

Intellectual Discourse

Volume 32

Number 2

2024



International Islamic University Malaysia
<https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id>

Intellectual Discourse

Volume 32

Number 2

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Intellectual Discourse is abstracted in SCOPUS, WoS Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI), ProQuest, International Political Science Abstracts, Peace Research Abstracts Journal, Muslim World Book Review, Bibliography of Asian Studies, Index Islamicus, Religious and Theological Abstracts, ATLA Religion Database, MyCite, ISC and EBSCO.

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print); ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

<https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id>

Email: intdiscourse@iium.edu.my; intdiscourse@yahoo.com

Published by:

IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia

P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298

Website: <http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop>

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Sherman A. Jackson (2024). *The Islamic Secular*. 621
Oxford: Oxford University Press. 527 pp.
Hardback. ISBN: 9780197661789. £32.99.
Reviewer: *Hamza Dudgeon*

Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَي	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَي	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Between Awareness and Visibility: A Google Trends (GT) Analysis of Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP), East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and Kuantan Port (2013-2024)

Goh Hong Lip*

Lee Pei May**

Loo Wai Hong***

Abstract: Malaysia and China established the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) in 2013. More cooperation follows, including significant projects such as the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and Kuantan Port. These projects help to strengthen the economic and strategic partnership between both countries. Despite their strategic importance for the continuous growth of West Malaysia's East Coast Region, they struggle to establish a significant online presence, which is crucial for gauging public interest and social acceptance. In this article, the researchers use Google Trends Analysis to investigate the public's interests in the projects. Findings indicate that MCKIP has consistently experienced low search volumes, with interest concentrated in Pahang, which is likely tied to job opportunities and investments. Kuantan Port searches were more related to tourism, while ECRL queries focused on project progress. MCKIP and Kuantan Port's online presence is overshadowed by the ECRL's broader scope and media coverage; notably, a spike in search interest during 2018-2019 coincided with political shifts in Malaysia and news

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coverage. The results highlight the need for enhanced strategic communication to improve public engagement, inform public decisions, and increase public trust in the government and project visibility, fostering positive economic and social outcomes for local communities. Better public relations can counter negative narratives, such as China's "debt-trap diplomacy" critique, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of its economic statecraft.

Keywords: MCKIP, ECRL, Kuantan Port, Google Trends Analysis, visibility, economic statecraft

Abstrak: Pada tahun 2013, Malaysia dan China telah menubuhkan Taman Perindustrian Kuantan Malaysia-China (MCKIP). Lebih banyak kerjasama menyusul termasuk projek utama seperti Laluan Rel Pantai Timur (ECRL) dan Pelabuhan Kuantan. Projek-projek ini membantu mengukuhkan perkongsian ekonomi dan strategik antara kedua-dua negara. Walaupun mempunyai kepentingan strategik untuk pertumbuhan berterusan di Wilayah Pantai Timur Semenanjung Malaysia, projek-projek ini menghadapi kesukaran untuk mewujudkan kehadiran dalam talian yang signifikan. Kehadiran dalam talian adalah penting untuk menilai minat umum dan penerimaan masyarakat terhadap projek-projek tersebut. Oleh itu, Analisis Google Trends digunakan untuk menyelidik minat awam terhadap projek-projek tersebut. Penemuan menunjukkan bahawa MCKIP secara konsisten mencatatkan jumlah carian yang rendah, dengan minat tertumpu di Pahang, mungkin disebabkan oleh peluang pekerjaan dan pelaburan. Carian mengenai Pelabuhan Kuantan tertumpu kepada pelancongan, manakala pertanyaan mengenai ECRL lebih memfokuskan kepada perkembangan projek. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kehadiran dalam talian MCKIP dan Pelabuhan Kuantan lebih rendah berbanding projek pembangunan berhampiran seperti ECRL. Secara khusus, lonjakan ketampakan pada tahun 2018-19 dikaitkan dengan siri kejadian berita dan perubahan kerajaan di Malaysia, yang menonjolkan pengaruh peristiwa luar terhadap minat awam. Hasil kajian ini menekankan keperluan untuk komunikasi strategik yang lebih berkesan bagi meningkatkan penglibatan masyarakat serta meningkatkan kepercayaan masyarakat terhadap kerajaan, supaya projek-projek mega tersebut dapat menghasilkan impak ekonomi dan sosial yang positif untuk komuniti tempatan. Selain itu, hubungan awam yang lebih positif juga dapat menangkis naratif negatif seperti kritikan terhadap "diplomasi perangkap hutang" China, sekali gus meningkatkan keberkesanan strategi ekonomi negara China.

Kata Kunci: MCKIP, ECRL, Pelabuhan Kuantan, Analisis Google Trends, ketampakan, strategi ekonomi negara

Introduction

China announced one of the most significant global initiatives, the One Belt One Road Initiative (renamed as Belt Road Initiative, BRI) in 2013, which aims to connect countries across different continents, providing new impetus for global growth. Ten years after its inception, more than 150 countries have embraced and become participants of BRI (Feingold, 2023). BRI is viewed as one of the crucial economic statecraft employed by China to achieve its broader foreign policy goals (Norris, 2021). While China employs other economic statecraft, such as activist institution building, BRI is arguably much more critical. This is because BRI is deemed the hallmark of Xi's foreign policy. Moreover, Beeson (2018) believes that if BRI is successful, it will help China cement its geoeconomic influence for many years. As an emerging great power, China wants and needs to expand its power beyond the region, but using economic statecraft does not guarantee that China can consistently achieve its national goals. Norris (2021) noted instances of backlash against specific BRI projects. As the West tries to frame the BRI as a form of debt-trap diplomacy, the visibility and reputation of BRI become even more critical for China (Himmer & Rod, 2022).

