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# ‘#SayNoToRohingya’: a critical study on Malaysians’ amplified resentment towards Rohingya refugees on Twitter during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how resentment among Malaysians towards Rohingya refugees become amplified on social media during the COVID-19 crisis. The focus of this article is the public discourse of Malaysians on Twitter, regarding Rohingya refugee issues. Through a qualitative content analysis of Tweets from Malaysian users during the country’s Movement Control Order, this article argues that the cause of Malaysians’ grievances was due to the citizens’ echo chambering of implicit insecurities. A deeper problem was also rooted in the nation where the distinction between refugees and undocumented migrants does not exist, and the inconsistencies of government policies towards refugees.



## KEYWORDS

Rohingya; refugee; social media; Twitter; resentment; Malaysia

## Introduction

Injustice comes in many shapes and forms. For the people of Rohingya, it is having to choose between probable extermination in their own backyard and traversing unknown waters without any assurance of survival. There is an added element of grimness in a Rohingya’s reality when one considers the once-raging COVID-19 pandemic – where were they to go for asylum when countries like Malaysia were turning them away due to fear of the virus? While it is easy to point fingers towards a global pandemic, there are a multitude of layers that go into play in such humanitarian disasters – statelessness, racism, abuse on social media, and lack of policies to protect even most basic human rights.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Malaysia was put into a partial lockdown under a Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18 March 2020 to 31 August 2020 (Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia, 2020). The MCO restricted Malaysians from both international and interstate travel, dining in at restaurants, carrying out outdoor activities, and attending schools, colleges and universities, among many other prohibitions. Many Malaysians turned to social media as there was a huge increase in home-based

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entertainment, video conferences and online communication during the MCO (Malek, 2020). There was a spike in degrading and discriminatory comments against the Rohingya refugees that started in late April 2020 on social media such as Twitter, when the partial lockdown was still in effect. Numerous Malaysian social media users conveyed outrage at a Facebook post falsely claiming that the leader of a Rohingya organisation demanded that Malaysia grant citizenship to the Rohingya refugees in the country (Latiff & Harris, 2021). The Rohingya activist in question has publicly denied making the declaration and lodged a police report stating the social media posts are false and defamatory (Mohanakrishnan, 2020).

It is evident that there was a robust change of view in Malaysia regarding the Rohingya refugees during the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic particularly among the nation's Muslim majority and politicians who were once big supporters (Wong, 2020). There were no public statements by the government regarding the hate speech and the violent threats directed against them, except for the Home Minister stating that Malaysia does not recognise the community as refugees but merely as 'illegal immigrants' even though they carry UNHCR identification cards (Nik Anis, 2020). Hence, this study aims to answer the following questions: Why is resentment amplified on social media towards refugees during times of crisis? What factors affect Malaysians' attitudes towards refugee communities? What do Malaysians hope to achieve by expressing their grievances towards the refugees on social media? This study argues that amplified resentment towards refugees on Twitter during times of crisis is caused by the nation's echo chambering on social media of implicit insecurities such as employment insecurity, loss of privileges as citizens, and personal safety.

In this article, we will first outline existing literature on the concept of anonymity on social media and the echo chambers that exist in cyberspace. The literature also reviews the current discourse of prominent social media platform Twitter which encourages such public debates online. The second part of the article will look at a number of methodologies used for this study. The third part will present the results of the coded Tweets and discuss the most frequent 'grievances' of Malaysians towards the Rohingya refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides that, we will also thoroughly analyse the trends in numbers of Tweets regarding Rohingya refugees before and during the pandemic to illustrate that the resentment towards the refugee community in Malaysia increased when the nation had more COVID-19 cases. The fourth part will discuss the top three grievances in greater detail, viz. the influx of Rohingya refugees, demands of basic rights from president of Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation Malaysia (MERHROM), and Malaysians' 'unpleasant experiences' with Rohingya refugees. We will conclude by providing brief policy suggestions in handling refugees in Malaysia while offsetting the grievances for future research.

### **Social media narratives: anonymity and echo chambers**

Since one of the features of social media is the ability to stay anonymous when posting content, people are more vocal in giving their opinions on the internet. According to Takikawa and Nagayoshi (2017), anonymity is effective in advancing deliberative democracy as it allows minority communities to communicate their views while their identities are not disclosed. Based on social information processing theory, people comprehend

relational data through computer-mediated mediums which are similar or more effective than conventional face-to-face exchanges (Walther, 1992, 1996, as cited in Woolley et al., 2010). Hence, this theory suggests that users are more comfortable sharing their views and opinions online as it is more successful in sending their message – especially when their identities are hidden.

Another crucial concept pertaining to anonymity on social media is the echo chamber. According to Penagos (2018), an echo chamber is a figurative explanation in which views are reinforced through repetitive interactions within a confined structure that discourages refutation. Kohl (2018) argues that the existence of the ‘echo chamber’ effect in numerous online communities, added to the anonymity that enables users to hide their identities, further complicates the issue of suppressing dissenters and political minorities. One of the factors of echo chambers is that the postings of most users on social media are skewed by their own demographics such as region, level of education, age, or wealth as stated by Allen (2016). Hence, they do not seek other perspectives as their beliefs are reinforced by existing in communities that only see eye to eye with each other. Takikawa and Nagayoshi (2017) posit that similar beliefs in echo chambers are repetitively circulated, causing the reinforcement of sentiments and the disintegration of communities, thus, creating a bipartisan environment online making it harder for different opinions to coexist.

Besides users only viewing like-minded opinions on their social media timeline, it is also a possibility that the content they see is largely confined to their previous searches and web histories. Allen (2016) states that the effects of an echo-chamber are possibly to have major consequences as many users only view self-reinforcing content on their feed and possibly even in their search results. People may consider those with differing viewpoints as their rivals and form separate communities in an echo chamber situation according to Takikawa and Nagayoshi (2017). The capacity of individuals to find people of similar opinions and to bypass conventional mass media gatekeepers illustrates that a massive number of online groups ‘have sprung into existence below and across national communities with varied social, political, religious or commercial *raison d’être*’ (Kohl, 2018, p. 128). Thus, hateful sentiments towards a certain community in these echo chamber groups will only intensify if members of such groups only communicate among each other.

