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# FESTIVE CAPITALISM AND THE ANTAGONIST: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SPONSORED CHINESE NEW YEAR SHORTS IN YOUTUBE FROM MALAYSIA IN 2022

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of antagonists in Chinese New Year shorts as cultural products to uphold capitalist ideology. Employing qualitative content analysis and character theory within the Marxist framework of cultural commodification, the examination of 50 shorts available in YouTube from Malaysia in 2022 found that regular forms of antagonists persisted. The shorts revolved around middle-class families, allowing the audience to easily relate to the overall narratives. Positive endings create a favourable impression of the sponsored brands, promoting long-term consumerism and brand support. The commodification of Chinese psychology is evident through the creation of fear during the festive season.

*Keywords: festive capitalism, festive seasons, antagonists, capitalist ideology, consumerism*

## INTRODUCTION

Watching Chinese New Year (CNY) films or *hèsuìpiān* (贺岁片) has become a common activity during CNY. Via CNY films screened during the festive season, businesses could place their products in the films, subtly registering these products in the mind of viewers to maintain brand awareness. However, with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement Control Order (MCO) in 2020, the film industry was hit with cinema closure and reduced cinema patronage. In Malaysia, cinemas suspended their movie screenings and concession operations (The Straits Times, 2020). Although it was quite safe for cinemas to operate (Liang et al., 2021), most remained shut. Films that were supposed to be released in 2020, including CNY films, were put on hold (Brzeski, 2020; Tartaglione, 2020). Thus, businesses had to ensure continuous awareness of their brands via a similar medium namely short films or shorts.

During the MCO, digital media activities, especially online media, increased (Vase.ai, 2020) with YouTube being the most used social media platform in Malaysia in 2020 and 2021 (DataReportal, 2020; DataReportal 2021). About 70 percent of YouTube channels watched

by Malaysians are localised content (Digital Business Lab, 2022). In Indonesia, YouTube plays an important role in bridging local filmmakers with the audience (Dyna et al., 2023). This indicates that YouTube could be a promising platform for businesses to engage the general public. Yeow et al. (2022) suggest that businesses should consider using social media platforms to engage consumers instead of depending on traditional marketing. Gan et al. (2022) highlight that social media is a popular and effective platform for promotion and development. Thus, sponsored shorts are a good and increasingly important alternative for reaching out to the general public.

In the context of the commercialisation of CNY via the mass media, it is important to check and understand the extent to which CNY shorts produced in Malaysia, especially sponsored ones, are used as propaganda vehicles by capitalists. CNY cultural products are creations of the Chinese society to reflect the CNY festival and its essence, thus the potential of using them for profit and exploitative agenda increases. CNY rituals and celebrations have gone through local adaptation and new ones are being created from time to time (Nuyen, 2022; Qiu, 2017).

Beyond entertainment, festive CNY shorts serve as marketing tools for businesses with embedded commercial objectives. Within the capitalist landscape, sponsors are highly concerned about their return of investment and feel obligated to have their products and branding visible through publicity generated and sponsored ventures (Mohamad-Noor et al., 2022). This would be the same for sponsors of festive CNY shorts. To properly reflect the sponsors' products and brand, the narratives and characters' portrayals within the festive shorts would need to be aligned with the sponsoring businesses' visions and missions. The challenge to find the right tone for antagonists in sponsored CNY shorts is tricky as they need to be engaging enough to fuel the story without presenting the brands in a negative light.

Therefore, this study delves into this realm of antagonists in CNY shorts, exploring how the alignment of antagonist portrayal with business goals serve the interest of the business capitalist. By investigating the types and forms of antagonists portrayed in sponsored festive CNY shorts produced in Malaysia in 2022 within the context of modern capitalism and consumerism society, the study provides insights into the types of antagonists and forms of conflicts that exist in sponsored Malaysian CNY shorts in 2022, the manner in which the antagonists are portrayed, and a description of modern capitalism and the consumerism society of Malaysia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A short should be less than 40 minutes in length, usually without a secondary plot line. It excludes previews, advertising films, sequences from feature-length films, unaired episodes of established TV series, and unsold TV series pilots (Cooper & Dancyger, 2005; MasterClass, 2021). Shorts are usually a concentrated piece of storytelling produced at a significantly lower cost (Nassar, 2021), with a narrative structure made up of story, action, and plot (Reich, 2017).

### Antagonists

Character theory asserts that a film's character can be understood via the character's moral quality and power (Bergstrand & Jasper, 2018) and by how the characters are constructed with various cinematic techniques, their functions or purposes in the films, and their cultural and

social significance (Eder et al., 2010). In this study, the character of interest is the antagonist, a character with direct oppositional objectives and intentions of the protagonist and with necessary power that challenges the protagonist. Antagonists are not necessarily evil or bad in nature; rather, the protagonist and the antagonist do not get along due to different purposes or opinions within the context of the film. The objectives of the antagonists could incite the audience to reflect upon their own self-hypocrisies and weaknesses (Samancioğlu, 2012) and ought to receive some special attention in films (Eder, 2012). Generally, there are four main types of antagonists: villains, conflict-creators, inanimate forces, and the protagonists themselves (Seger, 2009). Character theory asserts that antagonists' displays of cunningness, disrespect, and cruelty towards good but powerless victims can generate powerful emotions of fear and hatred in the audience (Bergstrand & Jasper, 2018).

