Migrant Identities in Crisis: A Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera's "Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown"

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how language is used in online media to frame the crisis surrounding undocumented immigrants in Malaysia amid a global pandemic. A 25-minute Al Jazeera documentary, "Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown", was examined following Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) selected principles of positionality, relationality, and indexicality. The findings reveal an intricate link to identity, with the theme of 'Us vs. Them' being the common thread that connects to all other discourses surrounding race, class, gender, nationality, and nationalism. The findings contribute to theoretical knowledge and raise awareness of the implications of negative rhetoric against the marginalised in society.

Keywords: *discourse analysis, discursive identity construction, Malaysia, online media discourses, undocumented migrants*

INTRODUCTION

As of 2022, there are approximately 2.2 million migrant workers in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, as cited in International Organisation for Migration Malaysia, 2023). However, there are also unofficially between 1.2 and 3.5 million undocumented migrant workers in the country, most of whom are nationals from Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (International Organisation for Migration, 2023). Immigrants have played a positive role in the country's economic development, contributing to Malaysia's GDP by 1.1% (Ashikul Hoque et al., 2020). Numerous factors drive migration, with socioeconomic pressures and climate change being the most notable (Vigil & Kim, 2023). While some migrant workers arrive with proper documentation, others come through illegal means (Ashikul Hoque et al., 2020).

The increase in undocumented immigrants in Malaysia is reportedly due to the country's poor immigration policy (Anderson, 2021; Ashikul Hoque et al., 2020). At present, most foreign workers are found to be employed in the manufacturing sector (e.g., rubber products, food manufacturing, chemical products, and plastic products) and service industry (e.g., retail, cleaning services, and local eateries) (Malaysian Investment Development Authority, 2024). However, Malaysia's frequent policy shifts concerning migrant workers (see Anderson, 2021) and poor regulatory enforcement have led to the abuse and exploitation of migrant workers by their employers (Nah, 2012; Vigil & Kim, 2023). Although illegal employment is deemed cheaper, less time-consuming, and less cumbersome by employers, they may incur more costs in the long run, especially when psycho-social and socio-economic costs are considered. By focusing on undocumented migrants' experiences in Malaysia amid a global pandemic, this paper adopts a linguistics, discourse-based approach to investigate the ways language is used to frame world crises within digital media discourses. Media representations of migrant workers as homogenous and socially inferior minority communities contribute to their simplified and problematic characterisation (Etchegaray & Correa, 2015). Thus, by exploring how the multiplicity of these migrants' identities and distinct lived experiences come to be discursively constructed within discourses, this paper also seeks to problematise such stereotypical representations.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Defining undocumented migrants
Nelson and Davis-Willey (2018) termed foreigners without proper legal documents as undocumented immigrants. Similarly, according to Ashikul Hoque et al. (2020), illegal immigrants are those who migrate across national borders without complying with local legal requirements. This term extends to individuals who arrive legally but overstay their visas, thus rendering them illegals. Nelson and Davis-Willey (2018) argue that the term 'undocumented immigrants' is employed more positively by the American media, despite 'illegal immigrants' and 'illegal alien' being the two more frequently used terms. They further posit that terminology is one way through which the dehumanisation of others takes place, i.e., via the usage of adjectives such as 'illegal' to describe a person, thus labelling them as a criminal. Research on foreign migration in Malaysia employs the term 'undocumented migrants' (see Anderson, 2021), whereas the term 'illegal immigrants' has been noted elsewhere (see Misman et al., 2019). Though the former arguably connotes neutrality, the latter has been used in Malaysian media as a blanket term to refer to foreign migrant workers and asylum seekers, often underscoring prejudice and hostility towards them (Misman et al., 2019).

Thus, as the language used by the media largely fuels the discrimination of and racism towards undocumented immigrants through terminology, metaphors, and other discourse strategies such as framing (see Gordon, 2015), this paper deliberately utilises the relatively more neutral term, 'undocumented migrants'.

Media and the 'Othering' of undocumented migrants in Malaysia

Cunningham-Parmeter (2011) analysed discourses within immigration law and found that common metaphors for immigrants, such as 'aliens', ' a flood', and 'an invasion,' are frequently used to frame immigrants as less than human due to their citizenship status. The researchers suggest replacing these words with metaphors of migration and economic sanctuary to encourage reform rather than punishment.

Research on social media discourses surrounding undocumented migrants portrays them as threats to the economy and society (Morales & Farago, 2021), which consequently translates to public sentiments that deem undocumented migrants as unworthy of social and political rights (Kmak, 2020). In Malaysia, Ehmer and Kothari (2021) reported that undocumented migrants are typically portrayed negatively by the domestic press, as politicians and the public equate them as illegals who are complicit in criminal activities. Similar observations were noted by Urquhart (2021), especially in the case of Rohingya refugees; however, the author notes that sympathetic social media posts by Malaysians could also be found.

Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are noted as one of the most marginalised migrant groups in Southeast Asia (Capaldi, 2023). Dehumanising sentiments against the Rohingya have arguably been present for several years, though COVID-19 brought about a fresh wave of social media onslaught against them. Rashid and Saidin (2023) analysed a corpus of tweets by Malaysian Twitter users on the Rohingyas during the government-mandated Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the spread of COVID-19 and found that the public sentiments were largely hostile, ranging from outcries for the Rohingyas to exit the country to blatant calls for their deaths.

Research on undocumented migrants in Malaysia during COVID-19 thus largely focused on contemporary media discourses, either those written by journalists in the press or expressed by Malaysian media consumers and users via social media posts and tweets. This paper extends the current body of literature on undocumented migrants in Malaysia by a) examining their portrayals via an online documentary that features the migrants' own lived narratives and b) exploring how the multiplicity of their identities is not only discursively constructed but also intersected to contribute to their distinct experiences.

METHODOLOGY

To address the established gap in the literature for the under-researched areas stated earlier, this study employs an in-depth qualitative design to analyse Al Jazeera's documentary, "Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown", which features interviews with (un)documented migrants in Malaysia, as well as with activists and employers on the migrants' plight during COVID-19. Since this study aims to explore the ways language is utilised to construct the intersecting discourses of the COVID-19-related crises in relation to undocumented immigration in Malaysia, this study specifically employs a social constructionist approach that underscores the importance of discourses and their nuances (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Merriam, 2009).

The selection of data followed the purposive data sampling method. The documentary, which was broadcast on July 3, 2020, on YouTube (Al Jazeera English, 2020), as well as on Al

Jazeera's (2020) official website, was specifically chosen because it became viral in Malaysia due to Al Jazeera's unveiled criticisms about the country's treatment towards migrants in the country during the COVID-19 partial lockdown. This happened amidst widespread admiration towards Malaysia for its perceived effective handling of the pandemic from around mid-March 2020 until September 2020 through numerous lockdown measures (Passeri, 2020).

The documentary was one of the main highlights in the daily COVID-19 reports by the then Senior Minister for Security and Minister of Defence, Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob (Sabri, henceforth), at the national level for a period of several weeks spanning from July to early August 2021. Further, Malaysian police and the Attorney General's Chambers claimed that the documentary contains seditious elements, which resulted in the investigation of Al Jazeera under the Sedition Act, the Penal Code, and the Communications and Multimedia Act of the country (Azril, 2020). The media coverage surrounding the documentary and Malaysia's reaction towards it was further highlighted when the documentary was nominated for the Coronavirus Reporting Award 2020 alongside two other nominees ("The New Humanitarian", 2020). The documentary is readily accessible to the public from Al Jazeera's official YouTube channel.

The popularity of social media discourse in the form of online video documentaries, added with rich multimodal features, further supports the selection of Al Jazeera's piece as the data source. Although an examination of public responses in the comments section of the documentary's YouTube page would prove insightful, Al Jazeera had disabled this function, which was met with public condemnation. Al Jazeera, however, defended its decision, citing concern that it would face prosecution like MalaysiaKini, a Malaysian news portal that was charged in 2020 for contempt owing to its readers' comments on its article (Azril, 2020).

Theoretical principles: Constructing identity through discourse

Overall, this discourse-oriented research is warranted to analyse the documentary better and understand the discourses on world crises in general, as well as the discursive constructions around national, ethnic, and gender identities (among others) in particular. Although this study acknowledges arguments that see individuals as having fixed and stable identities (see Carrera et al., 2012), including in the field of psychology and education (Berkman et al., 2017), this study perceives identity as discursively constructed and negotiated during social interactions among the members of communities (Chen et al., 2022; Nadia & Zurina, 2023; Virta et al., 2023). It may also be constructed and negotiated depending on how they see themselves and others. In other words, identity is also how individuals see themselves per se and in relation to other people and society (Bös et al., 2018; Ruelle & Peverelli, 2017) from multiple perspectives and environments (Chen et al., 2022; Nadia & Zurina, 2023; Virta et al., 2023). Identity is dynamic and flexible, dependent on the contexts the individuals are in (Bates et al., 2019; Nadia & Zurina, 2023), and is always discursively constructed and negotiated (Bamberg et al., 2011).