Therefore, this study seeks to understand the online presence of three crucial BRI projects in Malaysia: Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP), East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and Kuantan Port. Google Trend Analysis is critical to two aspects. First, the method sheds light on the public interest and knowledge of the three projects over time and by region. Based on the time series and regional comparative data, this study proposes sound suggestions for improving the visibility and reputation of the projects. Lastly, the search interest reflects Malaysians' genuine interest and actual behaviour. Unlike questionnaires, which might suffer from potential biases, Google Trend Analysis could generate real-time insights into public interest in the projects.

Major BRI Projects in Malaysia

The commencement of the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) in 2013, and subsequently, the development of Kuantan Port and the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), represents a strategic advancement in line with Malaysia's broader economic aspirations as articulated in the East Coast Economic Region (ECER) development zones (ECERDC, 2019a; ECERDC, 2020). The ECER was designed to

reduce the economic disparity between the less-developed East Coast and the more prosperous West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, and these projects are integral to achieving the aspiring goals. The initiations of the projects also align with the objectives of various Malaysian development plans, notably the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (ECERDC, 2019b), which emphasises regional development, infrastructure enhancements, and balanced development across the peninsula. Malaysian firms and Chinese firms jointly undertake these projects.

The ECRL is designed to enhance connectivity and stimulate economic growth across the peninsular, offering cutting-edge freight and passenger transport links that are expected to integrate with existing transport infrastructure, reducing travelling costs and improving accessibility. The MCKIP and Kuantan Port complement the ECER aspiration by providing a robust industrial base to facilitate trade activities, attract international investments, boost the local economy, and enhance regional employment opportunities. The availability of quality jobs in the East Coast region would enable people to remain in their home state, effectively lowering the stress of urban migration to the West Coast area (ECERDC, 2018), especially the Klang Valley region.

Previous studies have discussed the prospect of the projects (Abdul Rahman & Zakaria, 2015; Cheng et al., 2022; Lim, Li, & Syailendra, 2021). Most of the discussions were on the business and governmental structure of the projects and the local communities' perception of the projects. Gathering people's perceptions of the projects is essential as it allows the government to fine-tune its policies to better address the needs of the people. Using questionnaires to understand local perception may not be as encompassing as Google Trends analysis, which can reflect public interest across different times and locations, thus providing richer data.

Despite their strategic importance and potential to catalyse growth in West Malaysia's East Coast Region, these projects struggle to establish a robust online presence, which is crucial for gauging public interest and social acceptance. This gap in digital visibility could hinder the projects' ability to attract further investments and fulfil the goal of uplifting the regional economy. Due to the projects' low visibility, the government has been unable to capitalise on these projects to build public

trust. Aminudin et al. (2023) observed that the government suffers from declining public confidence because of problems such as inefficiency and corruption scandals. Therefore, the government must promote large-scale projects such as MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port so that the public understands that these are good government initiatives to advance public interest. Ultimately, it could increase public confidence and trust in the government.

Therefore, this research aims to delve into the dynamics of public awareness and the regional impact of these projects over time, as reflected through Google Trends data, providing insights that could provide more effective communication strategies and stakeholder engagement. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the search interest of MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port on Google from 2013 to 2024?
2. How do MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port search interest trends reflect the dynamics of public awareness and regional impact over time?

The aims of this study are to:

1. Analyse the Google Trends for MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port from 2013 to 2024.
2. Understand the variations in public engagement and regional impacts of MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port through Google Trends analysis.

Significance of Study

The study can enhance our understanding of public engagement with significant infrastructure projects like MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port in Malaysia. The search trends analysis can provide a crucial understanding of the fluctuations of public interest over time and across different regions. This information is vital for policymakers, project managers, investors, marketers and even the locals as it helps gauge public attitudes, tailor communication strategies, and optimise the projects to benefit the people, ultimately ensuring the implementation of policies and strategies to better align with community needs and expectations. As the debt-trap narrative gained traction, the Chinese government needs to understand how the people in the host country view these projects, especially if there is negative news associated with

it. This understanding will enable it to partner with the host country to develop measures to play down the negative news. As BRI is an essential source of China's soft power, ensuring a good reputation for BRI through such efforts is critical. When BRI projects are widely accepted in the host countries, other countries with limited or no participation in BRI might perceive BRI in a different light. This would have made them reconsider participating or increased their participation in the Chinese-led initiative. As BRI is a good source of China's soft power, increasing the number of BRI partners could help China expand and solidify its influence.

Methods

Several searches were conducted on Google Trends to analyse search interest. Popular search terms relating to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are explored in this study. The terms "MCKIP", "ECRL", and "Kuantan Port" are selected for the study due to their association with BRI and their geographical proximity to each other. Separate Google Trends searches are conducted for MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port, followed by a combined search for the three terms to compare their search trends and associated search terms. The Google Trends data for MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port from 2013-2024 are examined due to their relevance with each other. Relevant data gathered from Google Trends includes the search terms' interest over time, breakdown by subregion (states), and the related queries associated with each search term.

Although Google Trends does not show the number of searches over time, it presents data adjusted by population to reflect a specific search timeframe's popularity. The search volume in Google Trends is aggregated and normalised within a range of 1-100, relating to the peak search volume for the keyword during the period of inquiry (Choi & Varian, 2012). This is crucial for showing subregional interest in specific search terms and not getting lost in a sea of searches that certain areas might dominate. Consequently, the areas with large populations and high volumes of searches may not exhibit the highest search interest, but relatively more minor populations with substantial searches may exhibit higher search interest.

