

## Cyberbullying in the Name of God: Critical Discourse Analysis of Online Responses to the Act of De-hijabbing in Malaysia

NATRAH NOOR

Centre for English Language and Foundation Education  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Nottingham Malaysia, Malaysia  
[natrah.noor@nottingham.edu.my](mailto:natrah.noor@nottingham.edu.my)

BAHIYAH ABDUL HAMID

School of Language and Linguistics  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
National University Malaysia, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

*The Islamisation phenomenon in Malaysia is characterised not only by an increased number of Islamic projects within the public institutions, but its permeation is evident in the increased awareness of hijab in the country. Since the late 1980s, hijab has attained many meanings, from a symbol of Islamic revivalism to a reconstruction of Malay identity. Today, hijab has become a normative identity of Muslim women in Malaysia. For women who have conformed to this norm, they are expected to be always wearing it and when they decide to de-hijab, the decision can trigger public opprobrium, bullying, and abuse. The de-hijabbing decision of Muslim women in Malaysia has been in the spotlight, particularly for public figures, with media representing the decision as a threat to the Muslim community and Islam in general. However, public scorn, bullying, and abuse have reached an unprecedented level and are increasingly common with the rise of public display of hijab on social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach and van Dijk's (1999; 2006) Ideological Square Model, this study examines the positive self and negative other representations evident in the response of netizens to a Malaysian celebrity, Emma Maembong's, de-hijabbing decision. The findings of this research revealed not only the discursive strategies through which an outgroup population is delegitimised in social media, but also contributed to a better understanding of the struggles faced by Muslim women in exercising their agency.*

*Keywords: hijab; de-hijabbing; Muslim women; cyberbullying; critical discourse analysis; Ideological Square Model*

### INTRODUCTION

*Hijab* is one of the most visible markers of Islamic identity, but post 9/11, the controversy and debates surrounding *hijab* extended beyond its religious significance. Portrayed in the Western media through images of Afghan women in *niqab* and *burqa*, *hijab* is mostly depicted as oppressive, strange, extreme, and threatening (Byng, 2010; Haddad, 2007; Paz & Kook, 2021). These images have not only influenced the political debates and legislations about *hijab*, but they were the major sites that bring significant implications for how Muslim women are viewed in the West and how Muslim women in the West practice their religious identities in public (Berry Kim, 2003; Kaplan, 2006; Pacwa, 2019). The rhetoric about *hijab* being oppressive and threatening, alongside the heightened Islamophobia after 9/11 has resulted in Muslim women becoming easy targets of discriminatory and violent attacks. The danger that *hijab* poses to its wearers has forced Muslim women to remove their *hijab* for self-protection (Considine, 2017).

However, the second and third-generation Muslims responded differently. As illustrated in Hadad's (2007), *hijab* has become a symbol of solidarity and resistance for young American-born Muslims. Hadad's findings were consistent with the study conducted with Muslim women in Canada (Rahmath et al., 2016). However, these efforts occurred mostly

online, particularly on social media. Numerous studies have investigated the use of social media among Muslim youths in the West in challenging the misconceptions about them, but there are also some studies that focused on their self-representations (Bacchus, 2019; Hirji, 2021; Mohamed Khamis, 2021). Set to break the ‘oppressed’ Muslim women stereotype, young Muslims in the West used social media to reimagine their identities as active participants of the civic, political, and social domains of the Western society (Hirji, 2021; Islam, 2019; Mohamed Khamis, 2021)

The visibility of young and modern Muslim women on social media is a global phenomenon emerged in other countries including Malaysia. In fact, the phenomenon was already developing in Malaysia since 2008 when Yuna Zarai who is the first *hijab*-wearing singer in Malaysia released her music video that became a major hit and an icon of *hijabsta* or *hijabster* culture; which refers to a portmanteau of *hijab* and *fashionista* (Almarwaey & Ahmad, 2021; Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018). The *hijabsta* culture received significant acceptance among Muslim women in Malaysia and when a magazine called *Hijabsta* was published in 2012, it further legitimised the culture (Hassim, 2014; Hassim et al., 2019; Williams & Mohamed Nasir, 2017). As the popularity of *hijab* fashion grew rapidly worldwide, *hijab* became a normative identity marker for Muslim women in the country. This is congruent to (Hochel, 2013) who reported fashion as a primary reason for *hijab* adoption in Malaysia and supported by Hassim et al. (2019), that pointed to similar observation.