It is due to this discursive turn that Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) five sociolinguistics principles of identity construction were chosen as the theoretical and analytical principles underpinning the research. The five principles are *emergence*, *positionality*, *indexicality*, *relationality*, and *partialness* (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). In comparison with the limited number of identity frameworks in literature, Bucholtz and Hall's principles form a more

solid theoretical approach for this study. They focus on the ways language is utilised in the construction of discourses amidst crises, holistically focusing on the details of language, culture, and society. They also view identity as intersubjectively and interactionally emergent (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

More specifically, recent studies on discursive identity constructions (Abdul Fatah, 2019; Norazrin, 2019) have shown that of all five, the three most prominent principles for analysis are *positionality*, *indexicality*, and *relationality*. This is because these principles were deemed to be the most detailed, taking into account various contexts and offering a clearer and broader range of identity relations in analysis. This way, the chosen principles offered a more focused but holistic analysis in relation to the complexities of discourses and various constructions of identities in the data of this study.

According to the *positionality* principle, identity construction is dependent upon the context in which each individual is situated. Furthermore, it is contingent on and operates at the following three levels: "a) macro-level demographic categories; b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 592). On the other hand, *relationality* focuses on the notion of intersubjectivity, arguing that an individual's identity is constructed in relation to others who are involved in the interaction. Two aims underpin Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) view of *relationality*: (a) to emphasise that identities always attain social meaning in relation to other available positions of identity and social actors and (b) to question the idea that identities revolve around the notion of sameness/difference. Thus, they claim that the *relationality* principle is constructed via "several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/de-legitimacy" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 598). Of these, the analysis focused on the sub-principles of adequation and distinction, as well as authorisation and illegitimation, demonstrated later. Finally, *indexicality* refers to the indexical mechanism by which identity is constituted (Ochs, 1992, as cited in Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), i.e., "a linguistic form that depends on the interactional context for its meaning" (Silverstein, 1976, as cited in Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 594). According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels, (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position, (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles, and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups (p. 594).

Data analysis procedure

The analysis involved two stages: first, a thematic qualitative analysis, and second, a detailed discourse analysis guided by the theoretical principles outlined by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). The documentary's transcription was first downloaded via the 'open transcript' option on YouTube before undergoing grammatical checks by the researchers. Detailed transcription conventions, such as the one proposed by Jefferson (2004), are deemed unnecessary in addressing the aim of this study. Only a few salient paralinguistic features, such as audio and general pauses, were marked in the transcription, while other noteworthy and relevant paralinguistic features, such as tone of voice and emphasis, were highlighted in the subsequent analysis.

The two interrelated analytical phases of this study involved (i) thematic coding and (ii) discourse analysis, which also reflect the ways data are analysed in other studies on discourses and identities (Abdul Fatah & Schnurr, 2020; Norazrin, 2019; Zurina, 2020).

The thematic analysis of the interview data began with a systematic bottom-up inductive coding of each part of the documentary's transcript. The coding involved separating the spoken material from the transcript into 30-second segments and systematically organising them into a coding template, i.e., a detailed coding process specified by Saldana (2009). During the initial coding process, several emergent codes were found and revised to the point that three major salient codes were identified.

Four more major codes emerged following subsequent coding and refinement, bringing the total to seven major emergent codes. These codes were then inputted and organised into a codebook (see Saldana, 2009), complete with their definitions and examples.

It must be noted that the codes, themes, and discourses were provisionally named and interpreted based on relevant literature, the researchers' own knowledge, and understanding of the data using informed implicature (Sunderland, 2004). Overall, 162 codes were identified, which were then categorised into the seven major codes (see Findings for more details).

The second phase of the data analysis involved a discourse analysis of the data based on the identified codes. In a discursive study, this phase is necessary to better analyse texts and unpack their underlying meanings (Paltridge, 2012). At this stage, the parts of the documentary transcripts that best illustrate the emergent codes were selected. The selected excerpts were then analysed and later discussed more comprehensively, in close reference to the selected *positionality*, *relationality*, and *indexicality* principles of identity construction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

We acknowledge that our own experiences, existing personal prejudices, and assumptions as Bumiputera (native ethnic groups in Malaysia) and Muslim Malaysian researchers may affect some of our judgments throughout the course of this research (Merriam, 2009). We, however, strive to set aside our possibly biased viewpoints to unpack the underlying meanings in the documentary analysed. We tried to remain neutral and be conscious of our tendencies to view the issue as 'insiders' who may initially feel attacked by the production of such a documentary about our home country. We regard our position as Malaysians as an added advantage because we can better make sense of the meanings of texts based on the research contexts (Paltridge, 2012). Overall, this research takes a reflexive stance in acknowledging our own roles and the inevitable impact that these will have on the processes and outcomes of this study (Mann, 2016). All stages of the study – data selection, confidentiality, data collection, analysis, and presentation – had adhered to the general ethical regulations for academic publication.

