

## From Positive to Death: A Corpus-Based Semantic Analysis of COVID-19 Representation in Malaysian English News Reports

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### ABSTRACT

*More than a year after being declared a pandemic, Covid-19 has not shown any sure signs of dissipating even as the battle to curb it continues. In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO), or lockdown seems to be the most effective way to curb the spread of the disease. Unfortunately, studies show that lockdowns affect people's livelihoods and lifestyle, as well as their emotional and mental state. This situation, in many countries, is exacerbated by the onslaught of negative news on Covid-19 and heightened news consumption via various media platforms. Given this, the objective of the current study is to analyse the representation of Covid-19 in Malaysian media based on a corpus of news reports during Malaysia's first lockdown, i.e. MCO 1.0. This was a period of uncertainty lasting six weeks beginning from 18 March 2020 which saw increased reports of mental health cases and domestic violence cases in the country. News reports published in two Malaysian English online newspapers, The Star Online and Malaysiakini during MCO 1.0 formed the corpus of study. Using collocational analysis, the study examined the semantic prosody of Covid-19 and how it is represented in Malaysian news reports. The findings show that 'Covid-19' generally occurs in the company of unfavourable associations, causing it to acquire a negative prosody and in turn negatively represented in the news reports. The unfavourable portrayal of Covid-19, coupled with the increase in news consumption may adversely affect readers' emotions and anxiety levels, which in turn, may contribute to crisis fatigue.*

*Keywords: Covid-19; semantic prosody; evaluative meaning; representation; Malaysian English*

### INTRODUCTION

The worst global health problem of the current generation, Covid-19, has claimed over 4.7 million lives worldwide, 18 months after it was declared a pandemic. The battle to end the pandemic saw burnout among frontliners and the general community. One common form of burnout is crisis fatigue, a human response to long term, unrelenting stress that causes a person to feel physically and emotionally numb or tired (Rubin, 2020; Russell, 2020). The body's fight-or-flight response is triggered in response to stress and releases more hormones to cope with the source of stress, which can lead to depression, anxiety, weight gain, bone loss or high blood pressure (Rubin, 2020; Russell, 2020; Coelho, 2020). In relation to Covid-19, this situation is worsened with the constant need to keep updated with news on the pandemic. In a qualitative survey on how the elderly experienced pandemic reporting, Derrer-Merk (2020) found that respondents tended to avoid news on Covid-19 because "the torrent of bad news could not be processed in a constructive way" and "the reported news was often experienced as depressing and triggered anxiety for various reasons". The overload of unfavourable news of surging numbers of deaths and positive cases, continuous lockdowns and quarantines, and the effects of the pandemic on livelihoods, travel and social well-being that bombard the global community daily therefore has the tendency to impact readers negatively, which may give rise to crisis fatigue.

In Malaysia, statistics from surveys and news reports suggest that Malaysians may have experienced crisis fatigue and stress related burnout due to the sudden implementation and subsequent extensions of MCO 1.0. Signs that Malaysians were suffering from some degree of crisis fatigue during the MCO 1.0 are evidenced by reports on the increase in mental health cases and domestic violence cases. According to Hassan (2020),

Local media had reported a spike in calls to women's aid groups over domestic violence during the MCO. According to the police, there were 78 suicides nationwide from March 18, when the shutdown began, until June 9. There were 64 suicides in the same period last year. A total of 34 per cent of 4,142 calls received by the Befrienders between March 18 and May 16 were related to the Covid-19 outbreak. Over a third of the calls about Covid-19 were suicidal in nature. The Health Ministry also reported that it received some 2,500 phone calls and more than 1,000 WhatsApp messages between March 28 and April 12, during the early days of the MCO, on its Psychological First Aid hotline.