As *hijab* turned into a normative identity marker for Muslim women in Malaysia, women who do not wear it are marked by their non-conformity (Izharuddin, 2018). Although the wearing of *hijab* remains a choice, this choice comes with heavy scrutiny as some states in Malaysia implement a state-level *hijab* policy. For instance, Kelantan; a state situated in the northeast of Peninsular Malaysia, employs a dress-code policy under the Syariah Criminal Code 1985, Section 5 (1) (Syariah Criminal Offences Act 1997, 2002) in which stipulates all Muslims “*who are found guilty of acting and behaving in indecent manner*” are liable for a fine of not more than MYR1,000; approximately 240 USD or imprisonment for not more than six months or both (Malaysiakini, 2014). Apart from the policies, societal pressures faced by these women have also made it difficult for them to exercise their agency in relation to *hijab*. There is available research that discussed these pressures, for example (Hochel, 2013) recorded that some women who wear the *hijab* intermittently do so to gain respect from their male colleagues and to please their parents. Similarly, Olivier (2019) claims that some women felt pressured to alter their clothing due to the public’s perceptions of piety. However, the pressures faced by women who have worn the *hijab* but decided to remove it are even greater as this act triggers both legal and individual resistance (Fan, 2021) which is sometimes too heavy for these women to bear (Izharuddin, 2021; Izharuddin, 2018).

The term *de-hijabbing* refers to a voluntary act of taking off the *hijab* (Lee, 2019) which differs from forced *de-hijabbing* through *hijab* banning policies. *Hijab* banning policies can be understood within the context of postcolonial histories, for example, the Unveiling Act of 1936 which was introduced during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran, to prohibit women from wearing the *hijab* in public places (Ahmed, 2011; Fadil, 2011; Izharuddin, 2021; Izharuddin, 2018). In contrary to forced *de-hijabbing*, voluntary *de-hijabbing* implies the women’s willful act. Although the reasons to *de-hijab* are often personal and heterogeneous; that is, it could be due to personal health, marital integrity, and education (Izharuddin, 2018), it is much too often associated with a moral failure, a threat to Islam and an attempt to normalise liberal ideologies (Mansor. Muhammad Hafiz, 2019) The consequences of *de-hijabbing* are even more unfavorable for celebrities as they are at risk of being shamed and abused in the media.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In late January 2019, Emma Maembong, a Malay Muslim celebrity in Malaysia made a public statement of her decision to remove her *hijab* after almost five years of donning it. Her statement came amidst a backlash of her photo sans *hijab* leaked online. Her announcement received national coverage both on news and social media and it was even picked up by the Telegraph (Nicola, 2019). A few months after Emma's announcement, a Malay Muslim activist, Maryam Lee was investigated under the Section (10) Syariah Criminal Enactment 1995 for '*insulting or bringing into contempt the religion of Islam*' (Malaysiakini, 2019). The investigation can be traced back to the disruption during her book launch by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department where she shared her *de-hijabbing* experience. This public display of resistance as mentioned by Fan (2021) demonstrates the immense pressures faced by Muslim women in Malaysia. These incidents also bring into question the kind of agency exercised by these women in relation to their *hijab* conformity when resistance for not adhering to this bodily practice comes at the expense of public shaming, paying a fine, and at worst, imprisonment.

Although hair covering is imposed on all Muslim women, the existing literature has largely focused on the women who covered and not the women who chose not to. There are very few available scholarly works that focused on Muslim women who do not cover. Fadil (2011) asserts that *de-hijabbing* is an identity practice motivated by a conscious and active act to dispel the narrative that female piety is represented by the *hijab*. In a similar vein, Izharuddin's (2018) reported similar reasons behind the *de-hijabbing* decisions of Muslim women in Malaysia but also shed light on the indoctrination of *hijab* in schools as part of the Islamic revivalist projects which began in the 1980s. Fan (2021) on the other hand, focused on the act of resistance towards *de-hijabbing* and suggests that the resistance comes in two forms; legal and individual which includes online shaming and bullying.