While Google Trends can recognise the association of search terms with other key terms and provide general insight into public interests,

it is essential to note the limitations of these searches. The searches were conducted in English, and local dialects or languages may skew the results. However, the skewing of the results due to local dialects or languages might be limited as the projects were often referred to by their acronyms. Using English terms on platforms like Google Trend Analysis could provide more comprehensive data than search terms in local dialects or languages. Given the scope of this study, there are additional areas that can be explored. Specifically, future research could run an analysis based on standard terms in local dialects and subsequently cross-verify with the findings of this paper. Since the search terms are acronyms, terms such as MCKIP and ECRL may have different meanings unrelated to the study's interest. Nevertheless, Google Trends' weighted data can provide a solid platform for further analysis. Content analysis (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016) was used to analyse the rankings and associated search terms. Figure 1 shows the summary of the method used in the study.

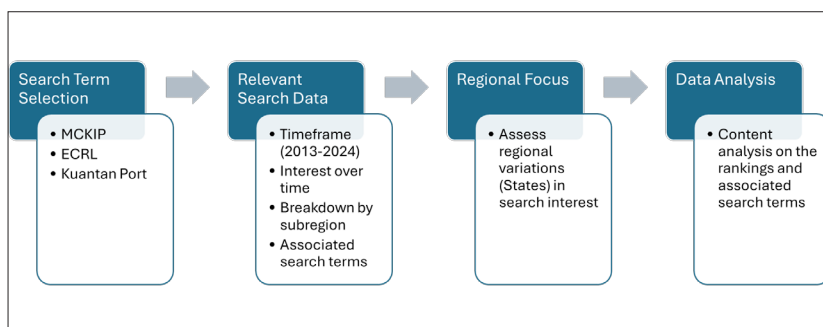


Figure 1: Summary of the Methods Used in the Study

Source: Developed for the study by the authors

Results

Search Term (MCKIP)

The Google trends analysis on the search interest of Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) from January 2013 to April 2024 by Malaysians are as follows:

The search interests showed an initial spike in 2013, gained momentum starting in 2016 and reached peak interest in 2018. From 2019 onwards, there was a declining trend with occasional spikes, though

it never reached the height of 2018 as observed. The decline in search trends might suggest a normalisation of the public's online interest in the projects or could be due to the broader economic developments affecting the region. The occasional interest spikes could be attributed to overshadowing by other nearby, higher-profile projects. Figure 2 shows the search interest over time for the search term "MCKIP".

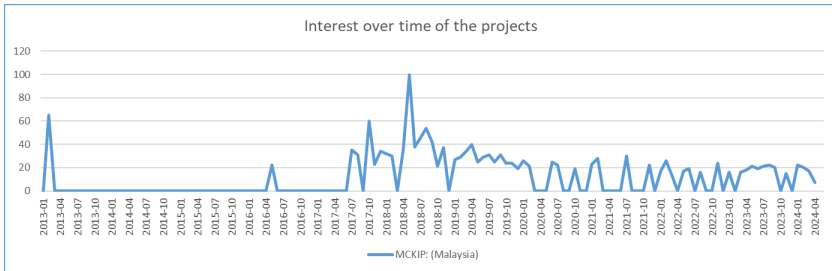


Figure 2: The Search Interest Over Time for MCKIP

Source: Developed for the study by the authors

If the search trends are compared to nearby projects such as the ECRL and the Kuantan Port, the search interest of the projects is as follows:

The search interest in MCKIP has been relatively low compared to other more prominent projects, which have garnered more media coverage and interest. This suggests public awareness of the MCKIP was lower than other nearby projects. There were sporadic spikes in the early days of the development, and a peak of search interest during mid-2018, but the search interest was relatively low and stable post-peak in 2018.

The initial search interests were high in early 2013, possibly due to the initial announcement and promotional activities related to MCKIP and the ambition to develop the MCKIP as a significant industrial hub in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the spike can also partially be attributed to the announcement of investment attraction and the potential job creation for MCKIP (The Edge, 2013). The period from 2014 to 2016 also saw sporadic news reports on the development of MCKIP, where the focus was on investment attractions associated with the development of Kuantan Port and the project's complement to the national ECER policy to improve the Peninsular East Coast's economy (ECERDC, 2016; Chen, 2016). Despite the continuance of investment attractions

and the success stories (Chew, 2016) from local investors, especially in the property industry, the search interest on MCKIP remained low. However, the search interest on MCKIP lagged from 2014 to 2016, with a gradual increase in interest starting in 2017.

The search interest in MCKIP has risen since 2017, but not positively, as there were reports concerning the denied access and “sovereign loss” of MCKIP in Malaysia (Bernama, 2017). The search interest for MCKIP peaked in May 2018, partly due to concern about revisionism by the new government on various Chinese-related investments and the historical regime change in Malaysia (Lee et al., 2018). Several high-profile news regarding the MCKIP during that time also contributed to the interest in the MCKIP search term on the internet, resulting in the peak interest in search. The concern about MCKIP escalated further when the “Great Wall” incident (Sean, 2018) and the alleged water usage problem (Latib, 2018) put MCKIP in the spotlight. Despite these incidents being identified as miscommunication between various parties (Kamsani, 2018), MCKIP during this period (2017-2019) was portrayed negatively, despite the relevant parties’ statements ensuring continuous commitment toward the development of MCKIP (Alagesh, 2019; Mahanum Abdul Aziz, 2019). MCKIP experienced a high interest in internet searches during this period.