FINDINGS

The findings gathered from the documentary primarily consisted of verbal data, which refer to the spoken material gathered from the documentary video of which automated transcriptions are made available on YouTube (which the researchers later checked and translated). The following table presents the emergent codes identified through the coding process:

Based on the emergent codes, the overarching theme of 'Us vs. Them'—specifically, Malaysians vs. Undocumented Migrants/Foreign Workers—is apparent. The first to fifth

codes serve to emphasise the distinction and conflict between these two groups, as each struggled to survive amid a raging worldwide pandemic. The sixth and seventh codes, though the least in number, emerge as indicators of solidarity and togetherness. This is explained towards the end of the paper.

Table 1: Main codes with operationalised definitions

No.	Code	Amount (x/[n=162] = %)	Definition
01	The Other	65/162 = 40.12	Words and/or phrases that denote and/or connote the quality of being different and foreign.
02	Warfare	48/162 = 29.63	Words and/or phrases that denote and/or connote aspects of war, conflict, and struggle in Malaysia's response to COVID-19, as well as the country's treatment towards undocumented migrants/foreign workers.
03	Documentation	21/162 = 12.97	Words and/or phrases that denote documentation and/or connote the state of being (un)documented.
04	Us vs. Them	12/162 = 7.41	Words and/or phrases that denote and/or connote differences, tension, and conflict between Malaysians and undocumented migrants/foreign workers.
05	Non-Human	7/162 = 4.32	Words and/or phrases that describe, denote and/or connote the treatment of foreign workers/undocumented migrants as not human/inhuman.
06	Us with Them	6/162 = 3.70	Words and/or phrases that denote and/or connote acts of solidarity of Malaysians with the undocumented migrants/foreign workers.
07	Them as Us	3/162 = 1.85	Words and/or phrases that denote and/or connote the sense and idea that undocumented migrants/foreign workers are just like Malaysians.

All three principles by Bucholtz and Hall (2005)—*positionality*, *indexicality*, and *relationality*—are at work in the documentary. To reiterate, this research focuses on a discourse analysis of the documentary, particularly examining the discursive constructions of identity (between

Malaysians and undocumented migrants) established in the video. This is primarily done by looking at the verbal data. However, it is imperative to note that as the data is not of a primary nature (not sourced from direct interviews, for instance), the analysis acknowledges that identity portrayals are constructed at the behest of editorial choices, which may not accurately represent the actors' dialogues as they appear in the documentary. As such, we find ourselves grappling with what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) consider the 'authentication vs. denaturalisation' aspect of the *relationality* principle. Specifically, how can the researchers discursively verify whether the identities of the actors portrayed in the Al Jazeera documentary are either authentic and true or falsified and embellished in the name of propaganda? Although the answer to this concern cannot be definitively obtained, we nevertheless hope that the analysis provides ample evidence to support the claims made.

ANALYSIS

Firstly, the 'Us vs. Them' dynamic is established even within the first 30 seconds of the documentary, as can be seen below (Table 2).

Table 2: Extract 1

Transcript (with timestamp)	Codes
00:02 as Malaysia battles to contain the COVID	
00:05	
19 virus, authorities have been carrying	
00:08	
out [1]military style operations across the	[1]Warfare
00:11	
capital Kuala Lumpur. In the name of	
00:15	
public health and safety	
00:16	
they've [1]rounded up [2]illegal foreign	[1]Warfare [2]The Other
00:19	
Workers. When you look at these [1]raids you	[1]Warfare
00:23	
can't help but think is this the	
00:25	
practical reality of dealing with a	
00:26	
Pandemic? or is it racism?	

According to the transcript, Malaysian authorities have launched warfare-like operations to curb the spread of the deadly virus. In their objective to do so, they are also targeting foreign workers, which begs the scrutiny of whether an act of health and public service is, in fact, disguising racism. Here, the principles of *indexicality* work together with *positionality* to establish this antagonistic dynamic. By overtly indicating the actors involved ("authorities" and "illegal foreign workers") and highlighting that the latter has been "rounded up" by

the former, the documentary clearly *positioned* the Malaysian authorities as battling not only COVID-19 but also these undocumented workers.