In terms of the portrayal of antagonists, Croley et al. (2017 in Wagner et al., 2023) assert that antagonists display a higher incidence of dermatologic than protagonists, and over time this portrayal becomes more extreme. Bogdan et al. (1982 in Safran, 1998) highlight that people with disabilities are often stereotyped as dangerous, especially in horror and suspense genres. Longmore (2003) observed that antagonists are commonly stereotyped in horror films, where their disabilities represent who they are. Giving disabilities to antagonists reflects and reinforces common prejudices against handicapped people, i.e., that disability is a punishment for evil, disabled people are embittered by their "fate", and disabled people resent the non-disabled and would, if they could, destroy them (Longmore, 2003). In animated Disney films, Sharmin and Sattar (2018) find that male antagonists are usually obese or burly but also have the vigour and handsomeness of the male protagonists. The male antagonists would usually use their intelligence and ability to strategise while being motivated by status symbols associated with patriarchal masculinity to achieve their goals (Bradley, 1995 in Sharmin & Sattar, 2018). In contrast, female Disney antagonists use manipulation, cunningness, and seduction which are motivated by vainness and obsession with appearance.

Generally, the idea of evil and villains in films is strongly tied to the culture and societal changes of the observed society because the concept of evil itself changes and reflects the values and fear system at the time. The cultural factors that could affect one's perception of evil include religion, social ecology, and regulatory social institutions (Graham et al., 2016). In Hollywood films, McClure and Hasseler (2014) conclude that antagonists' representations in films from the 1950s to the 2000s had a lot to do with the growing complexity of the audience and the turmoil that took place during the production of the films in America. Lately, more villain-protagonist focused films have been produced. Films like *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), *John Wick* (2014), *Joker* (2019), and *Cruella* (2021) put the 'villains' as the central character, indirectly making them the protagonist of the film. Hence, the commonly known good-guys are now the antagonists. Nevertheless, instead of hatred, Guo (2023) found that the evil characters are loved by the audience due to the audience's sympathy, life experience, social reality, and aesthetic changes.

In the context of CNY films, antagonists may challenge the traditionally cherished values of CNY including reunion, filial piety, harmony, wealth, and health. CNY themed films produced in Malaysia are generally light-hearted in nature. As early as 2018, the landscape of CNY shorts in Malaysia had undergone a significant transformation, adopting a more comedic tone in contrast to the previously prevalent focus on sentimentality (Pikri, 2018). This trend is also seen in recent Malaysian CNY films like *Kongsi Raya* (2022), *Small Town Hero* (2022), *Nasi Lemak 1.0* (2022), *Little Sunshine* (2023), and *Ma, I Love You* (2023) which feature comedic

content and highlight antagonists who disrupt harmony due to internal conflicts stemming from societal challenges. These behaviours that challenge traditional norms not only enrich the audience's film experience, but also force them to re-evaluate their own interpretations of CNY values. Antagonists are also reported to have a true self from what is being portrayed (Umscheid et al., 2022). Antagonists' disregard for legal or societal boundaries that restrict the protagonists (Sim, 2018) would also force the audience to evaluate the coexistence of CNY traditions and surrounding changes. By challenging the familiar, antagonists in CNY films highlight the delicate interplay of tradition and change of CNY festive season.

### **Commercialisation of CNY**

Under the Marxist frameworks, CNY traditions and superstitions would only be useful to the capitalist when they are profitable in one way or another. The emphasis on wealth and health during CNY is a good means to be exploited. In addition to the Confucianism belief in the value of filial piety, CNY is a very good means for profit maximisation. Traditionally, the capitalism economic system can be characterised by the production and exchange of commodities; human labour-power itself is a commodity that can be freely bought and sold in a capitalist market (Ajvazi, 2021). The working class is separated from the product that they produce and from each other, and begins to lose all the skills that they used to have owing to the increasing division of labour and dependency on machinery (Ajvazi, 2021). Consumerism is usually excessive consumption of consumer goods without regard to the negative impacts on people and the planet (Lister, 2016). It is believed that this expenditure by the consumer is the key driver of the economy and that encouraging consumers to spend is a major policy goal; thus, it is a positive phenomenon that fuels economic growth (Hayes, 2022). To do this, big organisations would overhaul their strategies over time to ensure continuous support for their product.

CNY is used by corporations in their drive for more profit. Playing with the ideas of health, wealth, and happiness, the celebration of CNY has been tied with an abundance of everything, prosperity of wealth, and getting with the new and doing away with the old. Since CNY is also a means to rest for the year ahead, laborious tasks need to be reduced. All these equal extra expenditures benefit the capitalist in the long term. With the rise of capitalism, CNY has become one of the means for driving profit by relentlessly playing the cultural cards of health and wealth. The commercialisation and commodification of CNY distort how others see the Chinese and reinforce the model minority myth in Malaysia. Not only are the Chinese stereotyped as wealthy and materialistic, the monetisation of CNY also risks the misinterpretation of CNY cultural practices that make the events distinct and emotionally resonant (Wang, 2021). Taking this into consideration, the capitalist marketing strategies targeting the general Chinese in Malaysia during CNY would no longer rely on an isolated approach. In other words, their strategies would need to be 'updated' from time to time to take advantage of the current situation to ensure profitable business. In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, CNY reunion dinners were limited to 15 family members living within a 10km radius and must not involve interstate or inter-district travel (Farik, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, businesses incurred losses as they were not allowed to operate as usual (Tan, 2021; Zakiah, 2021). However, in 2022, under Phase Four of the National Recovery Plan, the restrictions of the previous year were relaxed (Mazwin, 2022), and businesses were ready to recoup their losses.

