 scale from not at all interested to very interested. Scale scores were computed as the mean of constituent items for respondents answering at least half of the items, retaining the 1 to 5 metric.

Data Screening and Analysis

Missing values were sparse, typically four to five cases per Likert item out of 331, or below 2 percent. Pairwise deletion was used for correlations and listwise deletion for the reliability analysis, the conventional defaults in SPSS-based research (Pallant, 2020), and effective sample sizes are reported with each statistic. The three U&G composites were moderately negatively skewed (skewness of -1.15 to -1.23) because most respondents endorsed the agreement end of the scale. With $N = 331$, the sampling distribution of the mean is robust to this departure from normality under the central limit theorem, so parametric procedures, namely Pearson correlation, the independent-samples t-test and one-way ANOVA, were appropriate (Hair et al., 2019). Effect sizes were interpreted against Cohen's (1988) conventions, with r of approximately .10 read as small, .30 as medium and .50 as large.

Reliability of the Instrument

Internal-consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), interpreted against the benchmarks of George and Mallery (2003), with .70 the conventional minimum for established scales (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). As Table 1 shows, all three constructs and the combined 60-item scale exceeded .97, and every subscale exceeded .90. Corrected item-total correlations ranged from .67 to .94, and no item, if deleted, would have raised its scale's alpha. One caveat deserves note: alpha values at or above .95 can signal item redundancy, in that several items may be tapping near-identical content, and may indicate that the instrument could be shortened without loss of reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Table 1: Internal-consistency reliability of the study constructs

Scale	Items	N	Cronbach's α	Item-total r	Rating
Gratifications Sought (GS)	20	315	.980	.67–.90	Excellent
Media Needs / Dependency (MD)	20	317	.990	.78–.94	Excellent
Gratifications Obtained (GO)	20	312	.984	.81–.91	Excellent
Overall U&G scale	60	291	.993	.63–.90	Excellent

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile

The sample of 331 respondents was close to balanced by gender, with 51.7 percent female and 48.3 percent male, and was concentrated in the 20 to 24 age band (29.6 percent), consistent with the study's youth focus. Geographically, respondents clustered in Kota Marudu (32.3 percent), Kota Kinabalu (21.8 percent), Kota Belud (19.9 percent) and Tuaran (16.9 percent), with the remaining 9.1 percent spread across 21 further districts. Just over a third were students (36.9 percent), and almost all respondents (97.0 percent) had a television at home, with 37 percent owning two or more sets. Table 2 summarises the profile.

Table 2: Respondent profile ($N = 331$)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female / Male	171 (51.7) / 160 (48.3)
Age group	20–24; 35–40; 15–19; 25–29; 30–34	98 / 64 / 59 / 55 / 55

District	Kota Marudu; Kota Kinabalu; Kota Belud; Tuaran; others (21 districts)	107 / 72 / 66 / 56 / 30
Occupation	Student; Government; Self-employed; Private sector; Unemployed	122 / 72 / 66 / 48 / 21
Education	Degree and above; SPM; STPM; Diploma; PMR/PT3; Skills certificate	106 / 97 / 54 / 39 / 16 / 11
Monthly income	Dependent on parents; RM1,501–3,000; below RM1,500; above RM3,001	116 / 107 / 72 / 36
Television at home	Yes / No	321 (97.0) / 10 (3.0)
Number of television sets	One; Two; Three or more	201 / 98 / 25

Viewing Patterns of Local Television (Objective 1)

Television remains physically present in Bajau youth households, and viewing is concentrated in the evening: half the sample (50.5 percent) watched most between 7.00 and 9.00 in the evening, and a further 20.2 percent between 9.00 and 11.00, while nearly a third (29.6 percent) never watched in the morning. Monthly spending on internet data to stream programming most commonly fell in the RM31 to RM60 band (24.8 percent), and subscription spending was most often below RM30 (28.1 percent), indicating modest but real expenditure on alternative delivery platforms.