The search interest in MCKIP was lower starting in 2020, with fluctuating results. The news related to MCKIP is also very much focused on the number of investments and job creation (Tan et al., 2023). A recent boost of search interest also might be attributed to the 10th year of establishment (Ariffin, 2023) and the Malaysian government’s commitment to catalyse the peninsular east coast’s development through avenues like MCKIP (Alagesh, 2023). The notable negative news during this time was the mass food poisoning incident in early 2022 (Yusof, 2022).

Search Term (ECRL)

The search interest for the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) began to increase starting in mid-2016, escalated further around 2017, and peaked in 2019, indicating a very high level of public interest. The surge was likely due to significant project milestones or relevant news spotlighting the project.

The ECRL saw a relatively low search volume from 2014-2016. However, the search interest gained momentum in late 2016 as discussions focused on the project's actual cost (Gho, 2016) and potential implications (Abas et al., 2016) in bridging the economic divide between the east and west coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

Search Activity for the ECRL spiked between 2017 and 2019 due to dramatic events and the intense scrutiny of its progress. The project's suspension, confusion, realignment to the south, and resumption (NST, 2019; Malaysiakini, 2019; Othman & Abas, 2019) in a short period (April-May 2019) all contributed to the public interest regarding the high-profile project.

In 2020, search interest for the ECRL declined due to the ongoing pandemic and the overall national political climate. The realignment of the ECRL route back to its original state in 2021 (Choong, 2021) received a mixed reception and was not as sensational as in 2019. Despite not being under the same limelight as in 2019 and a decline in interest since then, the ECRL once again picks up the interest of the public starting in 2022, with increasing momentum. The discussions on ECRL focused on costs (Adilla & Jalil, 2023) and potential regional implications (Global Times, 2023). With more than half of the project completed and constant updates on progress, public optimism about the long-term prospects of the ECRL remains high (The Star, 2023), with expected operation by 2027. The trending discussion of Thailand's alleged "Chumphon-Ranong Land Bridge project" also contributed to the renewed public interest in the ECRL.

Search Term (Kuantan Port)

The search interest for Kuantan Port was relatively stable over the years, with a peak occurring in 2015 following a high-profile ship hijacking incident involving MT Orkim Harmony, which was reported to have arrived safely at Kuantan Port after a week's disappearance (Hakim Rahman, 2015). Reports of pollution and poisonous shellfish near the port also contributed to Kuantan Port's relatively high search interest (Alagesh, 2014).

Unlike its ECRL and MCKIP counterparts, the Kuantan Port search interest did not experience a spike in interest in 2016-2019. The port only recorded occasional search interests during this period despite

the disastrous 2016 Kuantan bauxite pollution controversy in 2016 (Malaysiakini, 2016; Reduan, 2017).

The search interest fluctuated with relative lows during April 2020 and July 2021. The news report during this period primarily focused on the technical achievements of the port (Kuantan Port, 2020) and the capacity to manage sophisticated and complex cargo. However, the search interest in Kuantan Port experienced a hike again in early 2022 and remained steady ever since. The announcement of progress and increased cargo handling capacity (Hani, 2022) might have contributed to the surge in search interest.

Figure 3 shows the search interest over time for the search term “ERCL” (scale to the left axis) as compared to other relevant nearby projects such as “MCKIP” and “Kuantan Port” (scale to the right axis).

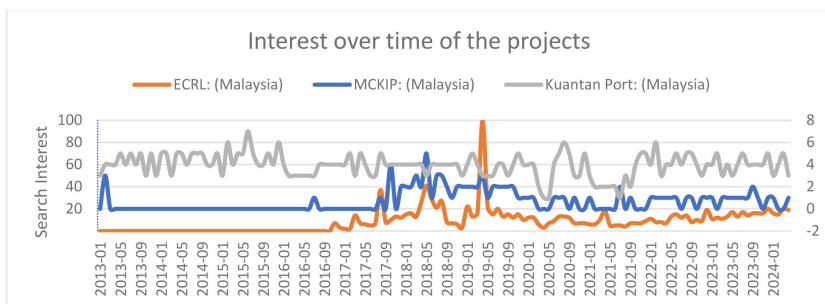


Figure 3: Search Interest Over Time for MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port

Source: Developed for the study by the authors

Regional Search Interest

The search results demonstrate varied search interest levels across different regions for all key terms (MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port). This potentially reflects each project’s geographical relevance and economic impact on those regions. In terms of subregional or locational search interest, the results are as follows:

MCKIP

The highest search interest was Pahang (16%), which was intuitively given that MCKIP is in this state. Lower levels of interest are also shown in other states, such as Terengganu (8%), Sabah (8%), and Kuala Lumpur (6%). Sabah, who emerged as

one of the top searchers for MCKIP, was surprising as the State of Sabah was on Borneo Island, a place 1400km away from Kuantan. However, there was virtually no or minimal search interest from East Malaysia counterparts such as Sarawak and Labuan on MCKIP.

ECRL

The search interest by region for ECRL also showed some surprising results, with Perlis topping the search interest (100%) and Perak (82%) ranking third. Perlis and Perak, located in the northeast and central regions of West Malaysia bordering Thailand, are not directly linked by the ECRL. This suggests that the states are likely interested in the broader economic impact of the project.

Kelantan (93%, 2nd place) also showed a very high interest due to the direct impact of the rail link within the state. The search interest level is also moderately high across most states, excluding Labuan, reflecting the nationwide significance of the project and the constant attention to such large-scale projects.