The lockdown also saw Malaysians reporting high levels of negative emotions. Azuddin and Zakaria (2020) found that close to half of the respondents of the survey (48%) reported varying levels of depression, with 8% reporting severe depression, and 12% reporting extreme depression. Respondents (45%) also reported varying levels of anxiety, with 7% experiencing severe anxiety, and 15% experiencing extremely severe anxiety. One-third of the respondents (34%) reported varying levels of stress, with 9% feeling severely stressed, and 6% feeling extremely severely stressed. This situation may have been exacerbated by people's constant exposure to news and by keeping up-to-date with various happenings and uncertainties in the country and around the world. A survey on Malaysian Media Consumption during MCO 1.0 (Vase.ai, 2020) shows that 99% of the respondents followed news developments regarding Covid-19. The survey also reported that 51% of Malaysians were closely following news every hour on how to protect themselves against Covid-19 while 47% followed closely the total cases in Malaysia every other hour. Many studies have documented the adverse effects of negative news on emotions (Johnston & Davey, 1997; Szabo & Hopkinson, 2007; Su et al., 2021), indicating a possible relation between the increase in news consumption and the rise in negative emotions.

The findings on the rise in Malaysians' negative emotions and the statistics on Covid-19 news consumption during MCO 1.0 present an opportunity for research into the representation of the pandemic in Malaysian English online newspapers. This is the aim of the current semantic analysis of the word 'Covid-19'. Based on a corpus of Malaysian English online news reports published during the MCO 1.0 period, the main objectives of the study are firstly to analyse the semantic prosody of 'Covid-19' and secondly to discuss its representation in Malaysian English news reports.

#### SEMANTIC PROSODY

Sinclair (1987) first proposed the notion of semantic prosody to refer to the extended meanings of expressions that can be analysed by their semantic prosodies. According to Louw (2000), semantic prosody is a form of meaning that is established through the proximity of a consistent series of collocates and is therefore dependent on the context and the register in which it occurs. In relation to this, Partington (2004) considers semantic prosody using a binary distinction between positive and negative attitudinal meanings. Hauser and Schwarz (2016) agree with Partington's views stating that semantic prosody denotes the covert valenced connotation of a word. Semantic prosody therefore studies the attitude of a word according to its surroundings, i.e., its collocates (Hunston, 2007). Table 1 presents the findings of past studies on the semantic prosody of English words to illustrate the different categorisations of semantic prosody.

TABLE 1. Examples of past research in semantic prosody

Negative Prosody	Neutral Prosody	Positive Prosody	Study
set in, break out, happen	-	-	Sinclair (1991)
-	happen, occur	-	Partington (2004)
cause	-	provide	Stubbs (1995)
persistent	-	persistent	Hunston (2007)

Semantic prosody analysis uses corpora and corpus tools of analysis to study the collocates of the expression under study. Frequency count and collocation analysis generate statistical data with the aid of computer tools. However, the prosody analysis, based on the collocates of the expression under study, involves qualitative analysis. Semantic prosody, therefore, employs both quantitative and qualitative analyses (Stubbs, 2009).

While semantic prosody is typically used to analyse and interpret data in studies related to evaluations and attitudes towards words in context, its application goes beyond linguistics. Hauser and Schwarz's (2016) study, for instance, involves semantic prosody and its effect on judgement. They studied the effects of semantic prosody on ambiguous medical outcomes based on an analysis of 'caused' versus 'produced'. They concluded that semantic prosody can colour judgements across different domains. Their study also showed that semantic prosody exerts a causal influence on readers' inferences about valence, which was observed through the explicit valence judgments and related inferences to the ambiguous medical outcomes.

Lin and Chung (2016), in their research, chose 'challenge' as the focus of study due to the conflict between negative perceptions towards the word and positive denotation of the word. Based on the UK Web Archiving Consortium and Sketch engine analysis tool used, the researchers found evidence that semantic prosody and syntactic structure are interdependent and that the negative associative meaning towards the word 'challenge' can permeate to its collocates. They conclude that words with strong negative or positive meanings play a more decisive role in determining favourable or unfavourable evaluations rather than a consistent series of collocates. However, they warrant further studies on similar words to supplement their findings.