Inspired by the nationwide coverage and backlash faced by Emma's *de-hijab* decision and the scarcity of research that includes Muslim women who do not cover, this research aims to fill in the gaps by exploring how women who have decided to remove their *hijab* are viewed in Malaysia. This is achieved by deconstructing the comments of Instagram users to a post shared by Emma upon removing her *hijab*. The data is chosen in particular not only because it represents the general views of the public pertaining to the act of *de-hijabbing*, but it also demonstrates the dominant ideologies surrounding *hijab* in the country. This research provides answers to the underlying questions; what are the discursive strategies employed by Instagram users in their comments to Emma Maembong's *de-hijabbing* post? And how do these strategies work in tandem with the '*us versus them*' schema that contributes to positioning Emma as the other or the outgroup?

This study is important not only because it enriches the existing literature on *hijab* but the inclusion of Muslim women who do not cover is crucial to understand the complexity of this bodily practice and the ways in which the notion of choice which is adversarial to *hijab* as oppressive is limited and cannot be reduced to the realities of Muslim women living in a predominantly *hijab* society. This research reveals not only the pressures faced by Muslim women in Malaysia who do not wear the *hijab* or no longer want to wear it, but it also highlights the ideological construction of '*us versus them*' as means of positioning these women as an outgroup which resulted in the disempowerment of their agency.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social networking websites such as *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook* have emerged as significant mediums in providing the most up-to-date news and information. While traditional media adheres to the norms and the censorship imposed in their reporting, social media liberates users from many constraints that govern the traditional media. Much research has been done to examine the integral role of social networking sites in public advocacy and activism (Smith et al., 2013; KhosraviNik, 2018), but there is also available research that focused on the lack of accountability in social media interactions; allowing radical, extreme and violent speech to thrive. According to Piazza (2021), the dissemination of misinformed ideas on social media contributes to the deepened polarisation and tribalism in society. This is congruent with (Awan, 2017; Khoiri & Muttaqin, 2021) that suggest the danger of social media as a breeding ground for the promotion, legitimisation, and recruitment of radical Islamist movements. The lack of accountability in social media interaction has also created a new form of online aggression known as cyberbullying.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, cyberbullying refers to ‘*an electronic posting of mean-spirited messages often done anonymously*’. However, in the literature of cyberbullying, there exist many definitions but generally, cyberbullying is described as an act of aggression that is intentionally executed to cause harm or distress characterised by a power imbalance (Menin et al., 2021; Steer et al., 2020; Wagner & Yu, 2021). Considered as an extension of traditional bullying, cyberbullying is executed through online chats, online media, and short messaging texts (Shahidatul et al., 2020). Cyberbullying can cause more damaging effects to the victims than traditional bullying due to the viral process of Internet sharing. Despite a great deal of published research on the phenomenon, research on the language use of cyberbullying on social media particularly as it occurs in Malaysia is still largely absent. Although there are available studies in Malaysia (Bahiyah, 2018; Hamiza Wan Ali et al., 2019; Shahidatul et al., 2020), these studies focused on peer-to-peer related forms of aggressions. Research on online aggressions toward celebrities remained inadequately explored despite celebrities being the most common victims of online bullying (Hassan et al., 2018; Ouvrein et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2020). Previous research (Smith et al., 2008; Ouvrein et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2020) illustrates that online aggressions toward celebrities differ greatly from peer aggression or aggression between known individuals due to the perceived distance resulting in increased disengagement and decreased empathy (Ouvrein et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2015; Pornari & Wood, 2010). This paucity is important to address, as celebrities are instrumental in reaching mass audiences of which integral in shaping the public’s opinions including on the topic of *hijab*. In fact, according to Manaf (2019), the engagement between celebrities and their fans on social media has significantly influenced public’s perception and adoption of *hijab*. A few other works on *hijab* (Hassim et al., 2019; Hochel, 2013; Mohamad & Hassim, 2019) suggest similar observation.