### **Twitter as a prominent social media site**

Twitter is a social media site where users post texts (which are called ‘Tweets’) with a maximum of 280 characters to people ‘following’ their profile; users also read Tweets from users that they follow on Twitter. Takikawa and Nagayoshi (2017) argue that Twitter is one of the most crucial sites for political discourses. Due to its nature, this site has more potential as a free public space and is more suitable for public discourses than other social media sites (Takikawa & Nagayoshi, 2017). One of the most recent events where Twitter was an effective tool for coverage was the 14th Malaysia General Election, held in May 2018 where users spread information to encourage voting turn out by tagging common hashtags such as #GE14, #PRU14, #MalaysiaMemilih and #PulangMengundi (Kasmani, 2020). Following this event, as argued by Tapsell (2018), ‘smartphone’ and social media have become a crucial and an essential component of the

public discourse in Malaysia which indirectly contributed to the fall of the previous Barisan Nasional (BN) regime. It is not only that social media has become a prominent outlet for users to present themselves and their ideas, it is also apparent that Twitter is widely used by most politicians, civil society groups and public figures to do the same. Twitter is indeed immensely powerful in shaping trends, providing alternative information, instigating awareness and mobilising political and social change, as can be witnessed in the 2018 General Election.

Due to Twitter's 'microblogging' characteristic, heated arguments that can turn into hatred are also easily spread on the social media platform. When it comes to political discourses in particular, Twitter supplies a fertile platform for the creation of 'us' against 'them' debates because Twitter enables boundless free expression with inadequate legislation (Sevasti, 2014, as cited in Alam et al., 2016). This point goes back to the concept of echo chambers discussed earlier. According to Takikawa and Nagayoshi (2017), many researches have studied the degree of homophilic (the propensity of individuals connecting with others with common political orientation) ties in following networks in Twitter. They are deemed to be factors of echo chambers where xenophobic discourses tend to be repeated within one distinctive group (ibid). As a consequence, Twitter has been criticised for failing to mitigate hate speech and stop the spreading of misinformation and false news (Takikawa & Nagayoshi, 2017). It is vitally important to investigate hate speech as well as extremism and polarisation as Twitter has a profound impact on the public (Yardi & Boyd, 2010, as cited in Alam et al., 2016). Due to Twitter having a great impact in disseminating information but at the same time spreading negative sentiments, this social media platform will be the main focus or unit of analysis of this study.

## **Methodology: analysing Malaysian resentment towards Rohingya refugees via Tweets**

### ***Twitter before and after COVID-19***

Firstly, it is important to illustrate the difference in the number of Tweets concerning Rohingya refugees before and after the increase of positive COVID-19 cases in Malaysia. The staggering amount of discriminating messages towards the Rohingya refugees by Malaysians on Twitter sparked the research question for this study. As previously mentioned in the article, there was a noticeable surge of Tweets regarding Rohingya refugees specifically on 23 April 2020.

This data was collected by using the Twitter Advanced Search tool, which allows a user to find Tweets that are near their locations, detected by geolocation information from the user's device. This study was conducted in Malaysia, hence it is assumed that this setting has limited the search of Tweets to users in the country alone. We have searched 'Rohingya' utilising the 'Any Word' search box. It also allows the search in a particular language. Since this study focuses on Malaysian Twitter users, this section will be left blank as both English and Malay are widely used languages in Malaysia. Moreover, Twitter also enables users to search for Tweets within a certain period of time. To illustrate that there were more Tweets regarding Rohingya refugees during the time of the pandemic compared to when the virus had not yet spread in Malaysia, this research

compared the discourse during 1 January 2020–31 January 2020 (31 days) and 23 of March 2020–24 April 2020 (33 days).

### ***Content analysis and coding sheet***

Content analysis is a systemic method that can provide a numerical output through categorising texts, audios and/or visual communication on social media (Ahmed, 2019). Using content analysis enabled the researchers to strategically achieve our study objectives through the quantification of the trending hashtags, posts, and relationships of certain threads in Twitter. We could also evaluate selected ‘viral’ Tweets and other communications to search for reasons, relevancy, commonality and partiality and then come out with our own interpretations about the messages within specific time periods and circumstances surrounding the trend. According to Krippendorff (2018), there are several advantages associated with the use of content analysis for social media research. For instance, it allows a closeness to data, provides insight into complex thoughts and discourses of a given society, and documentation of trends over time. In this study, we have employed content analysis consisting of a selected sample of 157 Tweets by Malaysian users regarding Rohingya Refugees between 23 March 2020 and 24 April 2020. It was noticeable that during this period the discussion on Rohingya refugees was much more vocal and much more numerous than usual. Most of these Tweets were more discriminatory than encouraging.

The Tweets in the selected sample are in both English and Malay (and sometimes a mixture of both). The Tweets are selected solely on their relevance to the discussion of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. These Tweets are then categorised into those regarding issues that Malaysians are ‘grieving’ regarding the refugees, also considering the number of ‘Likes’ and ‘Retweets’. Generally, when a person ‘likes’ a Tweet, it is assumed to denote agreement whereas a ‘retweet’ is intended to disseminate information. Both of these features are types of engagement on social media, although there are Twitter users that state ‘Likes or Retweets are not necessarily endorsements’ on their profiles. The coding process is done four times for the same set of selected date to ensure consistency through intracoder reliability. The example of the coding scheme is as per [Tables 1 and 2](#).

### ***Interpretivism and reflexivity***

After the coding of the selected sample, we analysed the data with an interpretivist lens while practising reflexivity to ensure the ethical soundness of the study. Interpretivist studies place emphasis on the offering of significant meanings to the knowledge without being biased according to own perspectives. Although the coding is capable of illustrating that some grievances of Malaysians towards the Rohingya refugees are even more intense than others, interpretivism can further add meaning to the data as it can possibly reveal underlying insecurities.