When determining the representation of a subject, a corpus-based discourse analysis is usually the preferred method. However, there is increasing interest in the role of semantic prosody in the representation of an expression. In an in-depth analysis of the opening arguments from both sides of the criminal trial of O.J. Simpson's double homicide case, Cotterill (2001) argues that the choice of lexical items and the semantic prosody of each item influenced the representation of the key issue related to the Simpson case which was domestic violence. Using the semantic prosody of key words gathered from the Bank of English corpus, the researcher shows how the choice of lexical items and their related prosody influenced the representation of the key points in the case.

Salama (2011), in relating semantic prosody to representation, used a methodological synergy of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to determine the representation of Wahhabi-Saudi Islam/Wahhabism in opposing discourses post 9/11. The researcher utilised significant collocates and their semantic prosody to first determine the representation of Wahhabi-Saudi Islam/Wahhabism, before employing CDA frameworks to determine the underlying ideologies of the representations. Arguing for the methodology, Salama (2011, p. 316) states that first, "collocational relations can ideologically contribute to the recontextualisation of one discourse topic across clashing texts. Second, statistically significant collocations can precisely reveal opposing discursive voices or textual tones towards the same or similar topics. Last, there has become an ever-growing need for CDA people to build qualitatively on more reliably quantified textual features, especially when it comes to collocates".

Drawing inspiration from the two previous studies, Abid and Al Khazraji (2017) using the Iraqi city of Kirkuk as the subject of study, employed semantic prosody to examine the city's semantic profiles, and semantic framing to determine media frames introduced to readers. To analyse semantic prosody, the researchers adopted the concordance approach instead of the collocation approach, and they substituted CDA frameworks with semantic framing to critically analyse the data. The analysis revealed that Kirkuk is typically associated with words and issues with negative connotations such as bombs, military tension between the central government and Kurdistan among others. The media, according to the researchers, depict Kirkuk as a disturbed city.

The studies show that it is possible to determine representation using semantic prosody as the framework for analysis. Following this, the current study employs this method of analysis in determining the representation of Covid-19 in Malaysian English online news reports.

#### COVID-19 STUDIES IN MALAYSIA

Language issues surrounding Covid-19 received research attention in Malaysia from the early stages of the pandemic. Tan et al. (2020) for instance is a compilation of linguistic analysis methods that could be employed in carrying out research that can help provide insights into the pandemic. Another study, Azizan et al.'s (2020) positive discourse analysis, examined a corpus of Facebook posts by Malaysians during the MCO 1.0. The study found that religion, patriotism, call for heroism and public awareness were the top four topics in the posts, and elements of solidarity and empowerment through collective pronouns such as "we" and "us" in the posts. Another discourse study (Joharry & Turiman, 2020a) analysed Malaysian citizens' responses to the crisis based on letters sent to *The Star Online* during the implementation period of MCO 1.0. The letters typically referred to the Covid-19 pandemic as a challenge and associated negative expressions with it

Covid-19, in Malaysian newspapers, has also been examined in terms of its collocates. Mohd Nor and Zulcafli (2020), for instance, analysed the collocates of Covid-19 in news reports published in *The Star Online* from 1 March 2020 until 31 March 2020. Their study found that collocates of Covid-19 in the news reports reflect Malaysians' fear, anxiety and uncertainty. The study also revealed the effects of the pandemic on the economy and social life of the country as well as the government's handling of the pandemic. In another collocational analysis of Covid-19, Joharry and Turiman (2020b) examined the collocation networks of Covid-19 in 303 letters to the editor of *The Star Online* published between 18 March 2020 and 9 June 2020. The findings show that Malaysians were frequently describing the Covid-19 virus using metaphors, preparing for an economic fallout, and referring to Covid-19 as a pandemic rather than an outbreak. Other studies such as Balakrishnan et al. (2021) investigated the motives behind Covid-19 online fake news sharing behaviour.

While there have been various studies on Covid-19 in the Malaysian context, none has examined its representation in the media from a semantic perspective. This is addressed in the current corpus-based semantic prosody analysis of Covid-19 in Malaysian English online news reports.