Kuantan Port

Unsurprisingly, the highest search interest was in Pahang, where Kuantan Port is located (46%). Significant search interests were also evident in Johor (30%) and Putrajaya (29%), suggesting the geographical proximity (Johor borders Pahang geographically), economic ties, and the logistic connectivity of related development. Perlis and Labuan did not show enough interest in searching for Kuantan Port. Table 1 shows the search interest by subregion for MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port.

Table 1: Search Interest by Subregion (States) for MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port

MCKIP		ECRL		Kuantan Port	
Region	MCKIP	Region	ECRL	Region	Kuantan Port
Pahang	16%	Perlis	100%	Pahang	46%
Terengganu	8%	Kelantan	93%	Johor	30%
Sabah	8%	Perak	82%	Putrajaya	29%

MCKIP		ECRL		Kuantan Port	
Region	MCKIP	Region	ECRL	Region	Kuantan Port
Kuala Lumpur	6%	Sarawak	80%	Malacca	27%
Malacca	5%	Kedah	79%	Negeri Sembilan	26%
Johor	5%	Terengganu	78%	Kuala Lumpur	25%
Kedah	4%	Sabah	78%	Penang	21%
Selangor	4%	Selangor	76%	Selangor	20%
Penang	3%	Penang	76%	Sarawak	20%
Negeri Sembilan	3%	Negeri Sembilan	71%	Kedah	17%
Perak	2%	Putrajaya	71%	Perak	16%
Kelantan	1%	Kuala Lumpur	69%	Terengganu	14%
Sarawak	0%	Malacca	68%	Sabah	14%
Putrajaya	0%	Johor	65%	Kelantan	6%
Perlis	0%	Pahang	38%	Perlis	0%
Labuan	0%	Labuan	0%	Labuan	0%

Source: Developed for the study by the authors

Overall Regional Search Interest

However, comparing the breakdown of the three search terms, some exciting findings can also be found. Labuan showed no substantial differences or interest in searching for MCKIP, ECRL, or Kuantan Port on Google. Perhaps other projects are more appealing to the region or due to its isolation from mainland West Malaysia and the East Malaysia region of Borneo Island, resulting in a lack of search interest in these projects, at least in online search. While most areas in Malaysia exhibit similar search trends where the search interest on ECRL was higher than Kuantan Port, followed by MCKIP (ECRL > Kuantan Port > MCKIP), the search queries exhibited by the state of Pahang were quite different. For the past 10 years, the Google search on Kuantan Port was higher than ECRL compared to other regions, and the search interest on MCKIP was significantly higher, doubling (16%) the nearest area of

Terengganu (8%). Perhaps the geolocational factor might influence the search influence on specific projects.

Related Search for MCKIP

There are related queries when people search for MCKIP, attributed to key terms searched for while googling for MCKIP. The top queries associated with MCKIP were “MCKIP Kuantan” (100%), “Gebeng” (31%), “Alliance Steel” (31%), “Alliance Steel MCKIP” (31%), and vacancy (5%). If we consider the breakout of rising queries, keywords such as “Gebeng”, MCKIP Gebeng”, “alliance Steel”, and “alliance Steel MCKIP” were the rising search when people were searching for MCKIP as well. If we consolidate the Top and Rising searches, the associated search terms on MCKIP can be summarised as “Kuantan”, “Gebeng”, “Alliance steel”, and to a lesser extent “vacancy”. Showing the search interest ranging from the location-associated projects with a small interest in the potential job opportunities. Table 2 shows the related search on MCKIP.

Table 2: Related Search on MCKIP

##MCKIP (n=10)

#TOP (n=6)		#RISING (n=4)	
Queries	Count	Queries	Column 1
mckip kuantan	100	gebeng	Breakout
gebeng	31	mckip gebeng	Breakout
mckip gebeng	31	alliance steel	Breakout
alliance steel	30	alliance steel mckip	Breakout
alliance steel mckip	28		
vacancy	5		

Source: Developed for the study by the authors

Related Search for ECRL and Kuantan Port

The top related search terms for ECRL are closely associated with the project itself, with prominent search terms being “Malaysia ecrl”, “project ecrl”, and “ecrl route”. The Bahasa Malaysia’s term “projek” is “project”, while “laluan” means “route” in English. The search interest for ECRL was primarily concentrated on the progress of the project and the project’s route, especially since there have been several proposed

revisions to the design of ECRL’s route since 2018. Notable key search terms include geolocational interests such as “ecrl terengganu” and “ecrl kelantan”, as the project also involved these states. Similar to the search related to MCKIP, though to a lesser extent, the search queries on ECRL also involved job vacancies, indicating an interest in finding job opportunities related to the high-profile project. The same can be said with the breakout or rising queries, where searches focused on the project’s route and a smaller but significant number of searches on potential job vacancies.

However, the search interest on Kuantan Port was vastly different from the search for MCKIP and ECRL. The top related search on Kuantan Port was “port Dickson”, a famous tourism hotspot on the west coast of peninsular Malaysia. Port Dickson is closer to Kuala Lumpur than the city of Kuantan, with a distance of about 220km to Kuantan and approximately 70km to Kuala Lumpur. The top searches focused more on tourism-related queries, with other prominent search terms including “hotel Kuantan” and “Port Dickson hotel.” Additional notable search terms were “Melaka,” “Port Klang,” “Penang port,” and “ECRL”. Similar trends were observed when looking at the rising search terms, where the increasing search interest was focused on Port Dickson, and there was a surge of queries related to ECRL.