In the following transcript, the documentary further illustrates this dynamic by juxtaposing voices from the two opposing camps (Table 3). Based on the transcript, the documentary contrasts the voice of Rayhan Kabir, who criticises the act of rounding up these migrants and drawing parallels to the way animals would be treated. In opposition, Sabri justifies the action by highlighting the purportedly illegal nature of the migrants' entry into the country. Here, the principles of *indexicality* and *positionality* are apparent as the two actors and the side for which they are respectively fighting are clearly indicated. What is striking is Sabri's use of the word 'haram', which is commonly translated as 'illegal' but also connotes the severity of the offence committed by the undocumented workers. This is because the word 'haram' can also mean 'forbidden' and carries a particularly harsh tone as it is a word closely tied with religion, denoting any acts that are deplorable (by Islamic law standards).

Table 3: Extract 2

Transcript (with timestamp)	Translation (Malay to English)	Codes
[RY] we are treating 00:32		
them like [3]a animal this is not the way 00:34		[3]Non-human
to treat a [2]migrant worker it is not the way 00:37		[2]The Other
to treat a human 00:40		
[S] *Bertindak zalim? Tidak betul*	[S] Being cruel? Not true	
00:44 *[2]Mereka tidak berhak berada di negara kita kerana masuk* *00:47*	00:44 [2]They don't have the right to be in our country because they entered	[2]The Other
secara *00:47* *Haram.*	00:47	
[N] 101 East investigates why so many 00:51		
[2]foreigners are being [1]locked up in 00:54	illegally	
Malaysia's [1]lockdown 00:56		
[Music]		[2]The Other [1]Warfare
		[1]Warfare

Key: R = Rayhan Kabir; S =Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Minister of Defense; N = Narrator

Moreover, the immigrants' already subjugated *position* is further lowered, with Rayhan's likening of their treatment to that of an animal, a *position* which Malaysian authorities (represented by Sabri) see as justified, owing to their undocumented nature (which subsequently, further dehumanises them). Here, the principles of *relationality* (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), specifically 'adequation and distinction', as well as 'authorisation and illegitimation', are at work. The immigrants' identity is not only further distinguished from that of Malaysians but are also delegitimised by the authority due to their undocumented nature, which implies that as Malaysians are by law 'legal' residents, they are thus deserving of humane treatment. It is, therefore, evident that national identity is at the forefront of the conflict.

Yet, despite Rayhan's admonishment, it is interesting to note how he uses the personal pronoun 'we' ("we are treating them like animal") in his criticism. This suggests that Rayhan is speaking as if he is on the side of Malaysians. Despite him and the immigrants being *positioned* as "Them", Rayhan can be seen as adequating himself to the side of the Malaysians, thus attempting to *position* himself as one of "Us". Rayhan's mobilisation of such a *position* could be due to his socio-economic standing relative to that of his fellow immigrants – he is educated, a white-collar employee, and drives a car. Thus, Rayhan can be seen mobilising his class identity, which overrides his national identity in his attempt to adequate himself to Malaysians, thus giving him the authority to speak as if he were on their behalf.

It is evident that the crux of the 'Us vs. Them' conflict concerns the alleged 'illegal' nature of these foreign workers. The illegality here is further underscored by concerns regarding national identity – not only are they deemed undocumented, but they are also not Malaysian citizens. Although the millions of workers who make up Malaysia's foreign labour force are not necessarily undocumented (Lee & Khor, 2018), it is an accusation that is commonly thrown against the group, which makes them vulnerable to threats by the government as well as condemnation by the public (Loganathan et al., 2019; Mohd Don & Lee, 2014). It is also important to note that for a significant portion of these foreign workers, their undocumented status can largely be attributed to institutional factors, i.e., exploitation by labour agencies that ignore laws and regulations that safeguard the rights of these workers (Loganathan et al., 2019; Nah 2012; Siti Awanis & Rohani, 2014).

Following Sabri's earlier claims in the video, which imply that the harsh treatment of these immigrants (and, by implication, their families) are justified due to their undocumented status, it can be surmised that possessing valid documents is an important requirement for humane treatment in the eyes of the authorities. Following Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principles of *relationality*, specifically 'adequation and distinction', it can be argued that valid documentation is a necessary trait for these foreign workers to be adequately viewed as a legitimate group and the lack of documentation results in them being distinguished as an illegitimate group that warrants acts of police harassment and brutality.

