



Psychosemantics of “us” and “them” in social media warfare

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ABSTRACT

The denotation and use of *us* and *them* have been used in various political discourses to either assimilate or alienate groups of people. Numerous political leaders have used both pronouns in their online narratives throughout different social media platforms in an effort to gain political mileage. This study aims to explore the notion of positive self-representation of *us* and the negative representation of *them* with the focus on the lexicon “*kita*” and “*mereka*” that influences public perception. The study is a phenomenological qualitative study that applied van Dijk’s critical discourse analysis method and the theory of ideological square. Samples were taken from Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Md Yassin’s online live Wesak Day speech on May 6, 2020, and a speech by Dato’ Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob in the 14th Parliamentary seating on July 18, 2022. The study applied a micro-level analysis of both lexicons. It can be concluded that both speeches have extremely different connotations and interpretations that are both favourable and unfavourable to both politicians.

Keywords: *Psychosemantics, ideological square, social media warfare, political communications, political discourse*

INTRODUCTION

Language and narratives, as an inherent aspect of communication, play a crucial role in the endeavour to disseminate ideologies as well as a tool to persuade and shape perception (Adnan & Daud, 2020). Language has major meaning-making aspects known as semantic macrostructure, which establishes comprehension among social media users on a certain topic. State actors, in contrast to informal language, frequently utilise formal language in online narratives to communicate semantic values, producing psychosemantics that contribute to social cognition (Kreis, 2017; Petrenko et.al., 2020; van Dijk, 1980).

In relation to narratives used in digital diplomacy, they rely on the effort to strategically deploy force, either hard power or soft power (Yavuzaslan & Çetin, 2016; Yecies et. al., 2019). Every language is unique, and each has its own denotation and connotation of meaning (Adnan & Daud, 2020). Different societies that speak different languages have countless connotative and associative meanings, a plethora of socially constructed knowledge and perception of reality, as well as a certain behaviours and features representing the culture's identity (Giralt, 2020; Reddy & van Dam, 2020).

In the realm of social media warfare, narratives deployed in any platform could influence public perception. The massive use of modern technology for digital communication has radically revolutionised how people, governments, and organisations operate and interact with the rest of the world. The impact of digital technologies in politics with a focus on social media manipulation, is an attempt to expand power (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020; Kadir, 2021; Kadir et al., 2020; Rogers & Neiderer, 2020). Communication via social networks suggests a new method of efficiently disseminating information while affecting public sentiment (Khairulnisa et al., 2021; Wadawadagi & Pagi, 2020). The evolution of social media, encompassing technologies, skills, methods, and resources has long attracted the attention of many scholars. There is evidence of widespread social media manipulation activities in 70 countries, 28 in 2017 and 48 in 2018 (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Each nation has at least one political party or government agency that uses social media to influence domestic public opinion (Azudin et al., 2023; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Moreover, studies have shown that in over 26 countries, social media is being used as an information control tool to either deny primary human rights, to vilify political opponents, or to muffle dissenting voices (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Khairulnisa et al., 2021).

Background

Social media has developed from a platform for social networking to an instrument for psychological manipulation in the context of cyber warfare. Social media poses covert dangerous risks to any state by offering alternative realities that fuel psychological and emotional manipulation. Such risks are regarded as immense and extremely damaging to any state as they put cultures, social cognition, and unity at jeopardy (Andriukaitis et.al., 2021; Francois & Lin, 2021; Johnson et.al., 2019; van Vuuren, 2018; Zolkepli et al. 2021; Zolkepli et al. 2022).

With social media dominating the socio-political landscape of almost every part of the world, new and old racist behaviours have become increasingly prevalent. The significance of the positive representation of *us* and the negative representation of *them* indicates the assimilation or alienation of a particular social group. In other words, the process of assimilation and alienation differs between the preferred societies over unpreferred societies.

The usage of *us* and *them* became frequent and begin to gain influence in social media through the Global War on Terror, the spread of Islamophobia (Zainudin et al.,

2021), China's COVID-19, and Ukraine War — all of which witnessed a heavy usage of both positive and negative representations of *us* and *them*. Even though China is a big economy, the alienation of Chinese people and those with Asian traits due to the spread of COVID-19 that originated from Wuhan (Zhong et al., 2020) led to a negative representation. Chinese people and people of Chinese descent were represented negatively and labelled as outgroups. Their representation was focused on their bad aspects as COVID-19 originated from China (Demirtas-Madran, 2020).

Aims and objectives

The research probed into the comprehension of meaning and cognition in perception building. In other words, the vast interpretation of meaning generated from the inference made through the ideological square in social media narratives impacting societal construct and behaviour was explored. There were two objectives that the research aimed to achieve. Firstly, to explore the positive or negative representation of *us* and *them* in the use of the lexicon “*kita*” and “*mereka*” in political narratives that were dispersed in social media, and secondly, to examine the connotation of such representations in forming the psychosemantic knowledge of an egalitarian leader or an elitist leader that could construct the positive or negative perception influencing domestic public diplomacy. The objectives pave and establish the understanding of how psychosemantics in social media warfare could influence domestic public diplomacy.