The next important method is reflexivity. Through this method, the researchers need to be more conscious and mindful of the characteristics that may influence their perspective when conducting a study (Paget, 2019). These features include ethnicity, educational background, age, nationality, sexuality, and many more. This ethical technique of study is described as a stage where the researcher contemplates critically the

**Table 1. Selected relevant coding of Tweets by Malaysians regarding the negative polemics of Rohingya refugees (23 March 2020–24 April 2020).**


Category	Description and Examples	Frequency	Most Retweets
Unpleasant Experiences with Rohingya Refugees	<p>Tweets describing the unpleasant communication or encounters with Rohingya refugees that also reflect their attitudes. These accounts describe the Rohingyas as ungrateful and hypocritical. Besides that, there are also a number of statements detailing the refugees to be stealing and begging.</p> <p>Examples:  <i>'Inilah bangsa plg kurang ajar and mentality low class'</i>                      Translation: They are the most disrespectful race and (have) low class mentality.  <i>'Rohingya ni bangsa kurang ajar. Rohingya ni bangsa pengator. Rohingya ni bangsa tak pandai hormat orang. Mungkin begini perangai mereka. Tetapi kenapa mereka berperangai sebegini? Benda ni kita kena tengok root problem mereka'</i>                      Translation: 'Rohingya is a disrespectful race. Rohingya is a dirty race. Rohingya is a race that does not how to respect people. Maybe that is their behaviour. But we have to know why they behave like that? We have to look at the root problem.'                      Many of the Tweets in this category express Malaysians' general unwelcoming attitude towards the Rohingya refugees, without any specific reason.</p>	32	12.1k/ 7.6k
General Hate Against the Refugees	<p>Example:  <i>'SELAMAT JALAN ROHINGYA'</i>.                      (With the picture below)</p> 	15	24.5k/23.5k

Illustration showing 5 ASEAN nations not accepting Rohingya refugees including Malaysia.  
 Translation: 'SAFE TRAVELS ROHINGYA'

(Continued)



Table 1. (Continued).

Category	Description and Examples	Frequency	Most Retweets
Demand of 'Equal Rights'	<p>This category comprises of Tweets regarding to the 'list of demands' from the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingyas Human Rights Organisation Malaysia (MERHROM) president.</p> <p>Example: 'Guys. This freakin bullsh*t. Request dari kaum Rohingya dkt kerajaan Malaysia. I'm sooo totally pissed off. I'm so totally pissed off.' 'Mereka mintak hak samarata'</p> <p>Translation: 'Guys, This is freaking bullsh*t. The request from the Rohingya community from the government of Malaysia. I'm so totally pissed off.'</p>	14	(1) k/ 912
Influx of Migrants	<p>Tweets that indicate dissatisfaction towards the influx of migrants (including refugees) into the country.</p> <p>Example: 'Tolongla kerajaan Malaysia. Buka mata. Malaysia ni dh macam negara luar aku tgok. Klw dekat kl tu yg bersepah bangsa luar shj. Bangla, Indonesia and lain2. Kt mna 2 ja ada diorang. Org melayu Malaysia boleh kira jaa. Negara apakah ini.' Translation: 'Please help, government of Malaysia. Open your eyes. I see Malaysia now is like a foreign country. In Kuala Lumpur, there are only scattering foreigners. Bangladeshis, Indonesians and others. I see them everywhere. I can count how many Malays are in Malaysia. What kind of a country is this ...' 'Dah banyak Rohingya'</p>	21	1k/700
Malaysians First	<p>Translation: 'There are too many Rohingyas'. This category contains Tweets that express the need for the government prioritise to help Malaysians first, as Malaysia is not a fully developed country.</p> <p>Example: 'Saya x kisah dorg baik ke jahat, tp saya perlu rasa secera terlebih dahulu adalah rakyat. Sy risau mee/kat melebihi2 dan mungkin menambah jenayah dlm negara. Selain tu saya risau penyakit. I don't want to lose my home, i xnk rasa bahaya dlm rmh I sendiri. I nak rmh I selamat.' Translation: 'I don't care if they are nice or bad, but Malaysians should feel secured first. I worry that they will take advantage and cause more crimes in the country. Besides that, I am scared of the disease. I don't want to lose my home, I don't want to feel scared in my own home. I want my home to be safe.'</p>	12	215/974
History of the Rohingyas	<p>This category encompasses Tweets that describe the 'history' of Rohingya refugees and why the race have been 'running' all their lives.</p> <p>Example: 'Dulu ada seorang tua pernah bagitahu saya, ada 3 bangsa dalam dunia ni yang takkan ada negara sampai bila-bila; Bani Israel, Gipsy, Rohingya' Translation: 'Once, an old person once told me that there are three races in the world that will never have a state until the end of time; Israelis, Gypsies, Rohingyas'</p>	10	7/44
		7	1k/2.4k

[The above table was prepared by the authors in 2020].



Table 2. Selected relevant coding of Tweets by Malaysians regarding the positive polemics of Rohingya refugees (23 March 2020–24 April 2020).