The code 'documentation' emerged as the third most frequently occurring, making up nearly thirteen per cent of the overall identified emergent codes. In the following extract, the analysis shows how Sabri's claims can be discounted following testimony by a Pakistani man (conspicuously dressed in a nondescript hoodie to remain anonymous and to avoid reprisal from authorities), who relayed his experience of facing harsh treatment at the hands of Malaysian authorities, despite possessing valid documentation:

Table 4: Extract 3

Transcript (with timestamp)	Codes
[A] some of the officers are very angry 03:41	
there and they keep the mobile and 03:43	
they're putting on the head like this 03:45	
like this. **[N]** he says his whole family 03:50	
including his son and daughter were 03:52	
[1]handcuffed and chained together with 03:54	[1]Warfare
other children and the elderly under the 03:57	
hot Sun they were only released hours 04:00	
later after authorities verified their 04:02	
[4]Documents. **[A]** my daughter is still is scared 04:05	[4]Documentation
she stopped laughing she said maybe they 04:10	
come again 04:11	
even we have a valid [4]documentation they 04:14	[4]Documentation
are [5]not respecting us as a human. I 04:16	[5]Non-human
learned here we [2]foreigners have 04:19	[2]The Other
a [5]value just like a dog only.	[5]Non-human

Key: A= Anonymous Pakistani man

The transcript shows that despite possessing valid documentation, the Pakistani man and his family were still distinguished as The Other. Moreover, this distinction *positioned* them in a relegated, marginalised *position*, where the harassment they received likened them to non-human entities ("we foreigners have value just like a dog only").

The following example further demonstrates the way the documentary juxtaposes Malaysians against these foreign workers, a distinction underscored by numerous cultural stereotypes that the former holds against the latter, for instance, that the latter are dirty and a threat to public safety and harmony (De Rycker & Mohd Don, 2013; Mohd Don & Lee, 2014). Between minutes 14:00 and 16:30, the documentary focuses on a busy marketplace in the capital. The primary workforce consisted of foreign workers, although since the pandemic, concerted efforts have been made to employ locals. In the extract below, the head of the local Trader's Association, Mohammad Pandu Insani, justifies these efforts by distinguishing local

and foreign workers based on several traits, and as the narrator claims, "hiring only locals will make the market safer" (14:39-14:43). Insani further argues from minutes 14:55-15:20 (Table 5).

Table 5: Extract 4

Transcript (with timestamp)	Translation (Malay to English)	Codes
14:55 [2]*Dan dari segi kebersihannya pulak, kita oleh tahu, mereka* *14:58* *Dengan cara hidup yang berbeza, dengan masyarakat setempat, okay, the local culture* *15:00* *Kat sini dengan tempat mereka. Jadi perbezaan tu memang ketara, dengan cara dorang makan* *15:03* *Makanan sirih dan sebagainya* *15:08* *Dorang ludah dan spit merata rata. Kan?* *15:11* *Itu membuatkan Kawasan sekitar ni nampak macam macam* *15:13* *Uh lain dari yang lain lah.* *15:16* *Uh dia tak [nampak] macam Kawasan sekarang.* *15:18* *Macam sekarang ni awak boleh lihat* *15:20* *Kawasan sekitar ni agak tenang dan aman*	14:55 [2]In terms of cleanliness, they live differently than us 14:58 Their local culture and ours, there's a big difference 15:00 Here compared to their hometowns. So the differences are obvious, with the way they eat 15:03 Eating betel leaves and other things 15:08 [[So]] they spit all over the place. Right? 15:11 That makes the surrounding environment look like 15:13 Uh, different than other places. 15:16 Uh, it didn't [[look]] like it does now. 15:18 Like now you can see that 15:20 The surrounding environment is quite peaceful and quiet	[2]The Other

Here, the 'Us vs. Them' dynamic is underlined with not just the notion of illegality but also the notion of cleanliness that is closely tied to cultural lifestyles. Specifically, the *positionality*, *indexicality*, and *relationality* principles operate in Insani's *positioning* of the foreign workers as dirty ("they spit all over the place"), a claim made even starker with the mention of specific cultural habits he associates with the foreigners (i.e., chewing betel leaves, which ironically is also a common practice in some parts of Asia, even among the elderly in Malaysia) (Gupta & Ray, 2004). As the foreign workforce has been reduced and the local workforce promoted,

Insani, by implication, *positions* the Malaysian workers as clean and not rowdy ("Uh, it didn't [[look]] like it does now…the surrounding environment is quite peaceful and quiet"). Here, the distinction between Malaysians and foreign workers is no longer just underlined with national identity but also delineated along the lines of ethnic identity.

Thus far, the dominant narrative in the Al Jazeera documentary underscores a 'Us vs. Them' dynamic that pits Malaysians (the authorities and members of the public) against (undocumented) foreign workers, underscoring concerns relating to national and ethnic identities. However, as the findings show, the documentary itself challenges the prevailing paradigm, which can be examined by looking at the codes 'Us with Them' and 'Them as Us'.