The channel rankings, however, reveal the central descriptive tension of the study. As Table 3 shows, the two most-watched services were digital: YouTube (M = 2.41 on the 0 to 5 weekly-frequency scale) and Netflix (M = 2.34). The leading broadcast channels were the commercial TV3 (M = 2.01) and the satellite provider Astro (M = 1.92), followed by the public broadcaster's RTM1 (M = 1.65). Crucially, the explicitly local Sabah channels sat lower still: TV Sabah (M = 1.46) and Borneo Times TV (M = 1.23). Aggregated into indices, national free-to-air channels (M = 1.60) were watched slightly more than streaming services (M = 1.47), satellite television (M = 1.46) and local Sabah channels (M = 1.34). In other words, the most-used windows onto the screen are global streaming platforms, while the channels most likely to carry Bajau and Sabahan content are among the least watched.

Table 3: Mean weekly viewing frequency by channel and platform (0 = never to 5 = more than six hours weekly)

Channel / platform	M
YouTube	2.41
Netflix	2.34
TV3	2.01
Astro	1.92
RTM1	1.65
TV Sabah	1.46
Borneo Times TV (BTV)	1.23
National free-to-air (index)	1.60

Streaming / OTT (index)	1.47
Satellite (index)	1.46
Local Sabah channels (index)	1.34

By genre, the most-watched categories were action, crime and investigative films ($M = 2.14$), cartoons and animation ($M = 2.04$), local films ($M = 2.00$) and main and regional news ($M = 1.95$). Local-content genres as a group, comprising local films, local documentaries, local drama, local talk shows, local culture-and-tradition programmes and regional news, averaged $M = 1.74$, marginally below the average for other genres ($M = 1.83$), with local drama ($M = 1.84$) and culture-and-tradition programming ($M = 1.61$) attracting moderate viewing.

A different picture emerges for stated interest as opposed to actual viewing. When asked how interested they were in programming of different origins, respondents rated Sabah-local programming at the top ($M = 3.76$ on the 1 to 5 interest scale), marginally above international ($M = 3.72$) and national Malaysian programming ($M = 3.69$), and roughly three-quarters expressed clear interest in Sabah-local content. Thus, although local Sabah channels were watched least, interest in local content was at least as high as interest in national or international content. This gap between appetite and access recurs throughout the analysis, and it is consistent with the argument that the cultural value of television for indigenous youth is conditioned by availability rather than by demand (Modili et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2022). It also mirrors the situation of minority youth elsewhere, who report turning to mainstream content not out of preference but because culturally relevant alternatives are scarce (Martins et al., 2022).

Gratifications Sought, Needed and Obtained

All three U&G composites sat well above the scale midpoint of 3.0, indicating broad agreement that television serves these motivational, dependency and gratification functions. Gratifications Obtained was highest ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.77$), followed by Gratifications Sought ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.86$) and Media Needs and Dependency ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.95$). Table 4 reports the composites and their subscales.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for U&G constructs and subscales (1–5 metric)

Construct / subscale	N	Mean	SD	Skewness
Gratifications Sought (GS)	327	3.86	0.86	-1.15
GS: Surveillance / Information	327	3.85	0.90	-1.20
GS: Cultural-Identity learning	328	3.84	0.91	-1.19
GS: Entertainment / Diversion	327	3.96	0.87	-1.25
GS: Social Integration	327	3.80	0.96	-1.12
Media Needs / Dependency (MD)	327	3.79	0.95	-1.17
MD: Identity-Cultural Needs	327	3.76	1.01	-1.09
MD: Informational-Developmental Needs	327	3.82	0.94	-1.21
Gratifications Obtained (GO)	327	3.95	0.77	-1.23
GO: Cultural Pride & Identity	327	3.95	0.80	-1.28
GO: Social & Family Integration	326	3.94	0.78	-1.22

Within Gratifications Sought, the strongest individual motives were diversionary and informational: watching to fill leisure time ($M = 4.02$), to be entertained ($M = 3.99$), to get the latest information on Sabah issues ($M = 3.92$) and to obtain educational information ($M = 3.91$). However, cultural-identity motives were also strongly endorsed, including watching to learn about Sabah ethnic cultures ($M = 3.89$) and to add knowledge of the local language ($M = 3.86$). This confirms that, for these youth, television is sought not only for entertainment but also as a route to cultural knowledge.