Category	Description and Examples	Frequency	Most Retweets
Religion	<p>Since the Twitter upsurge against the Rohingya refugees happened during the start of the holy Ramadhan month, when the Muslims fast, many of the Tweets in this category brought in religion as a counterargument to the 'grievances'.</p> <p>Examples:  '<i>Astagfirullah ... You know who else says this to minorities? Nazis, Zionists, Chinese gov on Uighur Muslims, Trump. Muslim minorities were considered vermin/rats. Malam ni dah Ramadhan. Semoga Allah ampunkari</i>'.  '<i>Translation: 'I ask Allah forgiveness ... You know who else says this to minorities? Nazis, Zionists, Chinese gov on Uighur Muslims, Trump. Muslim minorities were considered vermin/rats. It is Ramadhan tonight. Hopefully Allah forgives you</i>'.</p>	9	379/491
Malaysians as Xenophobic	<p>'Most Making the vile comments? Malay Muslims'.</p> <p>'If they were Arabs, it would be a different story'.</p> <p>Tweets against the 'grievances', categorising them as xenophobia.</p> <p>Examples:  'Malaysians are genociders-adjacent. This whole Rohingya reaction has convinced me the only reason we puff our chests every season about Palestinians is not because we actually care about them, it's because we're anti-Semites'  '<i>Menakutkan baca komen. Ingat kan Malaysia ini rakyatnya semua ramah dan baik hati. Penuh sifat kemanusiaan. Tapi nampak dah hilang semua itu. Bahkan gaya dah macam orang US, pengundi Trump. Dah jadi xenophobic</i>'.</p>	7	101/189
Against the Hate	<p>Translation: 'It is scary to read the comments (regarding Rohingya refugees). I thought Malaysians were all friendly and nice. Filled with humanity. But it looks like all of that is gone. Moreover, they sound like Americans, voters of Trump. They have gone xenophobic'.</p> <p>General Tweets questioning the sudden upsurge of 'grievances' on Twitter during the Movement Control Order.</p> <p>Example:  '<i>Apasal tetiba membuaak2 prejudis dan benci Rohingya sampai nak belatah and bunuh? Sbb PKPD di Pasar Borong? Setakat ni, kluster terbesar di Malaysia masih peserta tabligh. Dah lebih sebulan and masih ada kes baru dlm kluster ni stp hari. Dua2 tabligh and Rohingya tak patut distigmakan</i>'.</p>	7	169/315
Their Refugee Status	<p>Translation: 'Why is there a sudden increase in prejudice and hate towards the Rohingyas until (you want to) beat (them up) and murder? Because of the PKPD at Borong Market'</p> <p>Until now, the biggest cluster (COVID-19) in Malaysia are the tablighs. It has been a month and there are still cases from that cluster every day.</p> <p>Both tablighs and refugees should not be stigmatised'.</p> <p>A category of Tweets that counterargues the hate by justifying their status as refugees.</p> <p>Example:  'Refugees r not here by choice! They risk death/torture if they go home. They r stateless. Have a Heart! Its Ramadhan! A high risk cluster @KKMPutrajaya will screen/treat/protect from #COVID19. Kudos KKM. Or risk another wave. Petition 'Say No To Rohingya' is inhumane + wishful thinking'</p>	12	164/284

[The above table was prepared by the authors in 2020].

kind of information produced by the study and how the production of that information came into being (Berger, 2015). When academics are attentive to their environment and social circumstances while carrying out a research project, they will be more alert to their prejudices and will be more open to reflect their participants' understandings of the phenomenon that they find perplexing (Paget, 2019). By applying reflexivity, we labelled the Tweets containing elements of hate speech as 'grievances' which can be understood as 'a cause of distress (such an unsatisfactory working condition) felt to afford reason for complaint or resistance' (Merriam-Webster, 2020). This is due to the nature of the 'hate speech' being directed mostly at the 'consequences' of the presence of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. Some literature and many media outlets use the term 'racially-charged' speech, a rather ambiguous term, 'gross offensiveness' (Kohl, 2018) and 'offensive venting' (Tham, 2020).

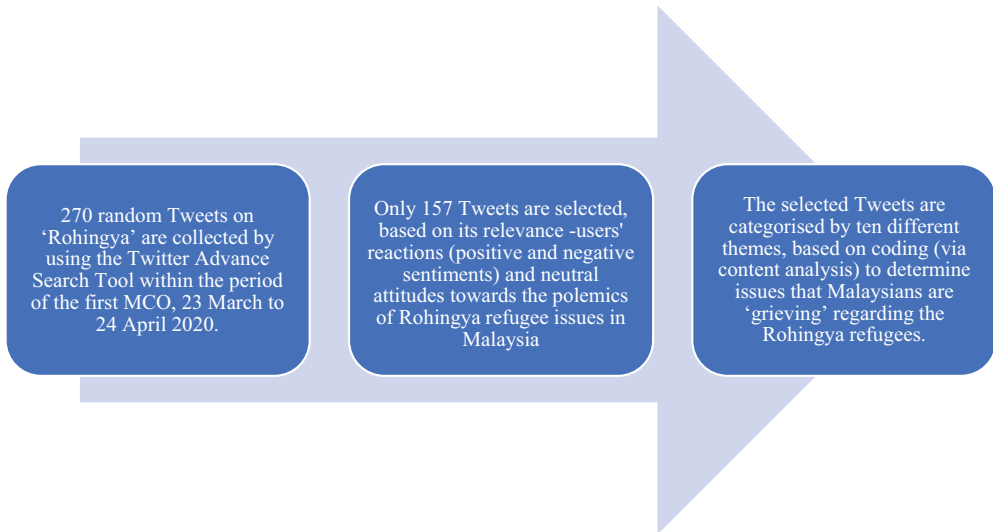
## Results and findings

### *Coding of top 10 Tweets on 23 April 2020*

The total number of Tweets coded is 157, comprising of Tweets that have both positive and negative sentiments as well as neutral attitudes towards Rohingya refugees. There are ten main categories included in both the coding sheets in the [Tables 1 and 2](#). As shown in both Tables, there are more negative than positive categories towards the Rohingyas in the ten categories of coded selected sample of Tweets. The top three categories (excluding the general hate comments against the refugees as they do not explicitly state the reason of hate and thus do not help in any meaningful analysis) of the Tweets coded are: 1) unpleasant experiences with the Rohingya refugees; 2) the issue of a demand of equal rights by the president of MERHRM and; 3) the effects of the influx of migrants into Malaysia. Some examples of categories that also have a high number of Tweets include the idea of helping Malaysians first and demanding a justification for the grant of refugee status to the Rohingyas.

There is undeniably a pattern of words in both the positive and negative Tweets. For Tweets championing the protection of Rohingya refugees, many stated the fact that refugees are 'not in Malaysia by choice' and that they are running from the persecution of the Burmese government. Besides that, this group also quoted Islamic narratives to convince the Muslim-majority community. This attempt included some counterarguments trying to ease the 'hate' using the fact that the holy month of Ramadan was coming in April 2020 when Muslims would fast from dawn to sunset, and urging Malaysians to be more compassionate towards poor people. Besides that, some even likened the situation of the Rohingya refugees to the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina to flee persecution. Lastly, this group also expressed disappointment with 'xenophobic' Malaysians and compared them to the attitude of Donald Trump towards immigrants, the Zionists towards the Palestinians, the Nazis towards the Jewish people, and the Chinese government towards the Uyghur Muslims.