For the capitalist, the mass media is a great means to make their products known. One of the aspects that the media fosters in a capitalist society is ideologies that are constructed, disseminated, reproduced, contradicted, and contested (Fuchs, 2016). As a form of commodity, sponsored CNY shorts as a form of cultural product on its own could transform other significant CNY cultural products into commercial products, and at the same time overcome geographical constraints and create connections among people. For the context of this study, a sponsored short film refers to a short film that receives any form of aid from a brand or organisation in exchange for some form of brand integration, character endorsements, product placement and/or storyline alignment. This needs to be differentiated from advertising (short) films. Advertising (short) films are paid communication products meant for marketing communication using cinematographic techniques and advertising theory, which are later broadcast via the mass media to provide information about products, goods, and services (Kholisoh et al. 2021).

Via shorts, media corporations could transform various aspects of CNY culture into a form of commodity that is determined by, expressive of, and functional to the structural imperatives of capitalism. Generally, the media would capture audience attention to be sold to advertisers, while the cultural products are structurally functional to capitalism (Mirrlees, 2013). Following this, this study perceives shorts generally, but specifically sponsored CNY shorts are commodities of the capitalist system and ultimately serve the goals of the capitalist. Via different forms of product placements, the media could directly make their product known while indirectly serving the goals of the capitalist. In screen product placement or simple product placement (Dempsey, 2019), brands' products are non-prominent and are not mentioned at all, but an appropriate duration of screen time would be given to the product on the screen to be noticeable (Kongmanon & Petison, 2022). When the brands' product names are part of the dialogues and directly mentioned by the characters, it would be a form of script product placement or integrated explicit product placement (Kongmanon & Petison, 2022; Dempsey, 2019). Another form of product placement known as plot product placement or non-integrated explicit product placement (Kongmanon & Petison, 2022) happens when the brands' products are always connected to the characters and play a role in the storyline. Product placement is found to enhance audience brand recall (Mohd & Shahrel, 2018; Song et al., 2020) and is effective as a form of subtle advertisement (Todua & Robakidze, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

Antagonists are seldom the subject matter of film studies. Antagonists' negative projections seem to negate the very idea of research for learning, awareness, and truth seeking. This produces an ideal environment for the capitalists as they could utilise these less understood characteristics to better enhance their business, i.e., the creation of unprecedented fear or prolonging of unnecessary existing fear that could only be resolved by the product's existence. With sponsored shorts getting more popular not only among filmmakers but also the audience, the understanding of the exploitation of antagonists by the capitalist allows a better knowledge of the possible chain reaction that leads to unnecessary consumerism, especially during festive seasons.

In the context of character theory in relevance to capitalism society, the antagonists' characters are believed to serve the interest of the capitalist business. This is done by presenting the antagonists' characters as natural and universal in general. Research on visual contents like cartoons that normalise authoritarian relationships, promote consumerism and entrepreneurship, support beliefs about work that employers would value (McGregor, 2023),

films that present simulacra, pseudo needs, and create a pseudo world (Kinanti et al.,2020), and possibilities of social media to drive real-world protests and revolutions (Fuchs. 2018) had shown the prevalence of normalising capitalist ideology expressed through various forms of visual contents. The representation of reality that are not real themselves could be harmful to society in the long run.

Studies on the portrayal or representation of antagonists in festive content are very limited, let alone one that specifically focuses on CNY. Nevertheless, visual content of festive context tends to present ideals of social institutions harmony, charity, and romanticised festive seasons by imposing capitalist dominant ideology values and traditions on the viewers. Ismail et al. (2021) in their research on selected festive advertisements portray positive values that are intended to assist in fostering good relations among people of different cultural backgrounds. This false consciousness and culturally hegemonic ideals could encourage viewers to overlook existing issues of systemic inequalities and injustice, poverty, individualistic failures, suppress dissent and promote conformity to narrow views of festive seasons. Thus, this study of sponsored festive CNY shorts serves to reduce the gap in further understanding antagonist characters in festive CNY short films in 2022 and the manner in which they are portrayed in the context of a capitalist environment like Malaysia.

### METHODOLOGY

To investigate the types and forms of antagonists portrayed in sponsored CNY shorts produced in Malaysia in 2022 within the context of modern capitalism and consumerism society, this study adopted the qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach. QCA systematically describes the meaning of qualitative material by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame (Schreier, 2012). This allows the study to better understand various elements that are already established in the study of visual content while further unearthing the themes in the aspects of the portrayal of the antagonist and the conflict created. Figure 1 simplifies the three main stages of this study.

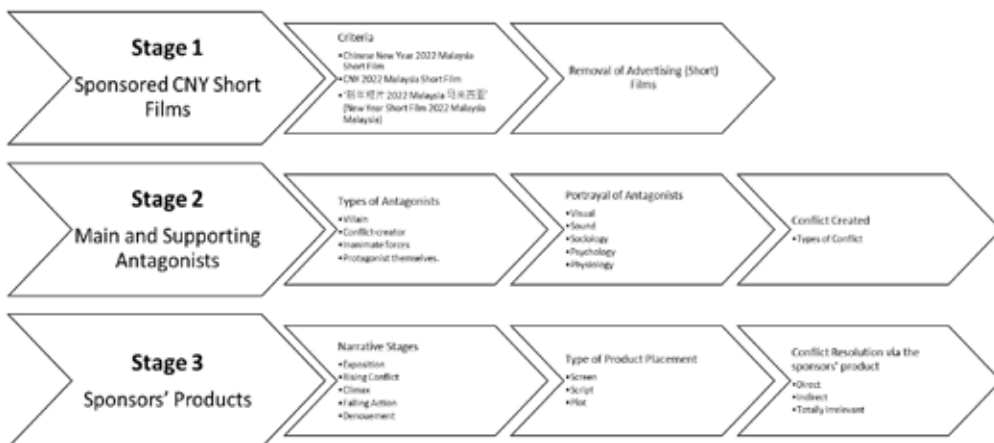


Figure 1: Stages of Research

In Stage 1, YouTube platform was used to locate all the analysed shorts, i.e., by typing ‘Chinese New Year 2022 Malaysia Short Film’ or ‘CNY 2022 Malaysia Short Film’ or ‘新年