The Media Needs block was endorsed slightly less strongly but still clearly ($M = 3.80$), with informational-developmental needs ($M = 3.82$) edging out identity-cultural needs ($M = 3.76$). Notably, the identity items that speak most directly to the framework, namely needing television to understand one's identity as a Bajau youth ($M = 3.70$) and to feel closer to the Bajau community ($M = 3.71$), were the lowest in the block, even though they remained above the midpoint. This suggests that dependency on television specifically for Bajau identity work, while present, is the weakest link in the chain, plausibly because so little Bajau-specific content is actually available on screen.

Gratifications Obtained produced the highest and most consistent endorsements, and the top items were explicitly cultural: feeling proud when the Bajau language is used on television ($M = 4.04$), feeling valued when Bajau culture is shown ($M = 4.03$) and feeling confident that television helps maintain cultural identity ($M = 4.02$). Social and family-integration gratifications were also high (subscale $M = 3.94$), including feeling closer to family when watching together ($M = 3.98$). In short, when Bajau youth do encounter culturally relevant content, the affective and identity pay-off they report is substantial, precisely the gratification that language and local representation are predicted to deliver (Harwood & Vincze, 2015; Caswell et al., 2017).

Factors Influencing Programme Choices and Cultural Boundaries (Objective 2)

Objective 2 concerns the factors that influence programme choices among Bajau youth and how these factors correlate with the formation or reinforcement of cultural boundaries. The factors are operationalised as the U&G constructs together with demographic and locational characteristics, while cultural boundaries are operationalised as the relative pull of local and Sabah content against national and international content.

The three constructs were strongly and significantly inter-correlated (Table 5). Gratifications Sought and Media Needs were almost collinear ($r = .91$, $p < .001$), and both predicted Gratifications Obtained strongly (GS-GO $r = .80$; MD-GO $r = .84$, both $p < .001$). The theoretically central path, from seeking cultural-identity learning to obtaining cultural pride and identity gratification, was large ($r = .77$, $p < .001$). This is the classic sought-to-obtained linkage of the U&G tradition: youth who watch television in order to connect with their culture are markedly more likely to report identity and pride gratifications from it.

Table 5: Pearson correlations among U&G constructs

Construct	GS	MD	GO	GS-Culture	GO-Pride
GS	1.00	.91**	.80**	.98**	.77**
MD	.91**	1.00	.84**	.91**	.82**
GO	.80**	.84**	1.00	.80**	.98**
GS-Culture	.98**	.91**	.80**	1.00	.77**
GO-Pride	.77**	.82**	.98**	.77**	1.00

Note: ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). $N = 327$ (pairwise).

The U&G constructs were also consistently and positively related to actual viewing behaviour and to programme interest (Table 6). All correlations were positive and statistically significant. The strongest associations were with programme interest: Gratifications Sought correlated at $r = .68$ with interest in national programmes and r

= .64 with interest in Sabah-local programmes, while Gratifications Obtained correlated at $r = .65$ with Sabah-programme interest. Associations with channel and genre viewing frequency were medium to large, for example GS with local-content genres ($r = .55$) and with local Sabah channels ($r = .49$), and identity-cultural needs with local Sabah channels ($r = .50$).

Table 6: Correlations between U&G measures and viewing behaviour and interest

U&G measure	Local Sabah channels	Streaming	Local-content genres	Sabah interest	National interest
GS	.49**	.44**	.55**	.64**	.68**
MD	.50**	.45**	.53**	.62**	.64**
GO	.43**	.38**	.48**	.65**	.63**
GS: Cultural-Identity	.48**	.43**	.54**	.63**	.66**
GS: Surveillance	.49**	.44**	.56**	.63**	.66**
GS: Entertainment	.34**	.34**	.38**	.48**	.53**
MD: Identity-Cultural	.50**	.44**	.53**	.61**	.62**
GO: Cultural Pride	.42**	.37**	.47**	.64**	.61**

Note: ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). N of approximately 327, pairwise.

Two nuances are analytically important. First, the entertainment and diversion motive showed the weakest links to local viewing ($r = .34$ with local Sabah channels), whereas cultural-identity and surveillance motives showed the strongest. The youth who watch local content are doing so for cultural and informational reasons, not merely to pass time, which replicates the instrumental-ritualised distinction long documented in the U&G tradition (Rubin, 1983). Second, every U&G construct correlated with both broadcast and streaming use, supporting the view that television and digital platforms operate complementarily rather than as substitutes (Steiner & Xu, 2020).