As for the Tweets expressing grievances towards the refugee community, many of the repeated terms described the 'displeasing attitudes' of the Rohingya refugees. Many of these Tweets contained the phrase 'kurang ajar' which means something extremely rude in Malay. Besides that, most general Tweets included phrases such as 'Rohingyas are not



**Diagram 1.** A flow chart demonstrating the process of Tweets selection.

welcome’ and ‘Say no to Rohingya’. However, some of the negative Tweets were more offensive than just grievances such as mentions of wishing death upon the Rohingyas, sexual remarks, asking for the incarceration of the refugees in concentration camps and encouraging physical abuse (such as beating up and shooting). All these negative sentiments towards the Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia contributed to more Malaysians signing the online petition to send the Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar and block undocumented migrants from coming into the country.

As for Tweets which utilised the Twitter Advanced Search tool, there were substantially more of them during the 2-day period from 22 April 2020 to 24 April 2020 compared to the month of January the same year. The number of Tweets regarding the Rohingya refugees during January was counted manually and it amounted to 13. However, when running the search tool for the 2-day period in April, the results page for the search had to be scrolled continuously, not reaching to the end of the page even with a lot of effort – indicating there was a significantly sharp rise of Tweets on ‘#Rohingya’ among Twitter users in Malaysia. A flow chart demonstrating the process of how and why Tweets were narrowed down can be seen in [Diagram 1](#).

## Discussion

We discuss the top three categories of ‘grievances’ as illustrated by the coded data in [Table 1](#). The approach in analysing these most Tweeted categories is interpretivism – making the data more meaningful from Malaysians’ perspective. The objective of this analysis is to illustrate that insecurities of different kinds – such as unemployment, loss of citizen privileges and refugees as a social threat – are the causes of amplified resentment towards the refugee community during times of crisis. These implicit insecurities incite and amplify the negative attitudes of Malaysians towards the refugee community. Hence, Malaysians hope that the government will heed their voices through Twitter and will

firstly improve their wellbeing and secondly stop undocumented migrants entering the country. This analysis considers past and existing Malaysian policies and attitudes towards refugees of various nationalities. The order of the analysis will be ascending from the smallest number of Tweets.

### ***Influx of refugees***

Tweets regarding the ‘influx’ of Rohingya refugees, amount to 12 out of 157 in the coded selected sample (approximately 12% of the Tweets). From the analysis, it can be inferred that there had been echo chambering among citizens and the Malaysian government as the government believed that the Rohingya refugees could potentially spread COVID-19, making the situation worse in the country. On the 18 April 2020, Malaysia denied the entry of two boats with 200 Rohingya refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2020), which sparked anger among human right activists and non-governmental organisations. The purpose of returning the boats of these refugees was to avoid COVID-19 from spreading (News Straits Times, 2020). However, based on the interpretation of the Tweets, not many users cited the pandemic as an issue. However, one of the Tweets summarised the insecurities of some Malaysians regarding the influx of Rohingya refugees:

Saya x kisah dorg baik ke jahat, tp yg perlu rasa secure terlebih dahulu adalah rakyat. Sy risau mereka melebihi2 dan mungkin menambah jenayah dlm negara. Selain itu, saya risau penyakit. I don't wanna lose my home, I xnk rasa bahaya dlm rumah I sendiri, I nk rumah I selamat.

Translation: ‘I do not care if they are nice or bad, but I think (Malaysian) citizens should feel secured first. I’m worried they are asking for too much and perhaps increasing the domestic crime rates. Besides that, I am concerned of diseases. I don’t want to lose my home, I don’t want to feel in danger in my own house. I want to feel that my house is safe.’ (A Tweet from a concerned Malaysian regarding the influx of Rohingya Refugees, 23 April 2020)

Some Tweets not only mentioned the influx of Rohingya refugees, but foreigners in general – mainly Bangladeshis. These concerned Malaysian users also called on the government to ‘open their eyes’ as Malaysia has become a foreign country to the locals, one infested with foreigners such as Bangladeshis, Nigerians and Indonesians.

### ***Status of Malaysia as a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention***

This segues to the first root cause of the grievance regarding the ‘influx’ of Rohingya refugees. After a thorough analysis, it can be concluded that a majority of Malaysian users in this category classify Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi workers in their nation as immigrants. Immigrant in Malay is ‘pendatang’, and it is mostly used in a derogatory way (Somiah et al., 2019). To make things worse, the term *Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin* (translation: illegal immigrants), commonly used by the government as ‘PATTI’, is another disparaging term for undocumented immigrants. Some examples of Tweets mentioning the word ‘pendatang’ are given below:

I have already called them as ungrateful *pendatang*. Enough of *pendatang* ... enough of becoming a welfare state ... we have homeless people ... we do not need another headache. (An example of Tweets using the word ‘pendatang’ as a derogatory term, 22 April 2020)

In contrast, refugee in Malay is ‘pelarian’ which comes from the root word ‘lari’ meaning run. In this study, the term ‘refugee’ refers to persons who meet the refugee criteria that is set by the Refugee Convention and/or its Protocol or based on the laws of the countries that have domestic refugee legislation (Dewansyah & Handayani, 2018). It also refers to asylum seekers as individuals looking for protection from other countries because of the danger of persecution (ibid). Most Malaysians do not know that refugees in Malaysia include not only Rohingya but those from many other nations including Myanmar, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka (UNHCR, 2011).

One of the reasons that some Malaysians unintentionally categorise both refugees and undocumented migrants as PATI is due to the lack of state policies that clearly distinguish between the two (Daniel & Yasmin, 2020; International Federation for Human Rights, 2008; UNHCR Malaysia, 2021; Wahab & Khairi, 2020). Although Malaysia has been taking in refugees and asylum seekers from many countries, it remains one of the countries reluctant to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, making it challenging for the UNHCR to carry out its mandate to protect refugees in the country (Ahmad et al., 2016). Due to the non-signatory status of Malaysia in relation to the Convention, Malaysia considers all refugees to be illegal migrants (Muzafarkamal & Hossain, 2019).