Table 3: Related Search on ECRL

ECRL (n=47)

#TOP (n=25)

#Rising (n=22)

Queries	Count	Queries	Column I
malaysia ecrl	100	malaysia ecrl	Breakout
project ecrl	67	ecrl route	Breakout
ecrl route	47	lalan ecrl	Breakout
projek ecrl	40	ecrl kelantan	Breakout
lalan ecrl	38	cccc	Breakout
ecrl terengganu	26	ecrl station	Breakout
ecrl kelantan	23	ecrl map	Breakout
china	22	ecrl pantai timur	Breakout
cccc	22	ecrl kuantan	Breakout
ecrl station	20	ecrl news	Breakout
ecrl map	16	stesen ecrl	Breakout

ECRL (n=47)

#TOP (n=25)

#Rising (n=22)

Queries	Count	Queries	Column1
ecrl pantai timur	16	ecrl train	Breakout
ecrl kuantan	16	ecrl project malaysia	Breakout
ecrl news	16	ecrl terkini	Breakout
stesen ecrl	15	hsr	Breakout
ecrl train	14	mrl	Breakout
ecrl project malaysia	14	mrt	Breakout
ecrl terkini	13	jajaran ecrl	Breakout
hsr	13	ecrl vacancy	Breakout
mrl ecrl	11	ecrl job	Breakout
mrl	11	ecrl cost	Breakout
mrt	10	ecrl puncak alam	Breakout
jajaran ecrl	10		
ecrl vacancy	10		
ecrl job	10		

Source: Developed for the study by the authors

Table 4: Related Search on Kuantan Port

##Kuantan Port (n=26)

TOP (n=22)

#RISING (n=4)

Queries	Count	Queries	Column2
port dickson	100	lexis hibiscus port dickson	Breakout
hotel kuantan	51	ecrl	Breakout
port dickson hotel	45	lexis port dickson	120%
kuantan malaysia	40	port klang	80%
kuantan resort	35		
resort port dickson	33		
kuantan beach	26		
port dickson beach	24		
kuantan pahang	21		
kuantan beach resort	19		

##Kuantan Port (n=26)

TOP (n=22)

#RISING (n=4)

Queries	Count	Queries	Column2
port dickson malaysia	18		
lexis port dickson	17		
melaka	16		
kuantan port consortium sdn bhd	15		
port klang	15		
hyatt kuantan	12		
penang port	12		
penang	11		
avillion port dickson	11		
avillion	11		
lexis hibiscus port dickson	6		
ecrl	2		

Source: Developed for the study by authors

Discussion

Search Interest Over Time

The comparative search trends among MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port suggest that the public interest in the ECRL was way higher than the Kuantan Port and MCKIP in general. From 2013 to 2016, the initial search interest for MCKIP and Kuantan Port was low, indicating a lack of development or awareness during the early years of the projects. The ECRL also showed relatively low search interest initially but experienced a surge starting in 2016, possibly aligning with the ground-breaking ceremonies or the initiation of the mega project, which likely boosted public and media attention. The media coverage, the project’s scale, and the potential implication of the ECRL project may have caused the public interest in the ECRL to overshadow other projects such as the MCKIP and Kuantan Port. The news coverage on ECRL primarily concentrated on the development of the project itself, discussing the cost, controversies, and implications (Abas et al., 2016; NST, 2019; Malaysiakini, 2019; Othman & Abas, 2019;) with constant updates of its progress (The Star, 2023). Perhaps the expansive scope of

the project, which involves multiple states in West Malaysia, is why the ECRL generates constant search interest on the web.

The trending search on MCKIP was mainly associated with periods when the news portrayal was slightly negative (Kamsani, 2018; Latib, 2018). However, the search interest in Kuantan Port was mixed, correlating to the news. While the high-profile ship hijacking incident generated some search interest, the port development news and several nearby socio-environmental issues (Malaysiakini, 2016; Reduan, 2017) did not drive as much attention as the ECRL.

Although sensationalism by politicians is inevitable, the emergence of numerous negative news surrounding the ECRL and MCKIP from 2018-2019 suggests a need for public communications to reduce the potential misunderstandings between the investors and locals. This also supports the opposing dominance theory (Covello, 2009), which asserts that negative news attracts more internet traffic than positive news, suggesting that an adverse incident is perceived with higher weightage than positive reports.

Search Interest by Region

The MCKIP search interest was dominant in the state of Pahang. Given that MCKIP is situated in Pahang, it's intuitive that the locals show more search interests. The high concentration of search interest also indicates the direct local impacts and relevance of MCKIP to the residents. Hence, the locals will likely be the most affected or interested in the project development. Additionally, the search interest was relatively high in nearby regions, such as the state of Terengganu, suggesting local anticipation of the spillover effects of MCKIP. However, Sabah's unexpectedly high search volume provided an exciting foundation for further probing. In 2023, government officials from Sabah (Daily Express, 2023) suggested the potential to create a point-to-point industrial park similar to MCKIP, which could benefit both regions. This could indicate the broader economic interest or potential indirect benefits perceived by the Sabahans, or it might reflect the broader media coverage of relevant topics within the Sabah region. The same cannot be said with Sarawak and Labuan, as there is insufficient data to suggest significant search interest in MCKIP from these regions. Perhaps these regions focused more on other projects.

The ECRL represents nationwide significance and substantial interest across nearly all states, including Kelantan, directly involved with the rail link. From the distribution of the search interests, the ECRL can be seen as a project of national importance, where the public perceives the project as a transformative infrastructure development that further stimulates development and potentially catalyses the nation's economy. Intriguingly, Perlis and Perak, regions not directly linked by the ECRL, show strong search interest in related topics. This could reflect a keen interest in the broader economic implications of the project, such as the indirect financial benefits or evaluating the strategic importance of the rail link. A discussion in 2019 suggested that a rail link that could facilitate Perlis, Kedah, and southern Thailand might be more feasible and have a more significant economic impact than ECRL (Augustin, 2019). However, no news directly links the state of Perak with ECRL in this period.