Although there is no consensus on how *hijab* should be worn, Muslim scholars agreed that *hijab* is compulsory for women. This obligation derives from the concept of *awrah* or nakedness in Islam. However, many studies have reported that special attention is given to *hijab* due to its symbolic function as an emblem for Islamic politics and political ideologies (Byng, 2010; Haddad, 2007; Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Siraj, 2011). The many variations of meanings attained by and given to *hijab* resulted in *hijab* being one of the most visible aspects of Islam and Islamic identity. Hence, the identity of Muslim women without the *hijab*, particularly in the context of Islamisation, is defined based on their non-compliance, positioning them as transgressors and outsiders. It is from the context of non-compliance that the act of *de-hijabbing* in a society where *hijab* is predominant can bring about public criticism and to a certain extent, abuse. This is exemplified in the comments posted on Emma’s Instagram post. Emma

Maembong, a Malaysian actress who has worked in many locally produced television series and movies is one of the popular celebrities in Malaysia. Donning the *hijab* in 2013, Emma's decision to adopt the *hijab* was well-received and widely praised on social media and entertainment blogs (RotiKaya, 2013). Her popularity transcends beyond her work as an actress as she is also one of the most followed Malaysian celebrities on Instagram garnering 5.1 million followers. After five years of donning the *hijab*, Emma removed her *hijab* in 2019. Her *de-hijabbing* decision received nationwide criticism, particularly on online platforms. Due to the negative reactions and extensive coverage of Emma's *de-hijabbing* decision, this study aims to firstly fill in the gap of the current literature on *hijab* that excludes women who chose to not cover, and secondly, it also aims to critically analyse the linguistic patterns and ideologies embedded in the negative comments towards Emma as means of positioning her as the other or the outgroup.

### CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

CDA is an approach that covers every aspect of language use in both social and political domains that helps in critically investigating and explaining the relation between power and ideology (Fairclough, 2003). Although CDA offers different types of approaches and methods, one of the key focuses of these approaches is the polarisation of *in-group versus out-group*. Achieved through 'positive self-representation' and 'negative other-representation', the polarisation of the self and other representations works towards highlighting the '*us versus them*' binary which is the foundation of discriminatory discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017). One of the CDA approaches that focuses upon this schema is the Ideological Square Model (van Dijk, 1999; 2006).

### THE IDEOLOGICAL SQUARE MODEL

The basic premise of the Ideological Square Model as proposed by van Dijk (1999; 2006) is the ideological construction of the '*us versus them*' achieved through positive representation of self and negative representation of others. Developed based on social identity theory in the late 1970s (Turner et al., 1979) the Ideological Square Model is interested in exploring the strategies that people use to describe the groups to which they belong positively while depicting people outside the group negatively. The tendency to enhance positive traits and characteristics of self through negative portrayals of others brings about ingroup and outgroup biases that lead to discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes. This group polarization is ideological and produced and reproduced in many complex ways in text and talk from the lens of the '*us versus them*' dichotomy.

The Ideological Square Model (van Dijk, 1999; 2006) is seen as appropriate for this study as the framework specifically focuses upon the oppositions of positive self and negative other representations. Several recent studies (Ghaffari, 2020; Muhammad Irawan et al., 2017; Natrah, 2020; Onay-Coker, 2019) have utilised this approach which fits the objective of the research that aims to explore and highlight the polarisation of '*us versus them*' where the commentators are considered to be the ingroup or 'us/self', hence portrayed positively, while Emma who represents a significant minority of Muslim women who do not conform to the normative expectation toward *hijab* is positioned as the outgroup 'her/other' and as such perceived negatively. Based on this line of reasoning, the framework posits two stages of analysis namely, macro and micro analysis. For the macro analysis, van Dijk (1999; 2006) proposes four basic strategies to create the *us vs them* schema, and these strategies are:

1. Emphasize positive things about ‘us’
2. Emphasize negative things about ‘them’
3. De-emphasize negative things about ‘us’
4. De-emphasize positive things about ‘them’

Based on the above strategies, the binary of the self-other representation at a macro-level can be demonstrated as follows:

**Commentators:** *Self; We, Us* → In-Group

**Emma Maembong:** *Others, They, Them* → Out-Group

In terms of the micro-analysis, van Dijk (1999; 2006) suggested 25 key terms or rhetorical discursive strategies and they are *disclaimer, authority, irony, lexicalisation, burden, categorization, consensus, comparison counterfactual, national self-glorification, euphemism, hyperbole, argumentation, evidentiality, generalisation, illustration/example, implication, metaphor, norm expression, number game, polarisation (us-them), populism, presupposition, vagueness, and victimisation*. A short description of five of the most frequently used rhetorical discursive strategies as found in the data are summarised in TABLE 1 below:

TABLE 1. Rhetorical Discursive Strategies

Discursive Strategy	Description	Linguistic Devices
Disclaimer	Semantic maneuvers or techniques to present something positive before rejecting it	However, but
Authority	Mentioning authoritative figure(s) in support of a claim	God, scholars, the Quran
Irony	Deliberate contrast between what is said and what the writer intends to say	Sarcasm, metaphor, euphemistic terms
Lexicalisation	Semantic features to portray someone or group of people; positively or negatively	Negative words or positive words; for example, derogatory terms, insults, or compliments
Burden	When a person, institution, or country is burdened by a specific problem, hence should act to diminish it	‘They are a burden to our community’, ‘Their lifestyle is too different’

## METHODOLOGY

Following a qualitative research approach employed in CDA, this study attempted to investigate the discursive strategies found in the comments for a post shared by Emma upon announcing her *de-hijabbing* decision. The comments were selected as they provide authentic data that feature people’s general responses toward Muslim women who decided to *dehijab* in Malaysia. It was also chosen as it was the first post shared by Emma (see FIGURE 1) to denote her *de-hijabbing* decision. The post garnered 30,700 comments and these comments were extracted using EXPORTCOMMENT; an online data collection tool that extracts comments from social media postings such as Instagram, into Excel files. The comments were written in both Malay and English and contained slang, emojis, and metadata user-generated tagging such as tags and hashtags# which were then filtered to exclude emojis,

nestled comments, and tagged comments that did not add to the research's analytical outcome. After the filtration, the comments were reduced to 18,576 which were more manageable for the research. This method is supported by Partington and Marchi (2015) who emphasise quality rather than quantity of the data. The comments were then translated into English and the translations were checked and verified by a bilingual editor with a two-year experience translating and editing stories for Malaysiakini - one of the biggest online news portals in Malaysia. The translation and verification process took about two months to complete not only due to its size, but also due to the heavy editing required in translating the highly noisy text including spelling errors, non-standard words, slang, short forms, and repetitions.

In addition to the Instagram comments, this research also employed NVIVO12-Pro software to transform the data into more meaningful segments and concepts that are significant for the study. The analysis using NVIVO 12-Pro began by generating a Word Cloud to extract the overall sentiment of the comments. Next, the software was also able to generate the most frequently used words in the data using the Word Frequency Queries wizard. Upon acquiring these words, the contexts where the words appeared in the comments were then pulled out for further linguistic inquiry using van Dijk's (2006) Ideological Square Model.



FIGURE 1. Emma Maebong's Instagram Post (Maebong, 2019)

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data is critically analysed within the framework of CDA and based on van Dijk's (1999; 2006) Ideological Square Model and aided by NVIVO 12-Plus software. The analysis comes in twofold – micro analysis that focuses on identifying the rhetorical discursive strategies in the data and macro analysis that emphasises on the positive self and negative other representations to create an ideological binary of '*us versus them*'.

### NVIVO 12-PRO

The first stage of the data analysis is run through NVIVO 12-Pro. FIGURE 2 shows a word cloud of the most frequent words used to describe or talk about Emma and her *de-hijabbing* decision. Both the word cloud and a list of the ten most frequent words can be seen in FIGURE 2 and FIGURE 3.





#### DISCLAIMER

**Excerpt 1:** “I’m keeping mum but, as a Muslim, it is my obligation to remind you (of your wrongdoing) because I don’t want to be punished for my silence in the Hereafter”

**Excerpt 2:** “No offence, I don’t mean to condemn you, but you shouldn’t be blaming Allah for your weakness.”

**Excerpt 3:** “Just let her be herself. She can do what she wants, considering that she is ready for her punishments in hell.”