According to Hoffstaedter (2017), one of the reasons why Malaysia did not ratify the convention or enhance protection for refugees was the fear that any form of acknowledgement would attract more refugees. Because Malaysians do not know the difference between refugees and ‘PATIs’, there exists a generalisation about all undocumented migrants, inciting more negative attitudes towards them during times of crisis. Being a non-signatory does Malaysia’s reputation no good in the eyes of the global community if efforts in helping many refugees cannot be respectably recognised. The UNHCR has pursued a Muslim approach in Muslim majority countries that are not parties to the refugee convention in the hope of carving out a complementary protection space based on Islamic law and practice (Ahmad et al., 2016). However, that is not the case in Malaysia as refugee policies in this Muslim majority country, even towards Muslims, have been inconsistent.

Based on the Immigration Act 1959/1963 in Malaysia, one is either a legally documented person or an illegal undocumented person (Cheung, 2011, as cited in Azis, 2014). For this reason, most Malaysians are not able to distinguish between refugees and undocumented migrants as there is no legal framework to establish the difference (Bemma, 2018). Consequently, they are susceptible to arrest for immigration violations as the country does not acknowledge the rights of refugees under the international framework (UNHCR, 2011). They are subjected to detention, imprisonment and deportation under Malaysian Law (Yusoff et al., 2019). In other words, Malaysia simply does not recognise refugees.

Since Malaysians categorise all refugees as undocumented migrants, the Rohingya refugees make them feel insecure for invalid reasons. The popular sentiment among Malaysians is that there are too many immigrant labourers in the country (Wong, 2020). The estimate is close to two million officially authorised foreign employees in 2019, ‘while other reports claimed that unofficial estimates showed up to six million of them, or 18.6% of the country’s 32.6 million population’ (ibid). Many Malaysians mistake Rohingya refugees for Bangladeshi

migrants due to the darker colour of their skin. Hence, they are unsympathetic towards the Rohingyas as there is also tension towards Bangladeshi workers due to their 'influx' even though Malaysia depends on foreign workers to sustain its economic growth (Abdul-Rahman et al., 2012). Still, Malaysians have yet to openly talk about Bangladeshi workers and how they manage to get into the country. The 'influx' is a case of a race to the bottom – a socio-economic phenomenon caused by globalisation, induced by Malaysian companies. Malaysians blame foreigners for coming to the country despite the development of the country being built by foreign hands. These foreigners became undocumented during COVID-19 because employers refused to renew their work permits and they could, of course, not renew their permits themselves (Paulsen, 2020).

Therefore, it can be deduced that the 'grievances' regarding the influx of Rohingya refugees are caused by the lack of distinction between refugees and undocumented migrants. As a consequence, a majority of Malaysians classify refugees as PATIs – who are mostly brought in by Malaysian employers (Malay Mail, 2020). Rohingya refugees make Malaysians feel insecure because refugees are mistaken for Bangladeshi workers. The Tweets in this category suggest insecurities over an alleged economic threat as Malaysians are concerned about limiting of employment opportunities if more migrants and refugees were to enter the country, especially during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic where there were many job losses and pay cuts. That being the case, Malaysians utilise social media, particularly Twitter during the times of crisis as a cry for help to the government. Within the period of the first MCO (March-April 2020), there were 78 Tweets that had specifically mentioned or Tweeted certain leaders, politicians, state agencies urging them and other authorities to take care of their citizens first as a response to the polemics of Rohingya refugee issues. Such Tweets or hashtags were directed to: #wismaputra (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), #kkm (Ministry of Health), #imigresen (Immigration Department), the Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yasin (@MuhyiddinYassin), Minister of Home Affairs, Hamzah Zainuddin (@dhzhamzah), Minister of Rural Territories, Annuar Musa (@AnnuarMusa), Minister of Defence, Ismail Sabri (@IsmailSabri60), Klang Member of Parliament, Charles Santiago (@mpklang) and the National Security Council (@MKNJPM). Examples of selected original Tweets can be seen in the following:

'Aku sebagai orang Melayu Bumiputera Malaysia menolak sekeras-kerasnya agar kerajaan Malaysia terus membantu pelarian Rohingya!! Siapa setuju tolong rt sampai pemerintah atasan sadar! @MuhyiddinYassin @chedetofficial @SyedSaddiq @HishammuddinH2O'  
Translation: 'As a Malaysian Malay Bumiputera I strongly oppose the continuous assistance by the Malaysian government towards the Rohingya refugees. Whoever agree please retweet till the top leaders [become] aware!' (23 April 2020)

@mpklang Malaysia is not Rohingya 'DUMPING' ground. Amnesty International and who others talk big they can take care of this Rohingya people. Malaysia is infested with Pendatang. It's high time we clear all this pendatang without documents. They impose a lot of danger for local Malaysians. (18 April 2020)

@dhzhamzah Tolong pertimbangkan pendatang pati rohingya dn berstatus unchr. Rakyat Malaysia muak dengan pendatang. Mintak hantar pulang negara.

Translation: 'Please do not consider those illegal Rohingya immigrants (even with the UNHCR status). Malaysians are tired of immigrants. Please send them away immediately'. (21 April 2020)

Saya Mohon Kerajaan @MuhyiddinYassin @dhzhamzah Untuk Tutup Pejabat #UNHCR Di Malaysia dengan Segara. Batalkan Pengiktirafan Kad UN Untuk Rohingya dengan Serta Merta!. Tangkap Mereka Sebagai Pendatang Haram Yang Lain.

Translation: 'I urge the government @MuhyiddinYassin @dhzhamzah to close the #UNHCR office in Malaysia as soon as possible. Immediately cancel the recognition of UN card for those Rohingyas! Detain the rest of other illegal immigrants'. (23 April 2020)

@MKNJPM Sebagai rakyat negara Malaysia, saya mohon agar tuan tolak kemasukan pendatang rohingya ke negara yg tercinta ini. Kami telah melalui saat yg amat sukar dengan kebanjiran pendatang asing di Malaysia.

Translation: As a citizen of Malaysia, I urge you to reject the incoming of Rohingya immigrants to our beloved country. We have endured difficult times with the overflowing of illegal immigrants in Malaysia'. (22 April 2020)

Tolong tolak kemasukan pendatang rohingya! Yg mana dh masuk, sila halau keluat! Kami rasa tidak selamat! Kami ada hak pertahan negara kami! @MuhyiddinYassin @IsmailSabri60 @dhzhamzah tolong dengar suara rakyat!.