Demographic variables, by contrast, were weak predictors. None of age, gender, education or income correlated above an absolute value of .11 with any composite, and gender differences were non-significant for all three constructs (independent-samples t -tests, all $p > .33$). The U&G orientation toward television is therefore broadly shared across the youth demographic rather than concentrated in any single subgroup. Significant differences did emerge by district (Table 7). One-way ANOVAs across the four largest districts were significant for all three constructs, and the pattern was consistent: respondents in Tuaran reported the highest scores (GS = 4.25, MD = 4.29, GO = 4.33), followed by Kota Belud, with Kota Kinabalu and Kota Marudu lower. This is striking because Tuaran and Kota Belud are the historic Bajau Samah heartland: youth there attach more gratification and need to television than their peers in the more urban Kota Kinabalu. Age effects were significant for GS and MD, peaking in the 30 to 34 band, but not for GO.

Table 7: One-way ANOVA of U&G constructs by district

Construct	F(3, 293)	p	η^2	Means: K. Marudu / K. Kinabalu / K. Belud / Tuaran
GS	5.29	.001	.051	3.75 / 3.73 / 3.96 / 4.25
MD	6.90	< .001	.066	3.68 / 3.61 / 3.86 / 4.29
GO	6.13	< .001	.059	3.91 / 3.77 / 4.00 / 4.33

Note: η^2 of .01 is read as small, .06 as medium and .14 as large (Cohen, 1988).

Pulling these results together answers Objective 2 directly. The principal factors shaping programme choice are motivational rather than demographic: cultural-identity and surveillance gratifications, and the felt need for culturally relevant information, are the strongest correlates of local viewing, whereas the entertainment motive is the weakest. These factors, moreover, map onto a cultural boundary rather than dissolving it. Interest in Sabah-local programming was distinct from, and slightly stronger than, interest in national and international content, and identity-driven gratifications correlated more strongly with Sabah-programme interest ($GO\ r = .65$) than with international-programme interest ($r = .43$). The clear district gradient, with the Bajau heartland scoring highest, reinforces this reading: cultural-social location, not age, gender, education or income, marks the line along which programme choices divide. Television therefore appears to reinforce, rather than erode, a distinct Bajau and Sabahan cultural orientation among the youth who seek it, consistent with the social-identity and ethnolinguistic-gratification mechanisms documented by Harwood (1999), and Harwood and Vincze (2015).

The Role of Local Television in Shaping Cultural-Social Identities (Objective 3)

Objective 3 asks what role watching local television plays in shaping the cultural-social identities of Bajau youth. This is captured most directly by the Gratifications Obtained block, whose items measure the affective and identity outcomes respondents report from viewing, and by the pathway linking the cultural motives youth bring to television with the identity gratifications they take from it.

Identity gratifications were the most strongly endorsed outcomes in the whole instrument. Gratifications Obtained was the highest of the three constructs, and its top-scoring items were explicitly about cultural identity: pride in seeing the Bajau language on screen, feeling valued when Bajau culture is shown, and confidence that television helps maintain cultural identity (Table 8). When local culture and language do appear, watching translates into a measurable sense of pride, recognition and belonging, the 'representational belonging' described by Caswell et al. (2017).

Table 8: Highest-rated cultural-identity gratifications obtained (GO block, 1–5 metric)

Identity-related gratification item	Mean	SD
I feel proud seeing the Bajau language used on television	4.04	0.86
I feel valued when Bajau culture is shown on television	4.03	0.85
I feel confident that television helps maintain cultural identity	4.02	0.82
I feel connected to my identity watching local cultural content	3.94	0.91
I feel closer to local than to foreign culture after watching local television	3.93	0.86
I feel motivated to learn Bajau culture after watching television	3.90	0.94

The process behind this outcome is the sought-to-obtained linkage described earlier. Youth who watch television in order to learn about their culture are markedly more likely to obtain identity and pride gratifications from it ($r = .77, p < .001$), and identity gratifications were in turn bound up with local viewing and interest, correlating at $r = .65$ with Sabah-programme interest, $r = .48$ with local-content genres and $r = .43$ with local Sabah channels. Family mediation reinforced the effect: feeling closer to family when watching together scored $M = 3.98$, marking television as an occasion for intergenerational cultural transmission. This is consistent with evidence from other minority contexts that ingroup-language media feed identity centrality and private esteem over time (Saleem & Ismail, 2025), and with the finding that adolescents actively seek characters and content aligned with their identity groups (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016).