短片 2022 Malaysia 马来西亚' (New Year Short Film 2022 Malaysia Malaysia), and setting the filter to 'This Year' to ease the search and to avoid CNY shorts from previous years. Only sponsored shorts that do not directly promote products were studied. Advertising (short) films were excluded from the analysis list. The outcome was the identification of 50 sponsored CNY shorts.

Stage 2 focused on gathering information on the antagonists. This was done by identifying the main and supporting (if any) antagonists in the shorts, and the type of antagonist they were. At the same time, the conflicts created by the antagonist in relation to the CNY festive were also pointed out. The types of antagonists were categorised as either a villain, a conflict-creator, inanimate forces and/or the protagonist themselves. Since shorts are visual and audio-based medium, the antagonists were further analysed by looking into these aspects. On top of that, Reich (2017) also suggest that the portrayal of the film characters should consider the subtler aspects: sociology, psychology, and physiology. The study had taken these five aspects into account.

Stage 3 looked into the positioning of the sponsors' products in accordance with the five plot stages: exposition, rising conflict, climax, falling action, and denouement. With each plot stage, the type of product placement namely screen, script or plot product placement was also identified. The antagonists were then put into the context of the business nature of the sponsors to identify if the products act as direct, indirect or totally irrelevant to the resolution of the conflict. This allowed the study to identify the importance of the product in the short film. By synthesising information collected from Stage 2 and Stage 3, this study was able to understand and describe how antagonist characters in Malaysian-sponsored CNY shorts are capitalised into cultural products that benefit businesses in the long term.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Based on the shorts accumulated from the video-sharing site YouTube, 50 sponsored shorts of CNY in 2022 by various companies in Malaysia were studied. For reference purposes, only the titles of the shorts were used in the discussion. These shorts can be found on YouTube by typing in the shorts' titles.

The nature of the business of the sponsored shorts was banking, broadcast organisation, convenience retail chain stores, delivery services, food-related business, healthcare, household appliances, insurance company, property developers, utility service providers, and telecommunication. Sponsors that are not within the categories listed above are categorised under Others. The shorts are in various languages: pure Mandarin, pure Cantonese, pure English, and the rest in a mixture of two or more languages which consist of Mandarin, Cantonese, English, Hokkien, Malay language, Tamil and ethnic Sarawak languages. The shortest shorts is *Mak Saya Pemandan Rambut Terhebat* (2022) at around two minutes, and the longest short film is *Gathering in Happiness* (2022) at around 15 minutes. Each identified short film was watched at least twice; first, to get an overall idea of the narrative of the short film and to identify the main antagonist, and second, to scrutinise the forms of the appearance of the brand. Data were collected as indicated in the methodology. The categorisation of the data was checked and rechecked to ensure the consistency of the process. Based on the data collected, the following observations were made.

## Antagonists

Based on the collected data, all four types of antagonists are present in the analysed shorts. The most common form of antagonist is the conflict creators, followed by the protagonist themselves, villains, and inanimate forces.

### Conflict Creator

For CNY short films in 2022, the conflict creators are the most commonly observed antagonists. Conflict creators are not necessarily evil, but they usually have conflicting objectives with the protagonist. Conflict creators tend to produce conflicts that are more pessimistic. The commonly used conflicts created by them are boastfulness, interrupting others, being occupied, stubbornness, and desire for approval. In *Shopee CNY Sale 2022 is Here!* (2022), *Ah Ma Knows Best* (2022), *Prepare for HUATEVER* (2022), and *Blessing* (2022), the antagonists are boastful and tried to impress others by showing off their favourable circumstances. In *Chinese New Year Pitch* (2022), *Family is a Treasure* (2022), and *J&T Express CNY* (2022), the antagonists tended to disrupt the day-to-day routine of the protagonist.

As for being occupied, *Create A Marvelous New Year* (2022) and *Hēr Prósperity* (2022) portrayed antagonists who did not comprehend others' value of time. In *Create A Marvelous New Year* (2022), the protagonist was put into an uncomfortable situation as the son failed to reply to her messages due to being preoccupied with work. Meanwhile, *Hēr Prósperity* (2022) showed an antagonist that reprimanded the protagonist for being occupied with work in her restaurant. In *Tiger Roars in Happiness* (2022) and *Make Our Luck* (2022), the antagonists' refusal to adopt new changes is the main obstacle in the shorts. In *The Journey* (2022) and *Dr Ko Chinese New Year Short Film 2022* (2022), the protagonists had to take action in order to gain approval from the respected antagonists. While *The Journey* (2022) portrayed a father who did not approve of the lifestyle of his son, *Dr Ko Chinese New Year Short Film 2022* (2022) showed an aunty who did not approve of the lifestyle of her son's girlfriend.

