

I am a girl.

I am a Malaysian.

I am a 21 year old student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

I am a blogger.

I am a Muslim.

Those are just some of the identities that I would identify myself as, even though they might not be my only identities. There is the idea of how an individual can portray more than one single identity at the same time, called plural identities, such as myself being both a Malaysian and a student. Although I have various identities within myself, the likelihood that I would actually identify myself with a certain identity differs with the situations. For example, while I was in Malaysia, I would not have identify myself as a 'Malaysian', just because everyone around me is a Malaysian and it does not seem necessary for me to do so. But when I am here in the United States, my Malaysian identity is invoked, and I am now proudly identifying myself as a Malaysian, as I am now a part of a small group within the United States. The probability of me identifying myself with a certain identity depending on the context is called the identity salience.

Despite categorizing myself into these different identities, my identities are in fact a social construction and are recognized by other people around me. I can certainly say that I am a student at the University of Pennsylvania (how I wish this would be true though), the people around me would not have recognized me using that identity, since they would know that I have in fact not been accepted to Penn. I can certainly pretend and say that I am a citizen of the United Kingdom, but my passport would clearly show that I am not a British. No matter what identities I use to identify myself with, they will still be recognized by the people I talk and meet with.

Culture, on the other hand, can be defined as a set of values or beliefs that are used in a group of people that guide them in their life. Nasir defines culture as constellations of practices that are developed and shaped by communities as a way to accomplish their goals. Culture can vary from different places and in different ways. For example, Malaysians value respect towards those who are older than us. It is common to see university students calling their professors using their titles (e.g. Madam, Sir, Teacher, Professor, Ms, etc). Meanwhile, in the United States, it is common to see university students calling their professors by their first names, even without their titles.

Culture and identity tie together as they are the things that shaped how an individual think and act, and how an individual think of other people around him. His identity(ies) will guide him to act in a certain way, and his culture will provide a foundation to him in deciding whether or not an act is considering as 'good' or 'bad'. While this can be a good thing, there is also the threat of stereotyping of identities or cultures, or, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said in her TED Talk, 'The Danger of a Single Story', which I have personally encountered in far too many occasions.

I have lost track of the amount of times I have been asked, both by my friends and random people in Malaysia, about the common stereotypes in the United States. Some of the questions I have been asked include questions like, "*Do you get stared at because you wear the hijab?*", "*Do you go to New York City every weekend to shop?*", "*Are the FBI, NSA and CIA all real? Are your lives there threatened every single day?*" and "*Do all your American friends come from super rich families with big mansions and all?*"

In a way, it annoys me that they can ask me such questions, because the questions seem to be shallow and uneducated. But then I realized that, it is not their fault that their perception of

Americans and life in the United States are so wrong. I realized that one of the major reasons for this stereotype of American and the American lifestyles by the people in Malaysia is the media itself. Mainstream television series and movies, such as *'Gossip Girl'*, *'The Devil Wears Prada'*, *'Rich Kids of Beverly Hills'* and *'Mean Girls'*, portray how Americans all live in a fabulous life of fashion and shopping, while in reality, that only portrays a small number of Americans in the United States. Not everyone that I meet here in Madison live an extravagant life. Not even all of them have even been outside of the Midwest, let alone to New York City or Los Angeles.

The fact that most American television shows and movies are located in the major cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami cause a lot of non-Americans, like my Malaysian friends, to think that all Americans live in big cities such as those. This 'single story' of Americans (even though it's technically a group of similar single stories) results in a stereotype of Americans as a group of people who live in cities, shop all day and party all night long, and undermines the real identity and culture of Americans.

It is also true on the opposite side of the argument, in which the identity and culture of Malaysia are lost, due to the way they are portrayed in the media. In the first class for my Accounting course this semester, my instructor jokingly asked me if Malaysia loses an airplane a week, in light of the MH370 that went missing last year, as well as the plane crashes earlier in the semester. His question, albeit only being a joke, highlight Malaysia in a very negative manner, due to how the media has been talking about the disasters, and I felt slightly mad at how he could ask such questions to us.

I have also faced various stereotypical questions throughout my two years volunteering for International REACH. As a REACH volunteer, I would sometimes give a presentation about Malaysia and our cultures. My audiences have mostly been school students, ranging from 8-15

years old, though sometimes I also present to students on campus. My partner and I would usually prepare a presentation on the basic facts about Malaysia and some of the questions that people usually ask us, like the main races in Malaysia, the cultural food and traditional clothes. But sometimes, we get some questions from the audiences that we did not expect to be asked, and we were a little taken aback. Recently, I presented about Malaysia at Sandburg Elementary School, and one of the questions I received was if we have brick houses in Malaysia. The questioner was very surprised when I answered yes, and she replied saying that she thought the houses in Malaysia were built using wood.

There was also another encounter earlier this year during a holiday party that I attended with my coworkers. We were playing Cards against Humanity, and to be honest, that was the first time I have ever played that game. I believe that my physical appearance as a quiet Asian girl with a hijab kind of portrays this one image to my coworkers and supervisor, and that they look at me with the idea that I am an innocent and naïve person (not that I'm not). But as we progressed through the game, their perceptions changed with the responses that I gave to them throughout the game. Some of my coworkers received some pretty vulgar phrases during their turns (all in light of the game itself), and most of them were genuinely surprised when they found out that some of the answers were in fact from the girl that they thought were super innocent and nice. I can still remember the words from my supervisor when she said, "Wow Syaza, I am really seeing you in a new light now!", or the words from one of my coworkers, "I seriously did not expect this from you Syaza!" All I could do at that time was just smile, but in my head, I was thinking, "Well, now they see the other side of me.", which refers to my crazy and outspoken personality that I do not usually portray in public.

These are just various anecdotes and examples to portray the problems involved with an individual's identity and culture. Mainstream media in Malaysia would only show the fashionable and hyped up life in the United States, but they would rarely show any documentaries on the homelessness issue in the United States. News channels would only show how a small number of Americans are against Islam and how 'bad' the Islamophobia is, but they would rarely show the majority of Americans who are accepting of Muslims and how Muslims are able to live together in a close-knit community, like I am able to in Madison, Wisconsin. While it may be hard to actually control how the media chooses to portray a story about something, we must take it upon ourselves to look at a story from multiple angles. The media can be a good source of information, but we must realize that there will always be more to learn about a community. By choosing to only listen to one part of the story, we are, in Adichie's words, 'breaking an individual's dignity' by stereotyping about their identity(ies) and cultures.