The Kuantan Port also has a similar search interest distribution to MCKIP, where most of the search interest is generated by the state of Pahang due to the location of Kuantan Port, suggesting the direct economic impact on the local economy and job creation. The high interest of Johor and the peninsular west coast regions such as Selangor and Putrajaya suggests the economic tie and logistical connectivity, implying these regions view Kuantan Port as vital for the continuous economic development and supply chain integration.

The variation in search interest patterns among the projects suggests that various regions exhibit varying regional priorities and different levels of perceptions about the value and impact of these projects. Naturally, Pahang showed concentrated search interest in MCKIP and Kuantan Port compared to the ECRL, highlighting a more localised economic dependency. However, the ECRL gathered more nationwide attention than other projects. Unlike MCKIP and Kuantan Port projects, which are limited to a specific locality, the ECRL project is of a larger scale, is more expansive, and passes through several states. This could be why ECRL is garnering more attention and searches than the other two projects.

There is also a trend where the peripheral regions, such as Labuan, show lowered interest in the said projects, indicating a perceived lack of

direct benefits or relevance, suggesting the geographical and economic disconnect with this area.

Related Search for MCKIP

The related search for MCKIP is interesting as the top queries were locational related, such as “Kuantan” and “Gebeng”, indicating the industrial and economic focus of the public while searching for the term MCKIP online. The Gebeng area, considered part of the larger industrial ecosystem surrounding the Kuantan region, highlights the increased presence due to the industrial development and economic activities generated by MCKIP in the local area.

The lower but present interest also includes “Alliance Steel” and “vacancy”, which suggest that the MCKIP generated significant public interest in the major corporations involved with MCKIP and the potential job opportunities within the region. The phenomenon also indicates that the activities and development of such companies are closely monitored due to their impact on local employment and economic conditions, underscoring the project’s role in job creation that might benefit the local economy (Lim et al., 2021; Lim & Li, 2022).

Related Search for ECRL

Compared to MCKIP and Kuantan Port, the ECRL received much attention and scrutiny due to its scale and association as a BRI project (Lim et al., 2021; Liang et al., 2021). The top related search was project-specific and focused on the progress, with the most search interest regarding the route and its progress. This is likely driven by the project’s impact on connectivity and its significant nationwide economic implications.

Besides the project-based queries, many related searches on ECRL were quite locational, such as “ECRL Terengganu” and “ECRL Kelantan”. The search queries show regional interest due to the direct involvement of the related states with the project. This also points to the local communities’ engagement with the project’s development as they assess the direct benefits and the development of the rail link (MKN, 2024).

Similar to MCKIP, there’s a lower but notable interest in employment opportunities where “ECRL vacancy” and “ECRL job” were shown on

the top and rising queries, reflecting the public's interest in the economic implications, especially on the job creations for the locals as reported by the government (MKN, 2024).

Related Search for Kuantan Port

The related search for Kuantan Port was significantly different from MCKIP and ECRL. While the MCKIP and ECRL-related search were focused on locational factors coupled with the development of the projects, the search interest on Kuantan Port was tourism over the industry. The highest related searches, such as "Port Dickson" (100%), "hotel Kuantan", and "Kuantan resort", suggest that the public interest in Kuantan Port is significantly tied to tourism rather than purely industrial or economic activities. Perhaps the term Kuantan was perceived as a destination rather than an industrial hub, as Kuantan was traditionally viewed as a tourist destination due to its long beach and various attractions (Shamsuddin, 1997).

The searches linking Kuantan with other ports and tourist destinations such as "Melaka", "port klang", and "Penang Port" demonstrate the port's perceived role within a network of travel or trade routes, as well as its relative importance in Malaysia's maritime and tourism sectors.

Implications of Study

MCKIP

The public's focus remains firmly on the industrial aspects of MCKIP, with significant attention paid to specific large corporations and potential employment opportunities. The search trends and related queries like "Alliance Steel" indicate a strong focus on its economic activities and industrial development, particularly in Pahang. This implies that local stakeholders should continue emphasising MCKIP's role in regional economic enhancement and industrial growth.

Furthermore, the peak of MCKIP's search interest often aligns with negative news. This also calls for more proactive public relations strategies to manage and mitigate hostile public receptions and enhance the project's overall image through transparent and progressive updates regarding its benefits and achievements. Given that the projects were perceived as part of the BRI aspiration, the inability to address the negativities impacts bilateral trade and investments. Perhaps more

engagements with the locals might enhance the park's public image and foster trust in the government's abilities to develop the economy and create employment opportunities for the people.

ECRL

The consistently high interest in ECRL, especially during active development or local political events, reflects the project's importance within the region. The major infrastructure project also garnered significant public and economic expectations. Policymakers and other stakeholders should consider these perceptions in their strategic planning and public communications to enhance local community engagements, as the constant spotlight of ECRL highlights the anticipated spillover effects and broader economic implications. To leverage the impact of ECRL, the Malaysian Investment and Authority (MIDA) collaborated with China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) to introduce additional development projects named The East Coast Rail Link – Economic Accelerator Projects (ECRL-EAPs) in 2019. Implementing these development projects could help boost the East Coast area's tourism, construction, trade and industrial development. However, the success of these projects depends primarily on whether they can attract additional investors. Increasing connectivity could transform lives and livelihoods, especially in achieving the ECER aspirations. The economic benefits are proven by the completed BRI rail projects, such as the China-Laos Railway, which harbour similar avenues. The financial benefits reaped by the Laotian, such as cheaper transportation costs, could benefit Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) the most (Lee, 2022), improving the local economy. The ECRL can also be seen as a catalyst to court additional investment, leveraging improved connectivity.