### Protagonist Himself

This form of antagonist has internal conflicts that hinder his own objective. In other words, the protagonist could be seen as self-sabotaging. However, this might not be necessarily a bad thing. The protagonist who is also the antagonist tends to think about the well-being of others as well. This could be seen in *Pride* (2022) and *The Little Things* (2022) where the protagonists did things that they believe were for the good of others. Eventually, they realised that their actions were misunderstood by the family members and caused more harm in the long term. In *Always be There* (2022), the male protagonist cum antagonist tried not to get his family members worried after losing his job. However, his action made the family even more worried. Other types of conflicts created by the antagonists in this category were being shamed (*Mak Saya Pendandan Rambut Terhebat*, 2022), taking care of the family's health (*Drink More Water!*, 2022), being protective (*WonderFu Fortune*, 2022), and having confidence in oneself (*The Fú-Growers*, 2022; *Ong Lai Tart*, 2022). Generally, in the shorts studied, antagonists in this category can be seen to have a more selfless mentality.

### Villain-antagonist

Villains usually belittle the protagonist or have bad intentions with his actions. Among the animate antagonists, villains did not occur frequently in the shorts analysed. The bully-type villains could be observed in *Fish Ball* (2022) and *The Worst Feng Shui Master* (2022) where the antagonists took advantage of the weaknesses of the protagonists and made their lives more



difficult than it already was. In *Apa NKong Bilang* (2022), we saw that the grandfather, although appearing only in the mind of the protagonist, was enough to threaten the protagonist to reach home before night time. In *Roaring Chinese New Year with myNEWS* (2022), we were shown a more relaxed villain as the sister tried to annoy the working brother into going back home for a reunion dinner. The parents in *The Dream* (2022) were portrayed as the stumbling stone for the protagonist to achieve her dreams in taekwondo. Villains were not observed to be a popular approach for CNY shorts in Malaysia in 2022.

### **Inanimate Forces**

Inanimate forces antagonists represent the non-human power that impairs the objective of the protagonist. The main form of inanimate forces antagonists shown in the CNY 2022 shorts in Malaysia focused on the COVID-19 pandemic that separated family members as seen in *A Long-Awaited Reunion Dinner* (2022) and *Love Has No Barriers* (2022), possibilities of catastrophes involving family members in *Journey to the WoW* (2022) and *Legend of The Air Guardian* (2022), and *Taste of the Year* (2022).

### **Types of Conflict Themes**

Regardless of the types of antagonists, the most obvious themes used as conflicts in the shorts analysed were being boastful, disuniting, and being occupied. The main conflict that occurred due to boastfulness was to impress others. To do this, the antagonists had to disrespect the protagonist in a certain form. In *Ah Ma Knows Best* (2022), *Prepare for HUATEVER* (2022), *Shopee CNY Sale 2022 is Here!* (2022), and *Quarantine/Neighbour* (2022), economic status was used as the basis for the antagonists to show off. However, economics was not the only means to be boastful as shown in *Blessing* (2022) where having better circumstances in comparison to others was used to portray boastfulness.

In terms of disunity, the COVID-19 pandemic was the main culprit, both directly and indirectly. The observed CNY shorts tended to use the pandemic as the main reason for family members not being able to gather to celebrate CNY. In *Love Has No Barriers* (2022), the elder brother was diagnosed with COVID-19 upon returning to Malaysia to celebrate CNY, thus had to be home quarantined. Even on the day of the family reunion dinner, the elder brother was still unable to join the family. In *A Long-Awaited Reunion Dinner* (2022), the son and his family were not able to cross states to join his parent in the *kampung* to celebrate CNY. What made it worse was that the son and family had decided not to celebrate CNY with the parents the year before. In *Legend of The Air Guardian* (2022), the COVID-19 virus was made the culprit that disrupted people's lives and the overcoming of the pandemic led to the celebration of CNY. Other than that, bad luck (*WonderFu Fortune*, 2022) and floods (*Berani*, 2022) were also used to create disunity.

Being too occupied with one's responsibilities to the extent of ignoring loved ones was another main conflict seen. In *Create A Marvelous New Year* (2022), the son was so occupied with work that he did not return the calls and text messages of the protagonist-mother. A similar theme was also seen in *Always Be There* (2022) when the antagonist-daughter rejected the calls from the panicking brother. In *Hēr Prosperity* (2022), the protagonist-daughter was so occupied with her restaurant that the mother was unhappy with her for frequently being absent from family occasions. A less extreme situation of being absent could be seen in *Roaring Chinese New Year with myNEWS* (2022) where the male protagonist had to work

on CNY eve. In *Lion's Heart* (2022), the antagonist-daughter could be seen to be occupied with her lion dance activities to the extent that she did not manage to return home for the CNY reunion dinner. Other less regularly seen conflicts include disapproving of others (*The Journey*, 2022), interrupting others (*Chinese New Year Pitch*, 2022), being stubborn (*Make Our Luck*, 2022), being solitary (*The Photobomb*, 2022), being rigid (*Apa NKong Bilang*, 2022), being uncooperative (*Ong Lai Tart*, 2022), being rude (*The Undivided Heart*, 2022), being thrifty (*Huat Da Fatt*, 2022), and ignorance (*Greetings Video*, 2022).

## Portrayal of Antagonists

The portrayal of the antagonists was examined from different aspects. The aspects of visual and sound were directly observed from the shorts. The aspects of sociology, psychology, and physiology were subtler and analysed based on indications from the visual and sound.

### Visuals

Visuals play an important role in portraying any characters in shorts as the main nature of this medium is to stimulate sight. The observed shorts mainly used lighting to achieve natural looks for the scene. Both indoor and outdoor scenes were lighted to achieve the natural look of the scenes. In *Fish Ball* (2022), the bullying took place on a naturally lighted street where three female bullies in secondary school uniforms intimidated the protagonist. The same was observed in *A Tiger's Heart* (2022) where the antagonist was shown in a naturally lighted surrounding when he was demotivated during a lion dance training session. As for the indoor scenes in *Make Our Luck* (2022) and *Huat Da Fatt* (2022), the protagonists were lighted naturally for the indoor settings.