## METHODOLOGY

A corpus of news reports on Covid-19 published during MCO 1.0 was developed for analysis. The reports were collected from two online news portals, i.e., *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*, the two most used news portals in Malaysia in 2019 and among the top three news portals in Malaysia in 2020 (Vase.ai, 2019; Nain, 2020). In addition to being among the most popular news portals, *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* were selected for the study for their contrastive reporting styles, as the former is partly government-owned mainstream media, and the latter being privately-owned alternative media (Murudi & Ting, 2019; Lim, 2014). Using two news portals with different reporting styles and perspectives on key issues allows a more balanced representation of Covid-19 in Malaysian English online news reports.

Given the focus on Covid-19 representation in the Malaysian context, only local news reports concerning Covid-19 that Malaysians would have been interested in during MCO 1.0 were selected from the news portals. The choice to focus on local news during MCO 1.0 is also due to findings on media consumption during MCO 1.0 (Vase.ai, 2020), which found that Malaysians were constantly keeping up with reports on the number of cases in Malaysia.

It was also decided that only news reports published between 1 April 2020 and 30 April 2020 were selected. This period coincided with phases two and three of the MCO 1.0, and before the implementation of the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) on 1 May 2020. In total, 1,362 *The Star Online* news reports and 1,299 *Malaysiakini* news reports were used to create the corpus. The number of words in *The Star Online* sub-corpus and the *Malaysiakini* sub-corpus are 481,888 and 489,935 respectively, bringing the total number of words in the corpus to 971,823 words.

The two sub-corpora were analysed separately using AntConc version 3.5.9 (Anthony, 2020). The node word for the analysis is 'Covid-19' and the first step of the analysis was to generate the frequency list of each sub-corpus for information on the occurrence of the keyword. Following this, the software's collocates tool was used to generate data on Covid-19 collocates in each sub-corpus. The procedure to determine the significant collocates of the node word that warranted further investigation is adapted from Salama (2011). The collocate span used is the default setting, which is five words to the left and five words to the right of the node word. The possible collocates found within the span are narrowed down using an intersecting measure of Mutual Information (MI) score and T-score. Words with an MI score of 3.0 and above and a T-score of 2.0 and above are considered to be statistically significant possible collocates. After obtaining the list of statistically significant possible collocates, the frequency of collocates were checked to eliminate the possibility of misinterpreting MI scores and T-scores. Following this, function words were eliminated from the list of possible collocates.

Next, an analysis of the concordance lines of possible lexical collocates was performed to eliminate lexical items that did not contribute to the focus of the study. To this end, words that did not modify the node word or were not modified by the node word were eliminated. One example is the word 'Malaysia' which frequently occurs within the designated span and is statistically significant, but does not modify the node word and is not modified by the node word. It only provides information on the location of news. Once the filtering stage was completed, the 10 most frequent collocates of Covid-19 in each sub-corpus were identified for further analysis.

To determine the evaluative meaning or semantic prosody acquired by 'Covid-19' in each sub-corpus, a collocational analysis of its co-habitual occurrence with the 10 most frequent collocates was carried out. The analysis, following Partington (2004), categorises the prosody that emerged from the collocations as either positive, neutral or negative (as shown in Table 1). The outcome of the semantic prosody analysis will help to determine the representation of Covid-19 in the corpus of the study.

## RESULTS

The results of the frequency analysis show that the node word ‘Covid-19’ occurs 3,539 times (0.7%) in *The Star Online* sub-corpus and 2,721 (0.6%) in the *Malaysiakini* sub-corpus. ‘Covid-19’ has a relatively high occurrence in both sub-corpora due to the pandemic being the main topic of interest during the lockdown. However, the difference in the number of occurrences in the two sub-corpora, approximately 32% more in *The Star Online* sub-corpus compared to *Malaysiakini*, is interesting. This important preliminary finding is discussed in more detail in the discussion of the findings.

The distribution of the top ten collocates of Covid-19 in the two sub-corpora are presented next. Table 2 shows the details of the ten most frequent collocates in *The Star Online* sub-corpus.