Problem statement

The denotation of *us* and *them* have been used in various political discourses to either assimilate or alienate groups of people. Numerous political leaders have employed both pronouns in their online narratives throughout different social media platforms in their effort to gain political mileage (Adnan & Md. Ramly, 2021). Political communication became the main discourse of any political party to sustain influence over their adversaries as well as voters. Thus, political narratives in these communications should be able to infer the intended meaning that is often referred to a certain context in ensuring proper comprehension of the target audience.

Political turmoil between political leaders is inevitable due to misconceptions or disinformation. Political turmoil could also spur out of the misconception and misrepresentation of societies or groups through assimilation or alienation. This is evident in several nations like the United States where Black Americans are alienated and given a negative representation. Their “Black” image is associated with socio-economic issues such as poverty, drugs, theft, heinous crimes, and living in slums. On the other hand, the image “White” is usually associated with positive attributes like being entitled for respect, a dignified individual, and often innocent until proven guilty (Khalifa, 2018). Similarly, the Global War on Terror against Muslims, and the Ukrainian War revealed such instances where alienation demonises and marginalises groups of people (Albright, 2021; Amnesty, 2020; Tennant, 2016).

Fostering harmony among all groups of people regardless of socio-economic status to establish “oneness” among Malaysians is a taxing domestic challenge (Ramli et al., 2022). Complexities relating to wages, cost of living, and living standards pose arduous exertions. Marginalisation of people due to socio-economic downturns could be seen as a threat to nation-building. Therefore, political narratives that foster nationhood should incorporate a sense of belonging by implying assimilation and togetherness.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical framework

The study combined the behaviourist and constructivist paradigm to explore Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1986), and Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory (1978). Both theories were explored in an effort to understand the phenomena of societal influence in the construction of cognition and behaviour among individuals. These societal values become the essence that contributes to nationhood. The social cognitive theory and social constructivist theory ensure pertinent comprehension of thought and behavioural change that spurs from practice and experience since learning is the essence of attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, strategies, behaviour acquisition and modification (Cronjé, 2022; Schunk, 2020).

The theoretical framework of the study further incorporated van Dijk’s theory of ideological square that includes the discourse, cognition, and society triangle (van Dijk, 1998a, 1998b, 2009, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). It is a linguistic theory that analyses ideology embedded in the interpretation of meaning and its inferences. The theory’s socio-cognitive approach to discourse is a subset of a broader theory or philosophy known as social constructionism (van Dijk, 2009, 2015a, 2015b). This theory is crucial in identifying emerging themes in a discourse. In this study, themes like “*kita*” that represents an egalitarian or collectivistic concept, and “*mereka*” that represents an elitist or individualistic concept were explored. The theory uses the semantic inference of the ideological square that applies the emphasis and de-emphasis of what is good or bad about *us* or *them* in a discourse. Although the analysis is performed at the micro-level of meaning carried by both lexicons “*kita*” and “*mereka*”, the macrostructure of meaning providing semantic value in the narratives was also analysed. The theoretical framework adapted from Bandura (1970) and van Dijk (1998a, 1998b) is shown in Figure 1.

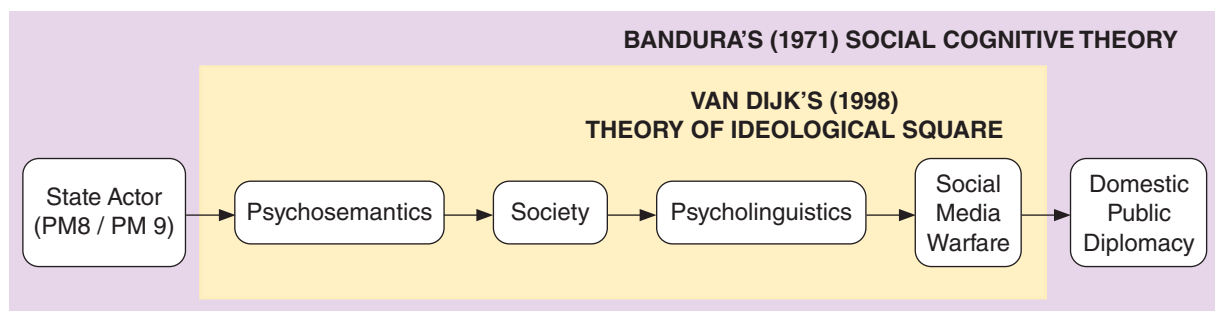


Figure 1. Theoretical framework adapted from Bandura’s (1970) social cognitive theory and van Dijk’s theory of ideological square (1998a, 1998b)

The theoretical framework of the study comprised the state actors, namely the eighth and ninth Malaysian Prime Minister, psychosemantics, society, psycholinguistics, social media warfare, and digital public diplomacy. These variables are seen significant in framing the research. A noteworthy variable is “society” where the variable was decoded into two components: “Elitist”, and “Egalitarian”. This is to decipher whether the political leader is being individualistic and presenting an elitist egalitarian ideology by manifesting social capital collectivism in the political narratives. Both ideologies bring significant meaning and interpretation of such narratives, and the implication of such meaning could result in either charisma building or character assassination.