However, several shorts still utilised some distinctive lighting to portray the antagonists. In *The Auspicious Time* (2022), before the loss of the almanack, the antagonist grandmother who believed in almanack reading was generally shown in low-key lighting. The low-key chiaroscuro lighting was also seen in the portrayal of a visiting Aunty in *Ah Ma Knows Best* (2022) where she was lighted up with a greenish-plain low-key background. The scene made the Aunty-antagonist looked spooky and lifeless. The makeup on her further made her look devilish. The use of low-key chiaroscuro lighting to portray the antagonists was also observed in *Hēr Prósperity* (2022), *J&T Express CNY* (2022), *The Little Things* (2022), and *Always Be There* (2022). Special effect lighting was sometimes used as observed in the usage of blue-red lighting for the antagonist's grandmother in *The Auspicious Time* (2022) and the use of lightning flash to indicate speed for the grandmother in *The Photobomb* (2022).

The usage of makeup and hairstyle in the shorts were generally natural for most of the antagonists. Exaggerated makeup, hairstyle, and wardrobe were not noticeable on the antagonists except in *Celebrate the Grandest* (2022). As for the props used, this pretty much depends on the nature of the shorts, especially the sponsoring brands. When the nature of business of the sponsoring brands was monetary institutions, banking apps (*Back to the FU-ture*, 2022) or card services (*Ong Lai Tart*, 2022) could be seen. If the sponsoring brands are food-related, then relevant food props would be used. For example, McDonald's burger meals were seen in *Mak Saya Pendandan Rambut Terhebat* (2022), Knife Cooking Oil for frying in *Always Be There* (2022), Julie's Love Letters in *The Worst Feng Shui Master* (2022), and Grab food delivery apps in *Ah Ma Knows Best* (2022) and *Prepare for HUATEVER* (2022).

## Sound

For the aspect of sound, the study looked into the background music and dialogues used in the shorts. Comical music and slow-paced background music were observed to be mainly used. Comical music reduced the seriousness of the scenes when the antagonists performed a misconduct. This could be seen in shorts like *Hearts Build Homes* (2022) when the parents were behaving in ways that made the son uncomfortable or in *Drink More Water!* (2022) when the mother kept asking the family members to drink water. Even when the antagonists were portrayed very seriously (especially visually), comical music was able to create the same effect such as in *Apa NKong Bilang* (2022) and *Tiger Roars in Happiness* (2022) where the evilness of the antagonists was mitigated. Another type of background music used was slow-paced music. The pairing of slow-paced music with the antagonists was also able to achieve a similar effect to comical music in the observed CNY shorts. The usage of non-diegetic slow-paced music gave a sense of 'it is not really that bad' regardless of the performance of the antagonists. Due to the context of CNY, background music did not give a sense of sadness or hopelessness. In *Family* (2022), the slow-paced music created a sense of warmth and hope. A similar situation could also be seen in *Mak Saya Pendandan Rambut Terhebat* (2022), *Fish Ball* (2022), *Lion's Heart* (2022), *It's Not Hard When It Comes From The Heart* (2022), *Family is a Treasure* (2022), and *Always Be There* (2022).

As for the dialogues used, the antagonists could be seen to speak in a stern tone to portray a sense of authority (*Key to Happiness*, 2022; *Make Our Luck*, 2022; *The Auspicious Time*, 2022), a harsh tone to enhance authority (*The Undivided Heart*, 2022; *Hēr Prósperity*, 2022; *Pride*, 2022), a proud tone to show off (*Shopee CNY Sale 2022 is Here!*, 2022; *Ah Ma Knows Best*, 2022), and sarcastic tone to build ego (*Quarantine/Neighbour*, 2022; *The Worst Feng Shui Master*, 2022; *Fish Ball*, 2022). At times, the antagonists' voice tones were also used to achieve positive outcomes such as childish tones (*The Fú-Growers*, 2022; *Roaring Chinese New Year with myNEWS* 2022), persuasive tones (*Huat Da Fatt*, 2022; *J&T Express CNY*, 2022), regretful tones (*The Little Things*, 2022), and soft-spoken tones (*You Wouldn't Want to be CAUGHT in this Family's SITUATION*, 2022). Neutral tones where the antagonists' dialogues were calm and respectful were also employed. This could be seen in *Blessing* (2022), *Greetings Video* (2022) and *Glue of the Family* (2022).

## Sociology

The sociology of the antagonists was indirectly indicated as the shorts did not state clearly the economic class, occupation, and education of the protagonist and antagonists. This study made inferences about the antagonists' sociology based on their direct surroundings: houses, living lifestyles, attire and so on. Based on this, antagonists in the CNY shorts were seen to be mainly from the middle-class family. These antagonists were portrayed as having enough income to live rather comfortably as they were not only able to fulfil their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing, but also sanitation, education, and healthcare. These showed that the antagonists were able to fork out some money to ensure a certain amount of enjoyment in their lives. For example, in *WonderFu Fortune* (2022), the antagonist, who was dressed in an embroidered short-sleeved cheongsam with minimum accessories, was doing her shopping in a mall in preparation for the upcoming CNY. She lived alone and comfortably in a spacious single-story house that was simple yet fully furnished. The same environment could also be seen in *J&T Express CNY* (2022). Even though the son was working far from home, the antagonist who was sick with dementia lived with her husband in a decent house that was complete with basic necessities. In *The Auspicious Time* (2022), the antagonist who was

superstitious about the almanack lived with her other five family members in a traditional house which was spacious and had lots of rooms.