'Us with Them' refers to instances in the documentary whereby Malaysians are *positioned* as allies in solidarity with the marginalised foreign workers. This is first evident around the eighth minute when human rights lawyer Sunitha Santikishna meets up with the Bangladeshi worker, Rayhan. Others include Mercy Malaysia's doctor, Ahmad Perdaus, and Migrant Care's founder, Alex Ong. It is intriguing to note that these figures are representative of Malaysia's three major races – Malay, Chinese, and Indian respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024).

On the other hand, the least coded of the emergent codes, 'Them as Us', demonstrates a level of empathy among Malaysians that does not merely *position* them as allies but also puts them in the same *position* as the foreign workers. This is specifically the case for people who have suffered losses – whether financially or personally – due to the pandemic. This sentiment is even more starkly demonstrated towards the end of the documentary as exemplified by both parties. As can be gleaned from the documentary, gendered dynamics are also at work. The first few immigrants featured (noticeably men) spoke bluntly about the harsh treatment they received at the hands of authorities, thus starkly delineating the distinction between 'Us vs. Them', or more specifically, 'bad vs. good' (from the immigrants' point of view, the Malaysian authorities can be considered as the 'bad'). However, the final few immigrants (noticeably women – Ruhima and Wendy) spoke in decidedly more apologetic tones. Specifically, they expressed a sense of guilt and responsibility over their conditions, like the Indonesian mother, Ruhima:

Table 6: Extract 5

Transcript (with timestamp)	Translation (Malay to English)	Codes
18:22 **[RH]** *Susahlah…kami paham sebab kami yang duduk di Malaysia*	18:22 **[RH]** It's hard…because we understand that because we're the ones living in Malaysia	
18:25 ²*Ni kami salah.* ⁴*Tidak buat permit. Jadi kami*	18:25 ²And we're in the wrong. [[We]] ⁴didn't apply for a permit. So we	²The Other/
	18:28 Understand that we're at fault	⁴Documentation
18:28 *paham kalau kita yang salah*		

Key: [RH] = Ruhima

Here, Ruhima is *positioning* herself in a *position* of guilt and, by implication, illegality, therefore distinguishing herself from Malaysians. Whereas the men featured earlier, such as Rayhan and the anonymous Pakistani man, insisted on emphasising their valid status in the country (claiming 'authorisation' of their identity as foreign workers instead of undocumented foreign workers), Ruhima is, by contrast, illegitimising her *position*.

In contrast with the male foreign workers featured earlier, who were mostly interviewed one-to-one (Rayhan), in a busy commercial area (Fowhad), and anonymously (Pakistani man), the women were featured in a close-knit family environment where they interacted with other women and children. The editorial juxtaposition was perhaps a strategy to underscore the point that amid this war against a raging pandemic, families and livelihoods are being destroyed.

In the following extract, Ruhima further lamented about her family's struggles due to the pandemic:

Table 7: Extract 6

Transcript (with timestamp)	Translation (Malay to English)	Codes
[RH] [7]*Sedihlah, satu keluarga semua…rasanya* 18:40 *Setiap hari menangis. Tak boleh kirim kampung dengan* 18:44 *Mak bapak kita…sebab saya pun ada anak dekat kampung* 18:47 *Kami tidak boleh kirim duit.* 18:49 *Suami saya…dia kerja contract…buat rumah*	**[RH]** [7]It's sad, the whole family… feels like 18:40 Crying everyday. [We] can't send [money] to our hometowns 18:44 To our parents…because I also have kids back home 18:47 [and] we can't send money back. 18:49 My husband…he does contract jobs…building houses	[7]Them as Us
18:52 *Tapi kerna dikernakan tidak boleh bekerja* 18:55 *Saya punya suami juga…* 18:57 *Tak dapat duit lah…cuti* 19:01 *Jadi kita tidak punya penghasilan.*	18:52 But because [the authorities] have ordered that [workers] can't work 18:55 [so] my husband 18:57 Isn't able to get paid…[he's been put] on leave 19:01 So we don't have any income	

Although Ruhima previously assumed an illegitimised *position*, here, she *positions* herself —according to the *relationality* sub-principle of adequation—as being on the same boat as others who are struggling in the pandemic, be it Malaysians or otherwise. Indeed, the reality of having lost a stable source of income, especially for working- and lower-class families living in abject or near-abject poverty, is a struggle that arguably resonates with most amid this challenging climate.