Van Dijk’s theory of ideological square in social media warfare

In the effort to explore the manifestation of ideology and power in a discourse, the study investigated the ideological square theory developed by van Dijk (1998a, 1998b), a critical discourse analysis method that immerses the discourse, cognition, and society triangle. Critical discourse analysis is a type of interpretive research that concentrates on how social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimised, and resisted in the social and political setting through text and discussion. Critical discourse analysts take a key input in such dissident research in order to investigate, expose, and eventually combat societal inequity. The general outline of the theory is as illustrated in Figure 2.

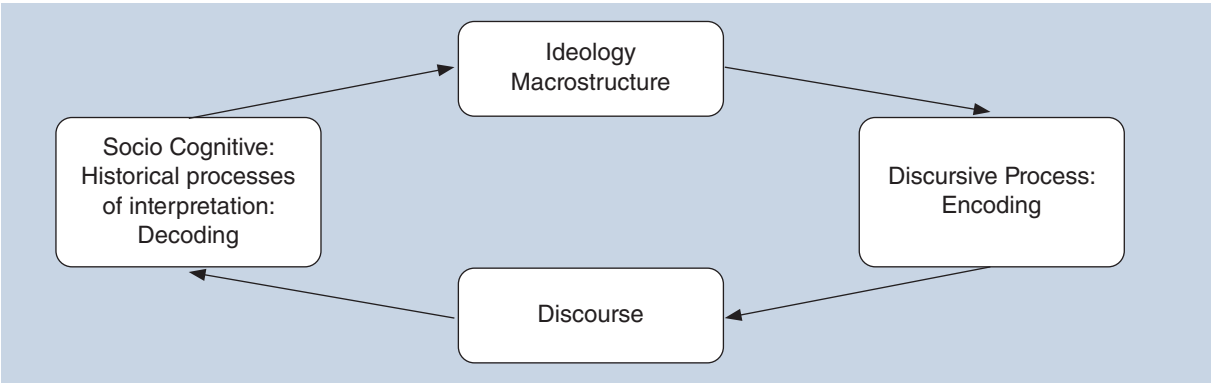


Figure 2. van Dijk’s theory of ideological square (1998)

van Dijk’s (1998a) theory of ideology is used to demonstrate the idea of ideological square. The word "square" refers to the four dimensions that can be used to explain and justify societal inequity, and polarisation. The theory is detailed in Figure 3:

- a) Express/emphasise information that is positive about *us*.
- b) Express/emphasise information that is negative about *them*.
- c) Suppress/de-emphasise information that is positive about *them*.
- d) Suppress/de-emphasise information that is negative about *us*.

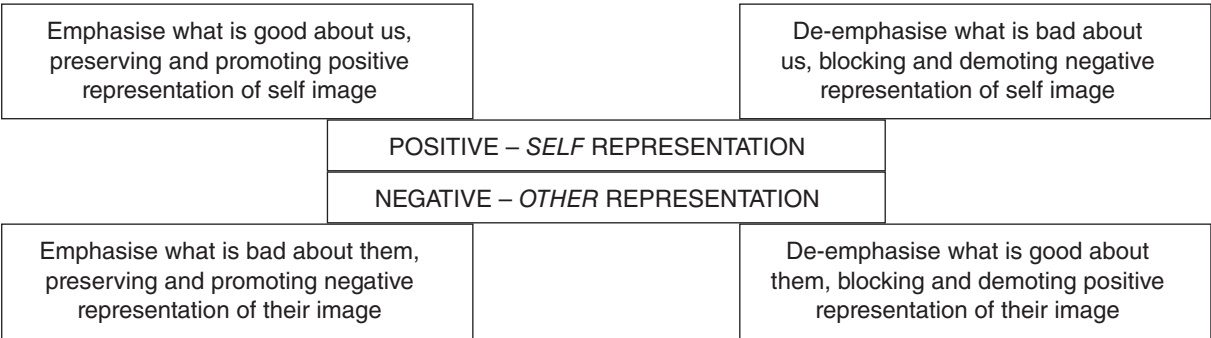


Figure 3. Van Dijk’s positive self-representation and negative other-representation (1998)

The process of emphasising and de-emphasising positive and negative representations of *us* and *them* is the essence of the ideological square. This aspect is crucial in the contextual approach as ideology permeates participants and social groups (van Dijk, 1997). However, in political speeches, it is argued that polarisation stipulates simple explanations. For example, opposing groups often associate themselves as having a juxtaposition between *us* and *them* that characterises the polarisation schema.

van Dijk (2009, 2015a, 2015b) stipulated that a socio-cognitive approach to discourse is a subset of a broader theory or philosophy known as social constructionism, which believes that social and political “reality” are constructed by group actors. The cognitive component of the socio-cognitive approach concerns memory, mind, and the mental processes that are involved in discourse interpretation and creation (Jenniffer & Lavanya, 2021; van Dijk, 2015a, 2015b). The main technique for organising ideological discourse is positive self-presentation and negative other presentation. The strategy emphasises positive values while de-emphasising negative values for in-groups or *us* and emphasises negative values while de-emphasising positive values for out-groups or *them*. In addition to this is the discourse, cognition, and society triangle that is also embedded in the theory of ideological square. The illustration of the triangle is shown in Figure 4.