In these excerpts, the first half of each comment was led by positive expressions; ‘*I’m keeping mum*, ‘*no offence*’, ‘*I don’t mean to condemn you*’ and ‘*just let her be herself*’; where the writers were portrayed positively as people who respect Emma’s decision to de-hijab. However, these comments immediately maneuvered into negative evaluations of Emma as a threat, a burden, and a sinner. According to the Ideological Square Model, this is an example of a *disclaimer* strategy with a combination of the overall macro strategies of *positive self-representation and negative other representation*. *Disclaimer* is an effective ‘*saving face*’ strategy that functions to maintain the writers’ positive standing at the expense of Emma. This is done by first stating the writers’ good intentions and unbiased opinion of Emma is then preceded by their negative evaluations of her. As seen in the excerpts, the positive expressions appear in various forms such as *apology* ‘*no offence*’, *negation* ‘*I don’t mean to condemn you*’ or *concession* ‘*just let be herself*’. Through this strategy, the *us versus them* schema is established by assigning the blame to Emma for threatening and burdening *Us*, or the overall Muslim communities. This strategy is also particularly effective to emphasise the positive attributes of *Us*, portraying *Us* as objective, rational and unaggressive which highlights the first feature of van Dijk’s model where positive things about ‘*Us*’ are emphasized.

*Disclaimer* is the most common strategy found in the comments and this came with no surprise given the religious nature of the topic which is *hijab*. In order to preserve the writers’ reputation as being more morally superior to Emma, it is important that to avoid giving direct insults or explicit attacks which can tarnish the writers’ moral grandstanding.

#### AUTHORITY

**Excerpt 1:** “Allah says that we need to cover our awrah (private parts). You can pray five times a day but if you fail to cover your awrah, He will not accept any of your deeds’

**Excerpt 2:** “Allah says in the Quran: Oh, children of Adam! We have provided for you clothing to cover your nakedness and as an adornment. However, the best clothing is righteousness” Surah Al-Araf: 26

**Excerpt 3:** “....Saidina Ali once said, ‘(cruelty) will persist, not because there are more bad people, but because good people remain silent”

The second most employed strategy as seen in the excerpts is *authority*. *Authority* is a discursive technique that functions to present the writers’ claim as legitimate, just, and worthy of support. *Authority* is established by mentioning an authoritative figure or a reputable organization. The word *Allah*; an Arabic word that refers to God, is the most frequently used authority found in the comments and *Allah* appeared as an authoritative figure used by the writers’ to justify their claims. In fact, it is the second most frequently used word in the overall comments. Other authorities that were found in the comments are the *Quran*, and the *Prophet’s companions* for example ‘*Saidina Ali*’ (*Ali bin Abi Talib*) as seen in Excerpt 3. Employing authority as a form of rhetorical strategy denotes the first feature of the Ideological Square

Model that emphasizes positive things about ‘Us’. It is also important to highlight that the writers’ use of *Allah*, the *Quran*, and the *Prophet’s companions* work not only towards validating and legitimising the writers’ claims and arguments but as these authorities are revered and sacred, challenging the writers’ arguments is equivalent to challenging the words of God.

#### IRONY

**Excerpt 1:** “*You look beautiful without hijab. May Hell welcome you with hearts wide open*”

**Excerpt 2:** “*Hell sends its regards to you*”

**Excerpt 3:** “*It’s okay Emma. Hell is big enough for you*”

**Excerpt 4:** “*Your hair is beautiful. Is it fireproof?*”

*Irony* is a discursive technique constructed using a deliberate contrast between what the writers say and what the writers intend to say, and it is another dominant discursive technique found in the comments. *Sarcasm* is the most common irony \ found in the data which serves not only to add humour but also to mitigate the writer’s critical attitude towards Emma. For example, instead of directly attacking Emma with ‘*go-to hell*’, the writers conveyed their insults through sarcasm; “*You look beautiful without hijab. May Hell welcome you with hearts wide open*”, “*Hell sends its regards to you*”, “*It’s okay Emma. Hell is big enough for you*” and “*Your hair is beautiful. Is it fireproof?*”.

Unlike *disclaimer*, *irony* denotes the third feature of van Dijk’s model where the writers’ de-emphasize their negative traits in order to create their *positive self-representation* which is done so by hiding the writer’s real intention through *sarcasm*. This technique shares similarity to the poetic license enjoyed by writers and poets under the pretext of creativity. Besides, as sarcasm is implied in a humorous tone, it helps to disguise and distract the writers’ negative attitude, consequently diluting their insults and abusive messages.