Such struggles faced by Ruhima and Wendy compel Migrant Care founder Alex Ong to acknowledge that these workers are essential lifelines for the Malaysian economy: "They are the silent contributor(s) to our economy" (24:42-24:46). Here, national identity is a category that works to distinguish foreign workers from Malaysians and to adequately identify Malaysians due to their significant contributions to the local economy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013), media discourse plays "a constitutive role in the creation or avoidance and the (successful/unsuccessful) management and resolution of crisis situations" (p. 4). When examining the intersections between language, communication, and crisis, this study seeks to examine the multifarious ways language and linguistic utterances are employed to communicate messages on world crises, specifically on Malaysia's war against the COVID-19 virus. Following De Rycker and Mohd Don's (2013) claim, we argue that the paper has shown that Malaysia's management of the crisis – although lauded by citizens in its early stages – remains controversial when it comes to the welfare of undocumented migrants.

Through a discursive analysis of the Al Jazeera documentary, this paper demonstrates that world crisis discourses on the pandemic are largely framed around seven emergent codes: The Other, Warfare, Documentation, Us vs. Them, Non-Human, Us with Them, and Them as Us. The first five codes support the overarching discourse of Us vs Them, which pits Malaysians (specifically, the authorities) against undocumented migrants. Meanwhile, the final two codes attempt to subvert the dominant framework by positioning Malaysians as either allies of the undocumented migrants or as being on the same boat as them, facing relatable struggles such as financial stresses due to the pandemic. The ways identity concerns are embedded in these discourses are of particular interest to this paper. The application of Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principles of *positionality*, *indexicality*, and *relationality* presents a new practical and extensive way of analysing online media discourses and revealing the ways through which national, ethnic, gender, and – to a lesser extent – class identities are also embedded in the emergent discourses.

It is through a discursive analytical examination that we can identify and unpack the multiple layers embedded in what is often represented by the media as a broadly simplified political and/or public health issue. Although media is an important means for conveying messages to the public, it risks creating some level of social stigma. Stigma is defined as an attribute that associates a person with undesirable, stereotypical characteristics (Goffman, 1963), which are also socially constructed (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Stigmatisation from the media would implicate how the public views certain individuals or phenomena (Scherman et al., 2022). Viladrich (2019) suggests that media portrayals of undocumented immigrants may bring sympathy towards the group. However, Scherman et al. (2022) found that the public

perceives the migrant population negatively when consistently exposed to negative news about the population and vice versa. This suggests that the way the media portrays these undocumented migrants could potentially lead to the stigmatisation of the group, possibly inciting xenophobia. Undocumented migrants belonging to disadvantaged groups, who are stigmatised as disease vectors (Wagner-Egger et al., 2011), can become more vulnerable to stigma during the pandemic (International Organization for Migration, 2019) and are seen as a threat to the health of society.

In the context of this study, Al Jazeera, as a form of media, has potentially stigmatised the undocumented migrants by the description of how they were treated by the Malaysian government during the pandemic. Such a stigmatised representation of undocumented migrants in Al Jazeera's reporting failed to shed light on the important but often ignored intersection between the perceived and actual risks experienced by the vulnerable migrants. Furthermore, relevant to Etchegaray and Correa's (2015) assertion earlier, Al Jazeera's homogenous reporting has likely reinforced some Malaysians' negative perceptions of and discrimination towards such minority communities. Also, upon exposure to such media reporting, the undocumented migrants may have increased their perceptions of discrimination against them, thus adding actual risks to the migrants in terms of safety, socialisation, as well as physical and psychological health (Etchegaray & Correa, 2015; Mohd Don & Lee, 2014).

Such a nuanced discursive analysis of the selected media data will offer media practitioners a fresher linguistic take on and a deeper understanding of online media discourses that will significantly impact future media reporting on controversial issues such as undocumented migrants. Within the context of countries with an influx of undocumented migrants like Malaysia, the findings of this study can inform relevant policymakers about the consequences of the country's current migrant policies, which may kickstart some much-needed changes. The findings of this study not only contribute to the existing discussion on how class dimensions are related to the ways undocumented migrants are portrayed in the media but also deepen the investigation of how identity is potentially constructed based on gender or class dimensions. Despite the in-depth nature of the study findings, they are only based on one type of online media discourse and thus cannot be generalised to all forms of media reporting on related issues. Therefore, future research on related topics can supplement the online data with interviews with migrants, journalists, policymakers, and activists. In addition, future research can also incorporate other sources of online data as well as media platforms when discursively analysing issues related to media reporting of controversial issues. Ultimately, besides the theoretical contribution in terms of the analytical approach, this discursive study may also provide an alternative perspective that can increase the awareness of relevant stakeholders and the public about the plight of undocumented migrant workers.
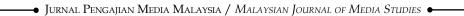
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