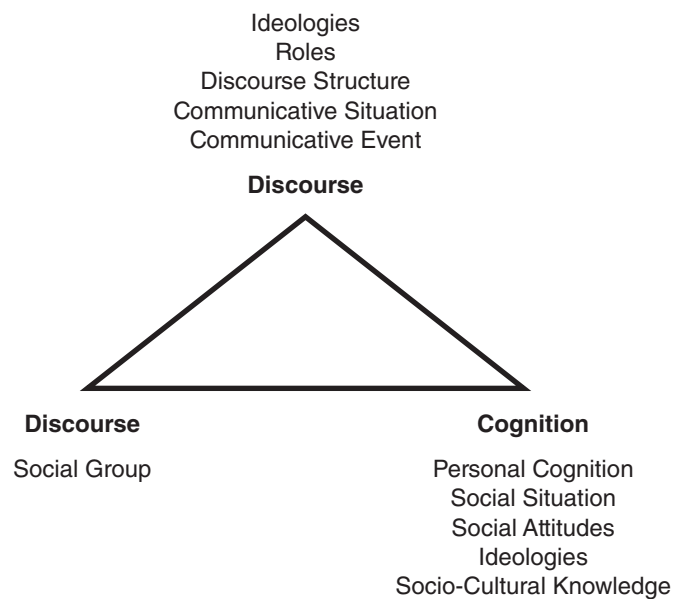


Figure 4. Van Dijk’s discourse, cognition, and society triangle adapted from Jenniffer & Lavanya (2021) and van Dijk (2009)

Figure 4 is a part of the socio-cognitive approach of critical discourse analysis that focuses on ideological manifestation in discourse, conveyed through the society and formed in individual and social cognition. In a discourse, in which the most crucial information in the text is referred to as the macro proposition, retrieval and reproduction, are critical. A macro proposition has a high structural value as a result of the numerous ties it has with the micro propositions from which it is produced, other macro propositions, and schematic categories like narratives (van Dijk, 1979).

Context models, also known as pragmatic models, change based on participant's understanding of the communication experience. The adequacy of discourse in relation to the communicative circumstance was established (van Dijk, 2015a, b). In addition to this, van Dijk explained that the knowledge system becomes a critical component of communal cognition, perception, and discourse. The common social knowledge aids in the formation of ideologies and attitudes regarding the favourable or negative appraisal of an idea. Power and power abuse, dominance and manipulation, and all other illicit kinds of discourse, engagement, and communication are all inherent in social structure and social group interactions (van Dijk, 2009, 2015a, 2015b).

The social cognitive theory as social constructivism in social media warfare

The social learning theory, henceforth SCT, indicates a direct link between a person's self-efficacy judgement and behavioural change (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy may be derived from a variety of sources, including performance achievements, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, and physiological factors. The notion is most applied in education, psychology, and communication, and it eventually holds aspects of a person's knowledge acquisition arising from observations of social interactions, media effects, and personal and societal experiences (Bandura, 1986; Krcmer, 2020).

Later, the theory was extended into the social cognitive theory where individuals in a community perceive a specific behaviour as well as the repercussions of that behaviour. Social cognitive theory's agentic conceptual framework enables researchers to explore the causes and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thinking, and behaviour (Krcmer, 2020; Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2021). Since media and communications should be multi-directional, changes in the direct pathway are established by educating, facilitating, inspiring, and leading participants (Bandura, 2001; Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2021).

An instance of the combination of both theories can be extrapolated from the interaction, communication, responses, and feedback in social media environments. The blend is vivid in three significant categories which are the narrator, the audience, and the respondents. The first category refers to the narrator of the source or content, the writer. The second category refers to the target audience who are active or silent social media users. The third refers to social media users, or groups that counter narrate the original content through their posts, a subset to the audience. The theoretical blend infers that the learning and comprehension of meaning through behaviour is conducted and applied through social interaction, and modelling.

Digital domestic diplomacy and social group representations

The Internet of Things (IoT) has not only influenced modern lifestyles but has also introduced vast new possibilities and challenges. The cornerstone of public diplomacy is communication, and how governments and cultures communicate have progressed into digital diplomacy. The digitisation of public diplomacy has become a trend that continues to contribute to its evolution. Through diverse channels of communication, digital engagement, and enhanced collaboration with non-state actors, contemporary public diplomacy emphasises soft power advocacy and relationship-building.

The inclusion of non-state actors adds greater aspects to public diplomacy that extend beyond the domestic realm, including the diaspora public (Bjola, 2021). Cull (2022) iterated that domestic public diplomacy, or the "New Public Diplomacy" (NPD) is concerned with how the state affects and depicts itself to its population in relation to state concerns, including local and international problems. Most countries have adopted and adapted the domestic dimension of public diplomacy. Domestic public diplomacy is an effective method for improving "geopolitical literacy" by informing domestic audiences how political developments can have local implications (Walker, 2022). Diasporas are acknowledged as one of the most important domestic publics in the United States and throughout the world. Local opinion leaders who can relate foreign policies to their constituents are also identified as critical publics (Fitzpatrick, 2022).