Additionally, the constant reference to ‘hell’ as seen in the excerpts above can be understood against the popular belief in Muslim society about women who do not wear the *hijab*. Based on this belief, women who do not cover are believed to receive severe punishment in hell. This is not only widespread but it is indoctrinated amongst Muslims and even more so pervasive in Muslim-majority societies such as Malaysia. The legitimacy of this deep-rooted belief is prevalent despite the ruling having no basis in the Quran, the most sacred and the primary reference of Islamic jurisprudence. This shared belief essentially highlights the ideology about *hijab* in the predominantly *hijab* society where *hijab* is used to mark a *good Muslim woman* from a *bad Muslim woman*.

#### LEXICALISATION

**Excerpt 1:** “*You are a stupid woman, Emma! You are just pretending to be good by wearing the hijab*”

**Excerpt 2:** “*She is stupid...so is her family. You should have just posted a naked picture of yourself*”

**Excerpt 3:** “*You’re trash*”

**Excerpt 4:** “*Loser and trash*”

**Excerpt 5:** “*Attention seeker, such trash*”

In addition to the discursive strategies mentioned above, *us versus them* schema was also highlighted through *Lexicalisation*. Employed to establish the positive self and negative

other binary, *lexicalisation* is a rhetorical technique materialised through the writer's choice of words. This technique is evident in the above excerpts where Emma is overall represented negatively with strong negative words such as *stupid*, *trash*, *loser*, and an *attention seeker*. The direct comparison made between Emma and 'trash' is used as an insult by associating her worth with 'trash' implying her dirtiness, worthlessness, and uselessness. It is also worth noting that although neutral word such as 'trash' is not a slur or an insulting term, it has as much derogatory force and can cause as much damage to the receiver at an emotional and psychological level as other slur words. The word 'trash' is also listed in (Shahidatul, Tan, and Bahiyah, 2020) common words of insults on online platforms. Employed to degrade the victims of their self-value and self-esteem, Shahidatul, Tan, and Bahiyah (2020) found that 'trash' is a worthiness-related insult by which its negative usage can only be understood from its contextual meanings. This is a particularly effective strategy since 'trash' is an innocuous-sounding word, and the writers can claim innocence to its usage and as such, mitigate the harm it caused to the receivers.

Additionally, Emma was also described as 'stupid' (see *Excerpt 1* and *2* above) 'loser' (see *Excerpt 4* above), and an 'attention seeker' (see *Excerpt 5* above). As suggested in the previous research (Felmlee et al., 2020; Shahidatul et al., 2020; Sylwander, 2020) 'stupid' is a common intellect-related insult directed at women which stems from a patriarchal culture that views women as intellectually inferior to men. However, in *Excerpt 2* (see above), the writer is seen to have extended its use to the victim's family to amplify the insult. The implication of bringing the victim's family in the insult can be understood against cultural values in the Malay community where daughters are expected to carry a good name of their family through good conduct and behaviours. As such, Emma's decision to de-*hijab* is seen as immoral behaviour that tarnishes the reputation of her family. However, the insult did not stop at attacking the victim's intellect and family, as the writer continues to reinforce his or her hostile message by equating Emma's act of exposing *her* hair to her posting nude; **'You should have just posted a naked picture of yourself'**. Although this comment demonstrates the writer's aggressive and hostile attitude, Emma's portrayal as unworthy and intellectually inferior mitigate the writer's insults and the implication that it brings to Emma. The negative attributes directed toward Emma also reveal the underlying ideologies about *hijab* which implies that the essence of Muslim women's worth, reputation, and intellectual appreciation lies in their *hijab* or a lack thereof. In this respect, Muslim women who do not adhere to the obligation are deemed, unworthy, immoral, dirty and as such justified to be insulted and humiliated.