TABLE 2. Ten most frequent collocates of ‘Covid-19’ in *The Star Online* sub-corpus

Collocates	Frequency	MI Score	T-Score
Cases	492	5.26114	21.60268
Pandemic	343	6.17709	18.26431
Spread	263	6.21520	15.99899
Positive	236	5.68017	15.06268
Patients	228	5.45041	14.75434
Outbreak	177	6.53875	13.16104
Fight	118	6.29174	10.72412
Tested	101	5.66146	9.85132
Curb	92	6.62398	9.49442
Death	82	5.68134	8.87892

The data shows 7 of the 10 collocates have inherently negative connotative meaning. The collocates ‘pandemic’, ‘outbreak’, ‘cases’, ‘patients’ and ‘death’ are associated with disease and have inherently negative connotations. The words ‘fight’ and ‘curb’ suggest the antagonistic nature of something that must be fought against and the spread of which must be stopped. The examination of the concordance lines also reveals some interesting information about the collocates. First, the negative prosody of the node word seems to have permeated to the collocates ‘spread’ and ‘positive’, colouring them as undesirable outcomes, a phenomenon noted by Lin and Chung (2016) to be possible with node words that have inherently strong meanings. While it can also be argued that ‘spread’ and ‘positive’ may have acquired negative prosody from frequent use in medical texts, the construction of the concordance lines shows that ‘Covid-19’ usually serves as the modifier in that sentence rather than the reverse (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

25	will ensure good practices to curb the spread of Covid-19 as advised by the relevant
26	be suspended until April 17 to contain the spread of Covid-19. The Sultans private secretary,
27	the governments efforts to reduce the spread of Covid-19 infections and put the country
28	proving to be effective in curbing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.It said with
29	unprecedented measures taken to deal with the spread of the Covid-19 virus, which has infected
30	control order (MCO) imposed to curb the spread of Covid-19. State police chief Comm Datuk
31	as part of efforts to check the spread of Covid-19, with all those who returned
32	be a success and we hope the spread of Covid-19 is contained, he said. Ismail
33	that China has managed to curb the spread of Covid-19 in their country. But now
34	the movement control order (MCO) to contain spread of Covid-19 was implemented. According to data
35	March 18 in a bid to curb the spread of Covid-19, has impacted the daily routine
36	abide by the MCO to avoid the spread of Covid-19. "The police will take stricter
37	all Ramadan bazaars in Penang to curb spread of Covid-19. "The decision was made this
38	Government and the people in fighting the spread of Covid-19, the involvement of NGOs is
39	to ensure localised cleanliness to check the spread of Covid-19. "We can enhance it further
40	efforts by the authorities to contain the spread of Covid-19, a bigger worry of Malaysian
41	movement control order (MCO) to contain the spread of Covid-19 was implemented on March 18. According
42	help with expenses required to curb the spread of Covid-19, he added.
43	frontliners who are fighting to curb the spread of Covid-19. People in several neighbourhoods lit
44	movement control order (MCO) to curb the spread of Covid-19, he understands the constraints faced

FIGURE 1. Sample concordance lines for 'spread' in *The Star Online*

144	aysia achieved 19.4% recoveries out of its total Covid-19 positive cases. He added 58 patients were discharged
145	have been in direct contact with two Covid-19 positive patients and thank goodness my test
146	and Rela. As of Tuesday, Sabah recorded 206 Covid-19 positive cases, with Tawau leading at 63 cases,
147	March 30. However, the numbers added up to 726 Covid-19 positive cases in Selangor up to April 1,
148	the highest in the total chart of Covid-19 positive cases. The statistics is due to
149	of the participants was later diagnosed as Covid-19 positive. "Though I am well (no cough,
150	of breath (sic), no fever), am not Covid-19 positive, as part of the SOP (standard
151	dard operating procedure) for close proximity to Covid-19 positive cases, precautionary measures mean all of
152	Covid-19 patients - which means those who are Covid-19 positive but are either asymptomatic or have
153	madrasah tahfiz in that area who are Covid-19 positive through our active testing, said Dr
154	travelling abroad, four cases had contact with Covid-19 positive friends, and three cases were due
155	about any close contact they had with Covid-19 positive case, their attendance at any mass
156	Covid-19 patients which means those who are Covid-19 positive but are either asymptomatic or have
157	madrasah tahfiz in that area who are Covid-19 positive through our active testing. The 41 students
158	a member of Parliament are confirmed as Covid-19 positive, he said. Sarawak assistant Transport Minister
159	mes unnecessarily. The lockdown came following 71 Covid-19 positive cases from the area.
160	-19 screening. Sabah has recorded a total of 225 Covid-19 positive cases as of Saturday (April 5), with 19
161	not known if he had contact with Covid-19 positive persons," Karim said at the state
162	1,580. From that cluster, about 37 people tested Covid-19 positive and there were five related deaths (
163	Department has confirmed that there are no Covid-19 positive cases among its staff and inmates