Digital communication may actively promote and expand the ideology of the elitist versus the egalitarian in terms of power and dominance. The use of social media in persistently deploying the positive representation of *us* and the negative representation of *them* may have a plunging impact resulting in a social divide (Anderson et al., 2021). Both

representations imply a demarcation between social groups by branding the out-groups with negative traits. The negative branding of out-groups dispersed in social media could change public opinion on the out-groups even if it is based on false allegations, leading to social disparity (Demirtas & Madran, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The study combined phenomenological inquiry with a qualitative method of data analysis. Since the data chosen should permit inferential reasoning within the context of the investigation, data selection in qualitative research denotes that a sample is purposefully chosen for its capacity to provide insight from its useful and rich source of information, as opposed to making assumptions from sample to population. Therefore, the purposive sampling technique was used in the data selection process. Information was taken from speeches delivered on Wesak Day, May 6, 2020, by Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Md Yassin, and July 18, 2022, in the 14th Parliamentary Session, by Dato’ Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob. The samples included in the study are crucial for illustrating how society is represented. The speeches were also widely shared on numerous social media sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp.

Since both speech texts suggest societal representation and were presented by well-known political figures, they are semantically identical. The study employed the discourse, cognition, and society triangle, van Dijk’s theory of the ideological square, and critical discourse analysis. In effort to comprehend the psychosemantics ingrained in the speeches, the approach was able to depict the positive and negative portrayal of *us* and *them* that resonates with the discourse, society, and cognition triangle. With an emphasis on the vocabulary “*kita*” and “*mereka*,” which manipulates public perception, this study explored the idea of positive self-representation of *us* and the negative depiction of *them*. The analysis explored the consequential impact of the narrative towards behaviour and societal construct through the theoretical lens of the social cognitive theory and the social constructivism theory.

FINDINGS

Analysis

The analysis of the speech text is tabulated in Table 1 and Table 2 with reference to the theory of ideological square framework while Figure 5 and Figure 6 tabulate the analysis of the discourse, cognition, and society triangle.

Table 1. Analysis of Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Md Yassin’s online live Wesak Day speech on May 6, 2020 – Theory of ideological square

Original Text (Encoding)	Translation	Ideology / Macrostructure	Self / Other Representation (Decoding)
Saya faham hari Wesak pada kali ini disambut dalam keadaan yang mencabar oleh kerana kita sedang menempuh fasa Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan Bersyarat atau PKPB dalam usaha kita memerangi wabak Covid-19.	<i>I understand that this Wesak Day celebration will be in challenging times since we are experiencing the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) in our effort to battle COVID-19</i>	Egalitarian	Positive Representation of Us

Table 1. (con't)

Original Text (Encoding)	Translation	Ideology / Macrostructure	Self / Other Representation (Decoding)
Tetapi saya percaya bahawa saudara saudari penganut agama Buddha akan tetap dapat memperingati hari wesak bersama-sama ahli keluarga.	<i>But I believe that my fellow Buddhists will still be able to observe Wesak Day with their family.</i>	Egalitarian	Positive Representation of <i>Us</i>
Sambutan ini sudah tentu dapat mengeratkan hubungan kekeluargaan selain dapat mencegah jangkitan Covid-19 yang sedang mengancam kehidupan normal kita.	<i>This year's celebration is expected to strengthen family relationships while preventing the COVID-19 infection that had been threatening our normal lives.</i>	Egalitarian	Positive Representation of <i>Us</i>
It gives me a great pleasure to send my greetings to all Malaysian Buddhist friends who will be celebrating Wesak tomorrow.	—	Egalitarian	Positive Representation of <i>Us</i>

It is evident that the ideology manifested in the speech of Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Md Yassin (TSMY) presented in Table 1, is egalitarian where the speech applies soft power, and TSMY's tone was calm and collected. The self and other representation in the text denotes a positive *us* representation where *us* was indicated using “*saya*” or “*I*”, and “*kita*” or “*we*”. The political “*we*” or “*kita*” used in political discourse often refers to the notion of segregating the in-group (*we*). However, the lexicon “*kita*” in this context (Prime Minister's speech) explains a positive note where the lexicon used is to apply inclusivity of the speaker and the audience. This suggests that the speech applied a positive representation of *us* where *us* represents the speaker and Malaysians as a whole.