#### BURDEN

*Excerpt 1: “.. As a Muslim, I should give you some reminders because I don't want to be questioned in the Hereafter for not reminding my fellow Muslims of their wrongdoings”*

*Excerpt 2: “As a celebrity, you should know your responsibility. Young people will follow your steps. You have a lot of fans. If you were a nobody you could do what you want (I am) sure that this is just a phase. I hope you feel guilty to Allah.”*

*Excerpt 3: “(Let) her be, (she) doesn't empathise her father. She claimed to love her father but still decided to remove her hijab. (I) feel sorry for her father. (Please) don't just think about yourself. (Life) in the Hereafter is more important.”*

*Excerpt 4: “This is the evidence that the world is ending. Many Muslim women will start taking off their hijab”*

*Excerpt 5: “I feel sorry for my daughter. She's autistic and you are her idol. She keeps on asking me why have you taken off your hijab and now, she's refusing to wear the hijab too”*

**Excerpt 6:** “Allah sends tragedies and disasters to this country because of this”

In the excerpts above, the rhetorical strategy of *burden* is invoked to depict Emma’s de-*hijab* decision as a *burden* to the ingroup. Within the context of *burden*, Emma was portrayed to have *burdened* her fellow Muslims who are made accountable to persuade or to call her to the ‘righteous’ path; **‘I need to give you some reminders because I don’t want to be questioned in the Hereafter’**. This notion can be traced to the concept of ‘*da’wah*’, an Arabic term that refers to ‘a call to Islam’ where Muslims believe that they should play an active role in spreading Islamic teaching and guiding their fellow Muslims to the ‘right path’. Emma was also portrayed as a *burden* to her father; **“She claimed to love her father but still decided to remove her hijab. (I) feel sorry for her father”**. This accusation can be understood against a false belief within the Malay community in Malaysia where fathers are deemed responsible for the sins of their daughters. Wahid (2021) mentioned this adulterated belief which originated from the Islamic teaching on parenting where parents are assigned the responsibility to care for the children’s good life and well-being. From these two excerpts, Emma’s portrayal as a *burden* to her fellow Muslims and her father works on emphasizing her negative traits while positioning the in-group or *us* as victims who have been burdened. The *burden* strategy is also extended to portraying Emma as being accountable for the ‘nearing’ apocalypse (see **Excerpt 4** above), for someone’s daughter’s refusal to wear the *hijab* (see **Excerpt 5** above), and for tragedies and disasters (see **Excerpt 6**, above) that have been affecting the country. Within all these representations, Emma’s act of de-*hijabbing* as mentioned by the writers has ultimately come at the expense of the in-group members and as such a *burden* for them.

van Dijk (1999; 2006) describes the technique of *burden* as a form of manipulation that aims to position the ingroup members as victims and therefore, emphasise the positive things about them. Consequently, this strategy has established Emma as a guilty party, a victim to be blamed for a myriad of things brought about from her decision to de-*hijab*, thus making her the outgroup. The strategy of *burden* is particularly effective to negatively picture the outgroup members to feed into the polarisation scheme of *us versus them*.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of comments on Emma’s Instagram post reveals that the Instagram commentators constantly represent the relations between Emma and themselves in terms of the polarising macro strategy of “us versus them” where Emma is attributed negatively while the writers are attributed positively. The employment of this polarising strategy is embedded in their language use with strategies such as *disclaimer*, *authority*, *irony*, *lexicalisation*, and *burden* being the most frequent strategies found in the comments. It is also clear that beyond its religious significance, *hijab* serves as a valuable symbol of membership for Muslim women in Malaysia. *Hijab* defines who belongs to the group and who does not and for this reason, Muslim women who choose to de-*hijab* are treated with resentment and hostility as their action is considered as a threat and a betrayal to the ingroup’s shared beliefs. It is under this pretext that aggression, and harassment against non-*hijab* women are legitimised and tolerated.

The pressure and hostile treatment faced by Muslim women in Malaysia who voluntarily decide to remove their *hijab* are harmful and regressive. While the dominant conceptions about *hijab* revolve around the binary of choice or oppression, the experience of Muslim women living in the context of Islamisation is more nuanced than the twofold perspectives. Although *hijab* remains a choice for women in Malaysia, the decision to remove or no longer wear it is not a safe and comfortable choice. As the study revealed, women like Emma receive immense pressures, insults, attacks, and even abuse for their de-*hijabbing*

decision. Additionally, this study also contributed to the understanding of the linguistic nature of online aggressions that are often implicitly and discursively embedded in online comments. Adding to the affordance of committing the act incognito, the implicit and discursive strategies used by online aggressors have enabled them to continue victimising their victims without having to face legal consequences. Hence, it is timely that the legal sanctions on cybercrime include the act of cyberbullying and extend the criminality of cyberbullying based on its impacts on the victims rather than the intents of the perpetrators.

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