Translation: Please reject incoming of Rohingya immigrants! Those who have entered, please ask them to leave! We feel unsafe! We have the rights to defend our country! @MuhyiddinYassin @IsmailSabri60 @dhzhamzah please listen to people's voices!' (22 April 2020)

Sebagai rakyat Malaysia, saya mohon kerajaan halau/hantar pulang semua pendatang tanpa izin/rohingya/bangla/Indonesia/dan seangkatan dengannya ke negara asal mereka. Kami rakyat Malaysia berasa tidak tenteram dan terancam. @MuhyiddinYassin @chedetofficial @NajibRazak.

Translation: As a Malaysian citizen, I urge the government to remove or send back all illegal immigrants (Rohingyas/Bangladeshis/Indonesians and others) to their respective original states. We the people of Malaysia feel unsafe and threatened. @MuhyiddinYassin @chedetofficial @NajibRazak'. (22 April 2020)

### ***Demand of equal rights from MERHROM***

The category with the second highest number of Tweets contained those protesting against the 'list of demand of equal rights' from the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation Malaysia (MERHROM) president, Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani. 14 out of 157 relevant Tweets or approximately 22% of Tweets mentioned this issue. The president was alleged to have listed four demands to the Ministry of Human Resources; 1) Permission for Rohingya refugees to work in Malaysia; 2) Insurance for Rohingya employees; 3) Discounted medical rates for them; and 4) A ban on putting working Rohingya refugees in custody (on humanitarian grounds). However, the document that went viral on Twitter was an allegedly fake list of demands claimed by the president himself in a public apology (Zainury, 2020). A repeated discourse among

Malaysians who Tweeted regarding this issue was the idea of the Rohingya refugees asking for too much from the Malaysian government.

Besides that, some Malaysian Twitter users also expressed their discontent as they deemed the fake list to be a demand for equal rights. Former Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak also stated that refugees somehow abused Malaysia's kindness (Wong, 2020). He quoted a Malay proverb that many Malaysians on Twitter in this category could relate to, namely, 'Sudah diberikan betis, nak peha pulak', which translates to 'Give them an inch and they will take a yard' (ibid). It can be inferred that there is a lack of understanding among this group of Malaysians regarding equal rights and basic rights. This study posits that if refugees were granted the basic rights as listed, it would potentially reduce the number of refugees committing crimes such as stealing, robbing or begging. Refugees are seen as committing these acts in desperation about their own survival, as they do not have the right to work in Malaysia. We question the inconsistencies of Malaysian policies towards refugees as the Rohingyas are not allowed to work when they are here to escape prosecution, unlike, say, refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Balkan War (1992–1995).

### ***Unfavourable policies towards Rohingya refugees***

The inconsistency of policies towards refugees has proved problematic in Malaysia. Refugees from various countries receive varying treatment from Malaysians. Paradoxically, Malaysia has been actively accommodating refugees since independence both from other neighbouring states such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia, and overseas, such as Bosnia, Palestine and Syria (Ahmad et al., 2016). The Rohingya refugees in Malaysia find the discrimination that they face in Malaysia peculiar as Malaysians, especially Muslim Malays, are outspoken about the predicament of nationless Palestinians (Azis, 2014). Unlike the previous Bosnian and Syrian refugees in the country, the Rohingyas do not get a lot of support from the government. The only form of identification that the Rohingyas have is the UNHCR identification card which has limited, or almost no, function at all as it does not grant them the rights to work, education or healthcare (Muzafarkamal & Hossain, 2019). Hence, the card acts as a performative protection of refugees (Ansems de Vries, 2016). Even with those cards, 'refugees report that their cards are often confiscated, thrown away or discarded as fakes by police and immigration' (Hoffstaedter, 2017, p. 288). These cards do not guarantee protection from arrest (Ansems de Vries, 2016).

Rohingya refugees are not able to attend state schools as they are considered undocumented immigrants. Due to that and private schools being unaffordable, most of their children obtain informal education in 128 community-based learning centres supported by the UNHCR (Dewansyah & Handayani, 2018). There are also learning centres which are run by local NGOs or religious organisations (Abdullah et al., 2018; Ansems de Vries, 2016). Refugee children can also access education through a parallel school system through these identification cards but the quality of that education is low as the syllabuses are inconsistent (Bemma, 2018). Ahmad et al. (2016) state that the lack of access to basic education for refugees may result in illiteracy and other social problems which Malaysia will have to face in the long run. The key objective of education is not to decrease employment opportunities of Malaysian citizens, but to enable refugees to become 'self-



sufficient, productive, and no longer stateless' (Wong, 2019, p. 446, as cited in Muzafarkamal & Hossain, 2019).

The issue of education is a vital segue into the topic of employment for refugees. As discussed earlier, Rohingya refugees do not have the right to work in Malaysia as they are classified as illegal immigrants in the eyes of the Malaysian law – unlike Bosnian and Syrian refugees. Initially, the Malaysian parliament announced a proposal to supply 10,000 provisional work visas to Rohingya refugees in 2014 (Cheung, 2011, p. 54, as cited in Hoffstaedter, 2017). However, the idea was discontinued due to corruption claims just days into its implementation in early 2006 (Cheung, 2011, p. 5, as cited in Hoffstaedter, 2017). Deepa Nambiar, director of Asylum Access Malaysia explains that many Rohingya refugees find informal jobs that are 'dirty, demeaning and dangerous' (Bemma, 2018, p. 108). Within these limited, undignified work opportunities, these refugees are being exploited as there are no legal implications if Malaysian employers deny their wages or dismiss them without notice or compensation (ibid). Ahmad et al. (2016) suggested that Malaysia should let them join the local workforce as Malaysia's economy relies so much on migrant workers.