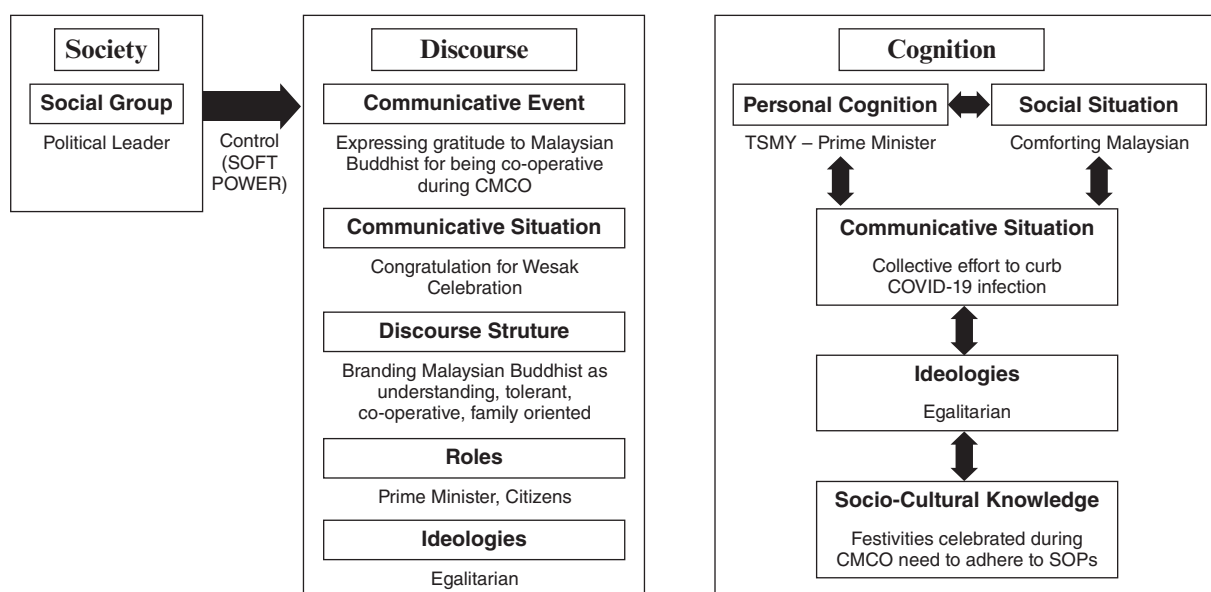


Figure 5. Analysis of Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Md Yassin's online live Wesak Day speech on May 6, 2020 – Theory of ideological square's discourse, cognition, society triangle adapted from Jenniffer and Lavanya (2021) and van Dijk (2015)

Figure 5 illustrates the breakdown of the speech into three main parts: society, discourse, and cognition. From the aspect of society, the speech was delivered by a political figure. The communicative discourse highlights the appreciation addressed to the Malaysian Buddhists for their cooperation during CMCO. The speaker also congratulated the Buddhists for organising the Wesak Day celebration and the community received compliments for being family-oriented, tolerant, understanding, and cooperative.

The blend between personal cognition, and social situations could construct social attitudes, ideologies, and sociocultural knowledge. The main social cognition or sociocultural knowledge at the time of discourse is that there should be a collective effort in battling COVID-19. Therefore, any festivities celebrated during the CMCO should adhere to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

Table 2. Analysis of Dato’ Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob’s speech in the 14th Parliamentary seating on July 18, 2022

Original Text (Encoding)	Translation	Ideology / Macrostructure	Self / Other Representation (Decoding)
Ahli yang berhormat. Mengawal minyak ni pun takkan sampai hati nak .. nak amik Tindakan .. makcik-makcik yg jual goreng pisang.. mereka tak boleh menggunakan minyak masak untuk goreng pisang.	<i>Honourable member of the parliament, controlling oil (prices and purchases), wouldn't come to a point where punitive actions are taken towards makcik-makcik who sell banana fritters that uses cooking oil to make those fritters.</i>	Elitist	Negative Representation of Them
Jadi, tapi adakah penguatkuasa nak saman makcik tukang masak ni atau rampas minyak masak mereka.	<i>But it doesn't mean that the enforcer would issue a summon to the makcik or confiscate their cooking oil.</i>	Elitist	Negative Representation of Them
Nanti dituduh kita zalim pulak kepada rakyat yang miskin ini. Yang nak menjual kais pagi makan pagi ini.	<i>We would be considered as being cruel towards these poor people. The ones that are extremely poor.</i>	Elitist	Negative Representation of Them
Jadi bukan sesuatu yang mudah seperti a,b,c, tetapi ada perkara-perkara yang perlu kita pertimbangkan.	<i>So, it isn't as simple as a,b,c.. but there are several things that should be considered.</i>	Elitist	Negative Representation of Them
tapi percayalah yang berhormat, kerajaan tidak berdiam diri, Perdana Menteri tidak boleh dikatakan tak melakukan apa-apa Tindakan. Insya allah kita akan lakukan terbaik untuk negara.	<i>But please believe me, the government is not keeping our silence, the Prime Minister cannot be said to be idle and not taking any actions. Insya Allah we will do our best for the nation.</i>	Elitist	Negative Representation of Them

In Table 2, it is evident that the ideology manifested in the speech of Dato’ Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob (DSISY) is elitist. Although the speech applies soft power, DSISY’s tone is defensive. The self-representation denotes a positive *us* representation where *us* is referring to him and the government was specified using “*kita*” or “*we*”. Negative other-representation where *them* refers to the out-group labelled as “*makcik-*

makcik” or “aunties”, “*mereka*” or “them”, “*rakyat yang miskin*” or “poor people”, and “*kais pagi makan pagi*” or “extremely poor”. The frequent use of the lexicon “poor” while repeatedly denotating the meaning, and connecting the word with the audience could result in damaging circumstances.

The political “we” referring to the lexicon “*kita*” is used in the speech as it is often applied in political discourse where it refers to the notion of segregating the in-group *us* / *we* with the out-group *them*. The lexicon “*kita*” in this context explains a negative note where the lexicon distinguishes the speaker with the out-group. The negative representation is accentuated when the political leader informs the public that the *makcik-makcik* who sell goreng pisang come from poor families.