However, two qualifications define the limits of this identity role. First, the role is currently latent rather than fully realised. The items measuring dependence on television specifically for Bajau identity work, namely needing television to understand one's identity as a Bajau youth ($M = 3.70$) and to feel closer to the Bajau

community ($M = 3.71$), were the lowest in the Media Needs block, and the local channels most likely to carry Bajau content were the least watched. The identity-shaping potential of local television is real but constrained by how little Bajau-specific content is actually available, a condition that echoes the literature on symbolic annihilation and its consequences for minority self-understanding (Tuchman, 1978; Coleman & Yochim, 2008; Leavitt et al., 2015). Second, the effect is strongest where Bajau identity is most embedded: youth in the heartland districts of Tuaran and Kota Belud reported the highest identity gratifications, indicating that television works with, rather than independently of, lived cultural-social location.

Taken together, the answer to Objective 3 is that local television does shape the cultural-social identities of Bajau youth, but conditionally and positively rather than as a simple force of preservation or loss. Where it shows their language and culture, it strengthens pride, belonging and attachment, and supports a hybrid identity in which local and national elements coexist, with respondents reporting that they felt closer to local than to foreign culture after watching local television ($M = 3.93$). Where such content is absent, the identity work simply does not take place. This is precisely the conditional, agentive role that the Uses and Gratifications framework predicts, and it aligns with the observation that digital-era media can serve as sites for cultural identity development when, and only when, relevant content is present (McKenzie, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the viewing of local television programmes among Bajau youth in Sabah and its role in the negotiation of their cultural identity, and the findings answer the three objectives directly. On viewing patterns, Bajau youth watch most through global streaming platforms and major national channels, while the dedicated local Sabah channels are among the least watched, even though stated interest in Sabah-local content is the highest of the three content origins. On the factors behind programme choices, the drivers are motivational rather than demographic: cultural-identity and surveillance gratifications, not the diversion motive, pull youth toward local content, and these orientations align with a cultural boundary that television reinforces, most visibly in the Bajau heartland districts of Tuaran and Kota Belud. On identity, watching local television yields strong pride, recognition and belonging when Bajau language and culture appear on screen, with the pathway from cultural motives to identity gratifications large and significant, yet this identity role remains constrained by the limited availability of local content on the platforms youth actually use.

The central conclusion is that the cultural value of television for Bajau youth is conditional. The measurement was robust, with all constructs achieving excellent reliability, and the U&G process was coherent, with gratifications sought, media needs and gratifications obtained strongly inter-linked and consistently predictive of local viewing and interest. What emerges most clearly, however, is an access-availability gap: appetite for local content outstrips its supply. Interest in Sabah-local programming is as high as interest in national or international content, and the single strongest gratification in the entire instrument is pride in seeing the Bajau language on screen, yet the channels most likely to carry such content are the least consumed. In other words, the problem is not a young audience indifferent to its own culture; it is a media environment that seldom shows that culture where the audience is watching.

This study suggests that broadcasters and content agencies, including the public broadcaster and the Sabah-based channels, place culturally grounded local programming on the streaming platforms that Bajau youth already use, rather than confining it to channels they seldom watch. Closing the gap is less a matter of persuading youth to value local content, which they already do, than of making culturally relevant, community-grounded content available where they are. Support for Bajau-language production would speak directly to the strongest gratification documented here, and co-viewing formats that bring families together would reinforce the intergenerational transmission that respondents already report. For future research, three directions are recommended. The distinction between community-authored and externally authored content should be measured directly, since representation on the community's own terms is central to representational belonging. Youth agency, including resistance to and reworking of media content, should be examined with dedicated measures. Finally, longitudinal and qualitative designs would allow the direction of the viewing-identity relationship to be established and the meanings behind these patterns to be heard in the voices of Bajau youth themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is funded by a grant under the Skim Geran Dana Kluster (DKP0131) from Universiti Malaysia Sabah. This study adhered strictly to ethical standards, ensuring transparency and the absence of conflicts of interest.

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