Some of the antagonists were also portrayed as poor, yet their basic necessities were still met. In *Family* (2022) for example, the three orphans living with a caretaker in the orphanage were troublemakers, but they were properly taken care of. Others were shown to be better economically such as entrepreneurs or close relatives but with declining businesses (*The Fú-Growers*, 2022; *Chinese New Year Pitch*, 2022; *Ong Lai Tart*, 2022; *The Undivided Heart*, 2022). Generally, all the antagonists shown in the shorts were not from poverty-stricken families. In other words, these antagonists had a certain level of purchasing power. Antagonists who were more affluent were shown to have better property and lifestyle, and those who were living enough to get by and comfortable were not wretched.

### **Psychology**

The antagonists are usually portrayed as emotionally stronger externally. In *A Tiger's Heart* (2022), the psychology of the antagonist was on the stronger side as he portrayed aggressive and determined traits when he decided to quit the lion dance practice and competition. The same traits were also seen in *The Little Things* (2022) where the antagonist held a grudge against his strict father, in *Berani* (2022) where the antagonist was determined not to turn up for the stage show, in *Celebrate the Grandest* (2022) where the main antagonist was powerful and aggressive in running the household, and in *The Dream* (2022) when the father was very strict with the protagonist's choice of activities. Psychologically weaker antagonists were usually less aggressive but maintained persuasive, energetic, confident, and adept traits. In *Huat Da Fatt* (2022), the antagonists were shown to be persuasive and confident in wanting to buy what was not necessary for CNY. This persuasion trait was also seen in *Hearts Build Homes* (2022) where the antagonist tried to talk his parents into adopting the new lifestyle of the new house, and in *Chinese New Year Pitch* (2022) where the antagonists tried to lead the protagonist to adopt a fresher idea for a CNY short film. Other traits of the less aggressive antagonists could be seen in *The Fú-Growers* (2022) where the energetic antagonist was quite confident of his limited skills in growing plants, in *Prepare for HUATEVER* (2022) where the antagonists were very energetic and confident in ensuring that their visit to the protagonists' house was a success, and in *Create A Marvelous New Year* (2022) where the highly capable antagonist son was portrayed as very focused with his work in the company.

Weak antagonists, especially the ones with feelings of guilt, were not common in the CNY shorts studied. In *Back to the FU-ture* (2022), the antagonist was unsure about his lifestyle and the manner CNY should be celebrated. Due to this, the antagonist required continuous help from the protagonists. The same observation was also seen in *Greetings Video* (2022) where the antagonists, being Chinese, had no idea how to properly celebrate CNY; in *Father* (2022) where the antagonist with dementia became more forgetful over time, and in *A Spark For Change* (2022) where the antagonist threw rubbish out of the car. These antagonists were hopeless, incapable, lazy or inadequate.

### **Physiology**

All combinations of antagonists in terms of their physiology existed in the analysed CNY shorts: young age (0 - 14 years old), working age (15 - 64 years old), and old age (65 and above) males and females. Young-age male antagonist could be observed in *Family* (2022), young-age female antagonists in *Ong Lai Tart* (2022) and *Fish Ball* (2022), working-age male antagonists in

*A Tiger's Heart* (2022) and *The Worst Feng Shui Master* (2022), working-age female antagonists in *The Photobomb* (2022) and *Drink More Water!* (2022), old-age male antagonists in *Family is a Treasure* (2022) and *The Journey* (2022), and old-age female antagonists in *Quarantine/Neighbour* (2022) and *The Auspicious Time* (2022).

Some shorts had mixed antagonists. In *Always Be There* (2022), a working-age male and a working-age female antagonist were used to depict two different narratives in a single short film. In *Huat Da Fatt* (2022) and *Chinese New Year Pitch* (2022), the group of closely related protagonists consists of different characters of different categories. The group of antagonists could be big like in *Prepare for HUATEVER* (2022) where the antagonists were made up of close relatives, distant relatives, friends and strangers. Generally, young antagonists were less frequently portrayed in the shorts. The antagonists were mainly from the working adults and old age categories.

In a nutshell, the antagonists were often portrayed naturally in terms of lighting, makeup, and wardrobe. Occasionally, some shorts would use more alternative methods to depict the antagonist. Props that were associated with the brands depended on the business nature of the sponsors. The props were presented in positive modes, especially when the props were directly used or handled by the antagonists. As for sound, the usage of comical background music and slow-paced background music were common to reduce the seriousness of the overall content. This built hopefulness to the overall aura of the shorts, especially when the antagonists would be speaking in stern, harsh, proud or sarcastic tones. Some antagonists were shown to be soft-spoken and would also speak in childish, persuasive, and regretful tones in the CNY shorts. While most of the narratives surrounded protagonists and antagonists from middle-class families with purchasing power, a few depicted a better-off living environment. Antagonists were usually portrayed as psychologically strong externally, with some on the weaker side occasionally. Physiology-wise, there were no specific gender or age groups that noticeably stood out from the rest.