FIGURE 2. Sample concordance lines for 'positive' in *The Star Online*

Interestingly, 'tested' remains relatively unchanged, neither giving nor receiving prosody from 'Covid-19'. However, the relation between these two words is apparent as 'Covid-19' modifies 'tested' by providing more information for what a person may be tested for.

The results of the collocational analysis and information derived from the concordance set suggest that Covid-19 is generally associated with words with negative connotations and it is represented as a pandemic and an outbreak in *The Star Online* news reports. The severity of the pandemic is measured using the number of positive cases, patients and deaths. The pandemic is something that needs to be fought against and the spread of it must be curbed. The representation of Covid-19 in news reports is negative and generally falls in line with pandemic reporting practices.

The results of the collocational analysis of the ten most frequent collocates of Covid-19 in the *Malaysiakini* sub-corpus is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Ten most frequent collocates of ‘Covid-19’ in the *Malaysiakini* sub-corpus

Collocates	Frequency	MI Score	T-Score
Cases	374	5.62020	18.94590
Pandemic	311	6.69726	17.46525
Spread	195	6.72004	13.83178
Positive	184	6.12948	13.37091
Outbreak	167	6.68125	12.79693
Patients	163	6.08574	12.57917
Curb	103	7.05859	10.07276
Infections	100	6.20236	9.86420
Infection	94	6.11310	9.55529
Virus	77	5.21567	8.53882
Tested	66	5.91399	7.98930

For the purposes of the analysis, the collocates ‘infection’ and ‘infections’ will be considered as one word as both words carry the same prosodic meaning. From the list of ten collocates, six of them, namely ‘cases’, ‘pandemic’, ‘outbreak’, ‘patients’, ‘infection(s)’ and ‘virus’, all are associated with disease. In this sub-corpus, ‘fight’ is not a collocate of ‘Covid-19’ but ‘curb’ is. This can be considered as not wanting to provide as strong an antagonistic nature to the pandemic by not using the word ‘fight’ in addition to ‘curb’. The same phenomenon for ‘spread’, ‘positive’ and ‘tested’ observed in the previous sub-corpus can be observed here as well (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

9	the MCO ends on April 14 with the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> under control, MAH president Kamaruddin
10	effort to slow down and contain the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . Disparity in sentencing is a
11	(MDC) in Balik Pulau to prevent the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . Its secretary-general John Ooh
12	universities as a measure to curb the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> , he said. The statement said
13	with the MCO to help curb the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> , he told reporters at the
14	not assist in trying to break the <b>spread of the Covid-19</b> virus. At a time
15	Nasional Berhad (TNB) to help fight the <b>spread of COVID-19</b> in the state. The donation
16	with our customers, he said. With the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> , FWD Takafuls complimentary special
17	his ministry in helping to fight the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> and disseminating information to the
18	on March 18, beyond April 14 to curb the <b>spread of the Covid-19</b> virus. As for now,
19	indefinitely in its efforts to curb the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . The ambassador said considering the
20	movement control order (MCO) to curb the <b>spread of the Covid-19</b> virus. A Malaysiakini reader,
21	imposed by MCO to curb the further <b>spread of the Covid-19</b> pandemic. The food aid
22	downside risk is a prolonged and wider <b>spread of Covid-19</b> , as well as its effects
23	was implemented on March 18 to stop the <b>spread of the Covid-19</b> virus, which has claimed 50
24	bazaars throughout the state to curb the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . His remark comes after Putrajaya
25	to play their roles in curbing the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . "For instance, a condominium committee
26	Ramadan bazaar this year to curb the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . They include Selangor, Malacca, Sabah
27	the government's efforts to curb the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . "Although the programme has to
28	14 days in a bid to curb the <b>spread of Covid-19</b> . Previously, those returning from overseas