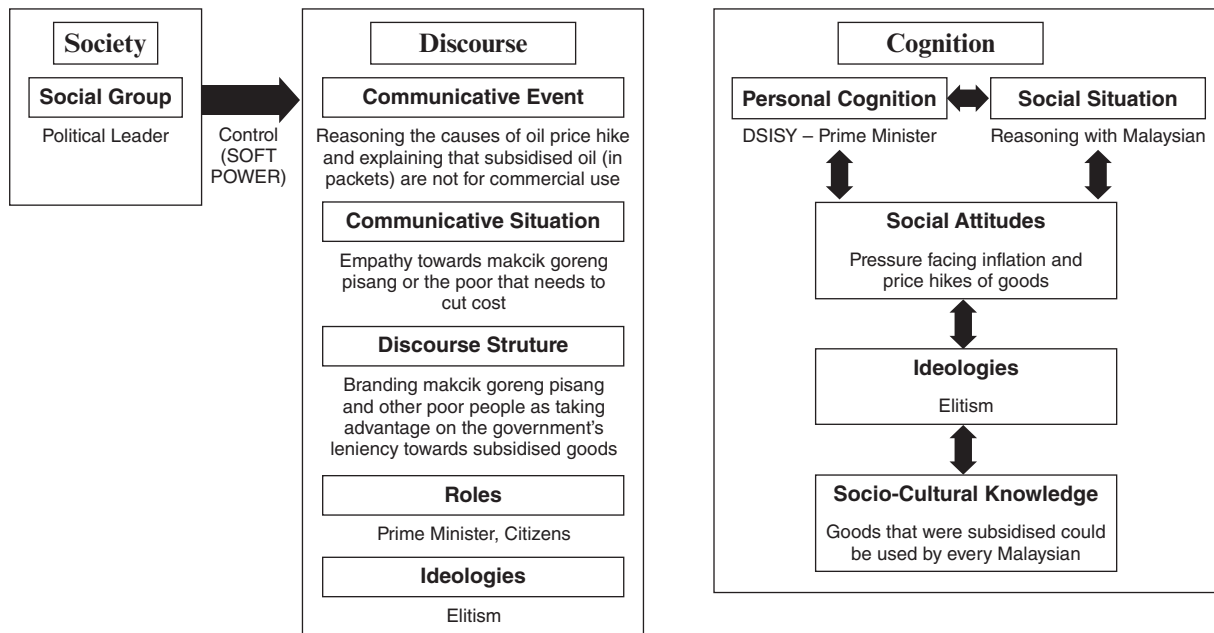


Figure 6. Analysis of Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob's speech in the 14th Parliamentary seating on July 18, 2022 – Theory of ideological square's discourse, cognition, society triangle as adapted from Jenniffer & Lavanya (2021) and van Dijk (2015)

Referring to Figure 6, the speech is dissected into three components, society, discourse, and cognition. In terms of society, the speech was delivered by a political leader. From the aspect of discourse, the communicative event was to provide an explanation to the audience that subsidised oil sold in packets are not for commercial use. The speaker showed empathy towards the out-group since they must use subsidised oil to cut costs. The speaker also branded them as poor, who exploit the government's leniency towards subsidised goods.

In terms of cognition, the blend between personal cognition, and social situation forms social attitudes, ideologies, and sociocultural knowledge. The main social cognition or sociocultural knowledge at the time of discourse is that global economic pressure and inflation have increased the price of cooking oil. However, it is unknown to the society that subsidised oil is not for commercial use. The social cognition entails that Malaysians are entitled to fully utilise any forms of subsidy from the government to maximise capital.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The media is crucial in a society's depiction of identity groups. Microblogging platforms such as Facebook and Twitter help transmit brief messages, photos or images, and video clips to close acquaintance, and other individuals around the world (Khairulnissa et al., 2021). Social media highlights various news values and publishes information with epistemological grounds that are politically and/or socially counter-hegemonic (Ahmad, 2022; Holt et al., 2019). In this respect, the positive self-representation and negative other-representation in social media are deemed impactful in disrupting the harmony of various social groups in a society. Instances like Islamophobia, or Chinacentrism depict power and domination on out-groups resulting in negative other-representations.

Both speeches that were analysed carry conflicting ideologies where TSMY's speech is egalitarian whilst DSISY's is elitist. Both speakers were contentious and different in terms of personality, political ideology, tone, and manner when addressing the audience. Both speeches also widely reached the Malaysian public through social media platforms including online news media platforms.

Data retrieved from Facebook revealed that TSMY's speech reached 229,000 views with 480 comments (Yassin, 2020). Facebook comments revealed that the speech was welcomed by Malaysians regardless of race and religion as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. FB comments on TSMY's May 6, 2020 speech

Comments (Original text)	Comments (Translated text)	FB Handle
Terima kasih PM... Kerana perihatin kepada rakyat	<i>Thank you, PM, for being concerned about the people</i>	Nizurkarnain Othman
Terima kasih Ucapan YAB Perdana Menteri yang menyentuh hati. Let we all stay strong and healthy.	<i>Thank you for the wishes YAB PM, that is so touching. Let us all stay strong and healthy.</i>	Wong Ling Kiong
Tahun ini kita sembahyang aje dirumah. Tak pergi temple pun ok	<i>This year we pray at home. It is okay to not go to the temple.</i>	Steven Lam

In contrast, data retrieved from Facebook revealed that DSISY's speech reached 185,000 views with 1,600 comments (Yaakob, 2022). Facebook comments revealed that the speech was negatively received by Malaysians (Table 4).