### **Antagonists, Capitalism and CNY Consumerism**

CNY shorts from Malaysia in 2022 were noticeably naturalising the antagonists. The animate forms of antagonists were easily identified and regularly seen during CNY celebrations including parents, siblings, close relatives, and friends. Atypical antagonists namely the inanimate forces antagonists, which were made up mainly of COVID-19, were also a phenomenon close to the society between 2020 and 2022. In terms of the technical aspects of the shorts, the visuals and the sound, the antagonists were portrayed in normal lighting, with natural makeup and wardrobe. The dialogues were conversational without being verbose or lexiphanic. Not adhering to the common stereotypes that perceived Chinese as achieving a higher degree of socioeconomic success, the economic background of the antagonists in the shorts was predominantly middle class with strong psychological characteristics. Compared to older antagonists, younger antagonists were also more likely to be portrayed as individualistic, more liberal in spending, having short-term mindsets, and more inclined to indulgence than restraint. The cultural cards of wealth were scarcely ever played by both the protagonists and antagonists. Psychological health and happiness were, however, constantly employed. The usage of the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the antagonists could also be perceived as taking advantage of the current situation for possible profit. In other

words, these antagonists were designed based on people or events the viewers could easily relate to during CNY celebrations.

Extreme forms of antagonists could backfire as the narrative of the shorts would be less trustworthy, leading to the viewers perceiving the shorts as simple entertainment without being able to fully engage with the overall narrative. For businesses that sponsor CNY shorts, designing believable characters that could assist in effective marketing and branding is important. Since the antagonist is an important character that carries the narrative forward by possessing oppositional objectives of the protagonist, a certain amount of attention would need to be put on the existence of the antagonists. Realistic antagonists who are relatable and logical on top of reasonable narratives would create subtle antagonist characters, despite being not very important yet memorable and motivate the narrative to move forward.

In the context of capitalism, antagonists were depicted as ordinary characters while exhibiting the sponsors' product via plot, screen or script product placement. The concept of 'ordinary' is important in the market-driven economy of capitalism that relies on the vast majority of 'ordinary' middle-class people whose purchasing power is increasing (Donmaz & Sayil, 2017). The usage of shorts as a marketing strategy has also become more important, especially with the development of mobile internet (Xu, 2023). While most of the observed CNY shorts were shot with sponsors' brands being subtly shown, a few did make the brands pretty obvious. Since most of the brands were not foreign to the viewers, the CNY shorts consistently ended with positive vibes, thus allowing the products to have a favourable impression and made the viewers feel good. The main conclusion of the shorts surrounded the main idea of happiness where everyone felt good about everyone else, including the antagonists. Using this feel-good strategy, CNY shorts are very cost-effective means for maintaining continuous consumerism and support from the general viewers, especially with future content creators that would focus more on creating and fostering audience rather than closing sales (Falcón, 2018).

The antagonists in the shorts were generally constructed, disseminated, reproduced, contradicted, and contested to fit the ideology of the capitalist. The antagonists were essential to ensure that the conflicts created in the narrative were credible enough for the viewers, yet not to the extent of tarnishing the sponsors' brands. These CNY shorts had been commodified into indirect trading platforms. CNY is usually associated with material abundance, the prosperity of wealth, and getting with the new and disposing of the old, but these were not the main themes reflected in most of the shorts studied. However, the commodification of physical CNY cultural products was not evident. What is more prevalent is the commodification of Chinese psychology. Antagonists were observed to more regularly generating psychological conflicts rather than materialistic-based conflicts which created disharmony among the protagonists.

The creation of unprecedented fear or prolonging of unnecessary existing fear during CNY consistently reminded the viewers of the existence of the antagonists. The psychological CNY commodity had been determined by, expressive of, and functional to the structural imperatives of capitalism. In the long term, festive shorts in general and sponsored CNY shorts in particular could be the commodities of the capitalist system and serve the goals of the capitalist. Conflicts that required the direct assistance of the brands' products to be resolved were mainly of healthcare products, while indirect assistance could be seen mainly in food-related brands. Despite that, most of the shorts did not seem to portray the need for the brands' products to sort out the conflicts. Since the shorts are available online via

YouTube, the geographical question had become irrelevant. The structure of society in terms of consumerism would slowly be transformed.

## CONCLUSION

Shorts are a new platform for ideas to be shared. In the business world, shorts will become a new platform for making businesses' brands known to a wider group of audience. Businesses could fully take advantage of shorts to make their way to the general society but with less intensity. During CNY, short films can be an effective way to exploit cultural themes and traditions. This study focused on the antagonists as an alternative to the regularly studied protagonist and noticed that antagonists were essential to the narrative of CNY shorts. This paper investigated the antagonists in terms of their types and portrayal in 50 sponsored CNY shorts produced in Malaysia for the year 2022.

The study found that the existence of the regular antagonists still prevails. The principal conflicts that motivated the shorts forward were boastfulness, disunity, and being occupied. The antagonists were visually portrayed naturally in terms of lighting, makeup, and wardrobe. Props were presented in a more positive mode while being handled by either the protagonists or antagonists. The usage of comical and slow-paced background music was common and the dialogues depicted both strong and vulnerable characters. The narratives of the shorts mostly surround protagonists and antagonists from middle-class families with purchasing power, while a few depict better-off living environments. The antagonists were usually portrayed as strong characters. Physiology-wise, there were no specific gender or age groups noticeably highlighted. CNY shorts from Malaysia in the year 2022 were noticeably naturalising the antagonists by designing them in a way that is easily associated with the general public and with acceptable narratives. The positive ending of all the shorts created the right impression towards the sponsored brand, which will serve the interest of the brands in the long term. The production of shorts is economical, thus making the CNY shorts a good means for maintaining continuous consumerism and support for the brands. The commodification of Chinese psychology, especially in the context of CNY, was very obvious, especially with the creation of fear during the festive season.

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