All in all, insecurity shown through this category of grievance consists, for the indigenous population, of losing their entitled privileges as Malaysians – especially for the Malays. Most people commenting on 'equal rights' are Malays – the predominant ethnic group benefitting from the implementation of Malaysia's affirmative action programmes. The root causes of this insecurity are a lack of understanding of basic and equal rights within the echo chamber, and the inconsistencies of Malaysian policies towards refugees of different nationalities. Malaysians are more vocal in expressing their discontent online fearing that non-Malaysian citizens will receive the same benefits as them during times of crisis.

## Unpleasant experiences with Rohingya refugees

The category with the most Tweets regarding grievances towards the refugees is 'Unpleasant Experiences with the Rohingya refugees' with 32 'Tweets', followed by 12.1k 'Retweets' and 7.6k 'Likes'. In this category, Malaysian Twitter users share their mostly unpleasant first-hand accounts of the Rohingya refugees. The recurring words in this group of Tweets include 'begging', 'stealing' and 'unappreciative'. A considerable amount of the Tweets described the Rohingya refugees' attitude as 'kurang ajar' (translation: extremely rude). Some examples are given below:

Aku dulu kesian la jugak dengan Rohingya ni cam oh shit refugees kesian depa ni. Tapi bila duduk Ampang, bersepah Rohingya curi Obike la, curi pokok la, mintak sedekah lepastu bila orang tak bagi dia maki dalam bahasa dia (ini jadi kat aku) dia siap ludah lagi.

Translation: 'I used to pity the Rohingyas. But when I lived in Ampang, they were everywhere stealing Obike, stealing trees, begging – and asked for more when doing so and cursing us at the same time, and spitting on us.' (Example of Tweet in Malay regarding the 'kurang ajar' attitude of the Rohingya refugees, 22 April 2020)

Betul. Pernah kerja dengan 3 orang dari Rohingya, memang kurang ajar. Degil, nak ikut kepala dia je. Tau-tau main berenti kerja. Lepastu nak dtg kerja balik? Haha harapan lah nak ambil balik kan!.

Translation: 'That's true. I've worked with three Rohingyas, they were definitely disrespectful, stubborn, only wanted to follow their heads. Quit their job without notice. And then came back to ask for the same job. As if I was going to take them back?' (Example of Tweet, 23 April 2020)

However, this group of Twitter users did not consider the demeaning conduct of the citizens towards refugees in Malaysia. Rohingyas fled their country as they were stripped off their civil, political and economic rights, and subjected to persecution in Myanmar but they were also living in fear in Malaysia (Hamzah et al., 2016; Rahman & Mohamad, 2016; Tan, 2020; Wahab, 2018). Statements from the Rohingya refugees include them being indiscriminately spat on and shouted at, and constantly being intimidated with death threats due to their ethnicity (Rodzi, 2020). Rohingya refugees are also called out on Twitter for not being Islamic, and only calling themselves Muslims to get help from Malaysia. During the upsurge of Tweets against the refugee community, a local man harassed a refugee by using harsh words and demanded that he recite one of the five pillars of Islam, the *shahada* (a phrase that declares a Muslim's faith towards Allah and prophet Muhammad) to prove that he is a Muslim (Free Malaysia Today, 2020). The local man was frustrated because the refugee was on his way to work as a grass-cutter during the MCO, and the video incited more discriminatory remarks towards the Rohingyas (ibid). Besides that, even local activists for the Rohingya were threatened with rape on Facebook after calling on the authorities to permit Rohingya refugees ashore (Ananthalakshmi & Latiff, 2020). It is perplexing that Malaysian Twitter users are vocal regarding the problematic behaviours of the refugees without reflecting on those of the locals.

Apart from reflecting on individual Malaysians and how they treat refugees, these users should also reflect on the treatment refugees receive from the government. It can be deduced that as a consequence of the upsurge of grievances towards the refugees on social media such as Twitter, the government changed its policies towards refugees during the pandemic. Malaysian authorities rounded up hundreds of migrants in the city of Kuala Lumpur (including Rohingya refugees and young children) on 1 May 2020 (Reuters, 2020). They were detained and put in overcrowded detention centres, putting them at risk of catching the virus (Straits Times, 2020a, 2020b).

However, Firdaus Husni, Human Rights chief strategist of the Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights argues that the anxieties of COVID-19 were used to validate xenophobic attitudes towards the Rohingya community (Rodzi, 2020). Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, lawyer and past president of National Human Rights Society stated that there is a reappearance of 'political exploitation of social media' with the current Perikatan Nasional government. Hence, resentment towards the political landscape in the country and frustrations and concerns regarding the MCO and its effects were being directed against the Rohingya. All things considered, the steps taken by the government illustrate social media as a powerful tool to convince governments to listen to the public discourse of citizens.

The type of implicit insecurity for this category of grievance would be social threats as the Tweets indicate that Malaysians associate the Rohingya refugees with having problematic social behaviour. Malaysians fear these refugees due to the stigma and discrimination echoed within the community. This grievance goes back to above-mentioned factors, such as inconsistencies of policies towards refugees of different nationalities and a lack of

distinction between refugees and migrants. Revisiting the point of Malaysia being a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees do not have rights to be employed in Malaysia, which compels them to steal and beg to live. Hence, Malaysians feared for their safety and shared their experiences online, only to amplify the resentment towards the Rohingya refugee community in the process.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated the factors causing amplified resentment towards refugees on social media during times of crisis. Based on the findings, it is clear that the grievances are mainly instigated by the citizens' echo chambering of implicit insecurities during unprecedented times. These insecurities include employment insecurity, losing privileges as citizens and refugees as a social threat. In addition, this study has also uncovered the root causes of these insecurities, which include Malaysia's lack of distinction between *pelarian* and *pendatang*, and the inconsistencies of government policies towards refugees of different nationalities. By applying systematic content analysis, this study has revealed that there are deeper meanings behind the 'grievances' towards the refugee community on social media. As a consequence of the ability to hide their identities online, social media platforms such as Twitter gave users a more powerful voice behind the screen to express themselves during the MCO in Malaysia, amplifying the discourse through echo chambers, and hoping that the government would implement better policies to attend to their grievances. This study has demonstrated how powerful a tool social media is. With more voices supporting this discriminated against community (such as the #MigrantLivesMatter movement) on the internet, governments would, hopefully, be more efficient in policymaking, protecting vulnerable societies, both online and offline.

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