Kuantan Port

Unlike the MCKIP and ECRL, the Kuantan Port's search interest is strongly tied to tourism (e.g., "Port Dickson", "hotel Kuantan"). This suggests a dual perception of the port as an industrial asset and a tourism-related location. Strategic marketing could leverage this dual perception to boost tourism and industrial investment in the region. The search interest from neighbouring areas such as Johor indicates the perceived importance of the port in regional trade and economic

connectivity. This implies opportunities for promoting regional development strategies that integrate Kuantan Port's capabilities with broader economic development goals. Since the project is perceived as part of BRI, increased visibility will also create a favourable image of Chinese firms and investments. A positive image of Chinese-related investment is instrumental in improving the local acceptance of projects of such scale and is essential for broader geopolitical stability (Lee & Zulkefli, 2021).

Overall Implications

The study reveals significant public interest and awareness fluctuations over time, indicating the need for enhanced public communication. For MCKIP, despite the initial interest due to the commencement of the project and potential economic impact, the interest waned, possibly due to the normalisation of the project's presence. The report of investment figures and possible job opportunities might not be enough to sustain a positive online presence (Chong et al., 2022; Goh et al., 2022). The spikes of search interests related to adverse events or news highlight the need for robust and strategic communication strategies to effectively manage public perception and address potential misinformation. This is crucial in maintaining a stable and positive outlook, which is essential for smooth development and the public acceptance of large-scale infrastructure projects in the future. Increasing project visibility through enhanced communication would also help people better understand the government's intentions to bring jobs and opportunities to the locals. Strategic engagement will increase the public's awareness of the benefits of such infrastructure projects. The public could enjoy immediate benefits of such projects as job employment and long-term benefits such as narrowing the developmental gap between the West and the East Coast region. The public would recognise the government's efforts to improve their livelihoods, leading to greater acknowledgement of its actions and policies, thereby fostering public trust.

Moreover, as the geopolitical competition between the US and China deepens, China must counter the debt-trap narrative associated with BRI projects so that the public would not resist existing Chinese investments and projects as well as would welcome future ones. As BRI projects in Malaysia have been associated with debt-trap diplomacy (Himmer & Rod, 2022), mitigating negative news, especially news

that reinforces the debt-trap narrative, is essential. Mitigating negative news about BRI projects would enhance the overall success of Chinese economic statecraft, enabling China to solidify its influence. A good reputation of BRI will minimise pushback against the initiative. Less negative news means that it will be much easier for China to seek new BRI partners or expand on other areas of cooperation with existing BRI partners. Such positive developments would challenge the claims of debt-trap diplomacy.

Search trends indicate that the economic implications of these projects generate considerable interest in the local communities, especially in the areas directly affected or involved by the projects. This may result in the local communities' heightened awareness and interest in the economic benefits, such as job opportunities and regional economic welfare development.

The unexpected high search interest in non-directly affected areas, such as Perlis, Perak and Sabah, suggest that these projects' broader economic or indirect benefits also hold a significant public interest. Perhaps project communications and stakeholder engagement strategies should also address these broader audiences, explaining potential spillover benefits and indirect impacts.

Conclusion

This study analysed the search interest trends for MCKIP, ECRL, and Kuantan Port between 2013 and 2024, offering insights into public awareness and the regional impact of these significant infrastructure projects in Malaysia. The study suggests that while the search interest of ECRL consistently garnered high national interest due to its broad economic implications and media coverage, the search interest for MCKIP and Kuantan Port was more localised and influenced by specific events. External events also influenced all the projects' search interests, with adverse events generating more search interests than positive ones.

Critical peaks in search interest were often driven by news about potential job creation, investment opportunities, and controversies, indicating that public attention is highly responsive to news of significant economic or social impact. At the same time, interest spikes were closely tied to project milestones and governmental negotiations, highlighting the projects' high profile and substantial public stakes.

The study relies solely on Google Trends data, which is valuable in gauging general interest. However, the general search interest does not provide deeper insights into the reasons behind search behaviours or the actual attitudes of the searchers. The study also provided insights into the regional variations in search interest. The lack of engagement from certain areas (e.g. East Malaysia regions like Sarawak and Labuan) might be underrepresented due to lower internet penetration or different search engine preferences. Future studies could employ broader integrated search data with social media analysis, public surveys, and economic reports to provide a more comprehensive view of public perception and the actual economic impacts of these projects. Future research could run an analysis using standard terms in local dialects to cross-verify the findings of this paper. For the peripheral regions, a case-to-case study might be needed to understand the temporal heightened search interest, such as the Sabah, Perlis, and Perak regions.

Further research could focus on areas with low search interest to understand the causes—whether due to lack of awareness, disinterest, or satisfaction with the projects. This could help in tailoring communication strategies to different regional needs and concerns. Despite the study's limitations, the paper can provide an adequate analysis of the information needed to explain the search trends concerning the projects.

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Chapter in a Book

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Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

Journal Article

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Chapra (2002)

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Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 10, 214-232.

The Qur'ān

In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:

The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth

In-text:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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The new Oxford annotated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Research Management Centre
International Islamic University Malaysia
P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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ISSN 0128-4878 (Print)

ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