Table 4. FB comments on DSISY's July 18, 2022 speech

Comments (Original text)	Comments (Translated text)	FB Handle
Kalau nak buat subsidi bersasar tu sasarkan hanya untuk rakyat Malaysia sahaja tanpa mengira golongan & sosial status B40, M40 & T20 kerana selagi rakyat Malaysia mereka berhak menikmati subsidi. Fikir mechanism utk elakkan barangan subsidi tiris kepada bukan rakyat Malaysia	<i>If targeted subsidies are to be deployed, it should be only for Malaysians regardless of economic stature of B40, M40 or T20 because they are eligible for subsidies as long as they are Malaysians. Think of how to prevent subsidised goods to be in the hands of non-Malaysians.</i>	Yadi Che Ahmad

Table 4. (con't)

Comments (Original text)	Comments (Translated text)	FB Handle
Yg peniaga kecil tak sepatutnya tak dibenarkan DS, yg perlu dikuatkuasa adalah bagaimana minyak masak bersubsidi boleh berada di negara jiran sampai dah berpuluh tahun dah	<i>Small businesses should be allowed (to use subsidised oil) DS, what needs to be enforced is how subsidised oil could fall in the hands of neighbouring countries for decades.</i>	Omar Bsm Trader
Jangan pelik kalau pisang goreng dapat 3 ketul je rm5....barangan yg bersubsidi mungkin boleh dihadkan kepada pemegang ic malaysia saja..	<i>Don't be surprised if a banana fritter will cost RM5 for 3 pieces, Subsidised goods should be limited to Malaysian IC holders only.</i>	Zulkarnain Mezah

It is evident that both speeches received different responses from Malaysians. Responses towards TSMY's speech denote happy emotions, showing support towards TSMY, expressing gratitude, tolerance, and the effort to attain social unity, peace, and harmony. The speech by TSMY was able to win the hearts and minds of people due to the positive representation of *us* in the speech where *us* represents Malaysians, and himself, collectively. This entails an assimilation effort that permeates the egalitarian ideology resulting in emotionally happy, and joyous responses from social media users. On the other hand, the speech by DSISY faced difficulties in gaining political mileage over social media users as he is perceived as imposing red tape on people's hardships. This is the direct impact of implying an elitist ideology in a speech resulting in unfavourable responses that are contentious against the speaker.

The blend between the social cognitive theory and social constructivism is prevalent where elements of behaviour modelling and socially constructed meaning are evident and can be seen in interactions, communication, responses, and feedback in social media environments. In both speeches, the theoretical blend is evident in the social media landscape in terms of comprehending and generating narratives. The apparent and persistent examples of comments reacting to these posts containing ideologies derived from the sources of communication depict behaviour modelling among opinion leaders who demonstrate their conduct and opinion through their remarks. This finding enables the study to relate macrostructures, ideology, and overall data interpretation with reality. The study found that ideology, discourse, cognition, and society's power manifestation are key elements to ensure the ideological framework influencing the psycholinguistic element of psychosemantics is in place. In relation to that, the negative and positive portrayal of social groups resulting from positive self-representation or negative other-representation allows emotional engagement among audiences and social media users towards the speech due to the primary comprehension of current political issues and standings in the conception of meaning beyond the discourse.

Scholars like Adnan and Sualman (2018), Leong (2015), Muluf and Noordin (2014), as well as Syahirah et al. (2017) have conducted studies on political communication dispersed in social media with regard to its influence. Muluf and Noordin (2014) found that the direct form of propaganda or white propaganda is the preferred form of propaganda. Leong (2015) revealed that confusion and disinformation affects democratic decision-making, and the new media challenges the political hegemony while advocating political change. Further, Adnan & Sualman (2018) found that Twitter is often frequented by young voters and political parties have ventured into social network sites to win the hearts and minds of the people.

More recent studies in the same field have been conducted by Kadir et al. (2020), Khairulnisa et al. (2021), as well as Shuraddin and Latiff (2022). Kadir et al. (2020) found that people are aware, sensitive, and proficient enough to respond to political narratives containing a plethora of political issues that can impact unity among people. Khairulnisa et al. (2021) also found that political parties manipulate social media to deny fundamental human rights, slander political opponents, or to muffle dissenting voices that are against them. Adding to this, Shuraddin and Latiff (2022) found that the development of pseudonyms in political communication is used to incite hate.

Although previous studies have not embarked specifically on the nature of this study, which is psychosemantics of *us* and *them* in a political leader’s narrative, these studies have paved the way in understanding political communication and media where people’s perception, and behaviour are affected by information and disinformation. These studies also revealed that people using social media are responsive towards any discourse manifested. Further, people are more engaged with current political situations leading to more awareness. Finally, future studies could embark on exploring the impacts of negative other-representation and positive self-representation that affect social behaviour in social media.

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