FIGURE 3. Sample concordance lines for ‘spread’ in *Malaysiakini*



114	identified as having had close contact with Covid-19 positive patients.
115	and voice mails claiming there was a Covid-19 positive case in Taman Nilam, Sungai Terap. 2.
116	the Kuala Lumpur Wholesale Market - recorded two Covid-19 positive cases yesterday, reported China Press. Following
117	asures taken CORONAVIRUS   There are no confirmed Covid-19 positive inmates in Malaysian prisons, according to
118	was responding to allegations that there are Covid-19 positive inmates in the Sungai Buloh prison.
119	(JKNJ) has debunked a viral message regarding Covid-19 positive cases in Jalan Budiman, Kampung Melayu
120	from Hulu Langat CORONAVIRUS   Half of the Covid-19 positive cases in Selangor comes from Hulu
121	found to have close contact with a Covid-19 positive person. We (Abang Johari and the
122	Transport Jerip Susil was confirmed to be Covid-19 positive and was receiving treatment at the
123	today, Malaysia has recorded a total of 3,662 Covid-19 positive cases, with a cumulative death toll
124	opportunity during the MCO to enable all Covid-19 positive cases to emerge for us to
125	the violators due to the rise in Covid-19 positive cases in Malaysia. "The tougher checks
126	is now under the red zone for Covid-19 positive cases, with the inclusion of the
127	Sabah Health Dept investigates Covid-19 positive case involving Keningau Hospital staff CORONAVI
128	abah Health Department (JKNS) is investigating a Covid-19 positive case involving staff at the Keningau
129	Ismail Sabri Yaakob said this was after 15 Covid-19 positive cases were detected in the premises. "
130	re. As of noon yesterday, Malaysia recorded 3,793 Covid-19 positive cases with 62 deaths.
131	been exposed to a staff who was Covid-19 positive although the worker showed no symptoms
132	yesterday, the Health Ministry have recorded 42 Covid-19 positive cases in Kota Samarahan and 46 in
133	MCO due to the high number of Covid-19 positive cases in these areas. Whereas 23 districts

FIGURE 4. Sample concordance lines for 'positive' in *Malaysiakini*

As with the previous sub-corpus, the collocates generated from the *Malaysiakini* sub-corpus also indicate Covid-19 is associated with words that possess negative connotations, suggesting that the word has acquired a negative prosody. It is negatively represented in *Malaysiakini* news reports as a pandemic, an outbreak and an infection that is caused by a virus. The severity of the pandemic is measured by positive cases and patients. However, emphasis on the death toll seems less apparent here compared to the other sub-corpus. The spread of the pandemic must be curbed but not something that is fought against. The news reports in *Malaysiakini* seem to follow general pandemic reporting practices as well.

It is interesting to note that both sets of collocates share 8 out of 10 words. This may be attributed to topical matters of the time and aspects of the pandemic that need to be covered. It is also noteworthy that although the news reports were from the period of MCO 1.0, the abbreviation 'MCO' does not appear as a collocate of 'Covid-19'. In both sub-corpora, 'MCO' did not achieve a significant MI score although it has a significant T-score. This shows the benefit of intersecting both statistical scores to determine statistically significant collocates.

## DISCUSSION

The difference in the frequency percentage of the keyword 'Covid-19' in the two sub-corpora, i.e. 32% more times in *The Star Online* sub-corpus than in the *Malaysiakini* sub-corpus, may be attributed to the contrastive reporting style and topical focus of the two news portals. In *The Star Online*, Covid-19 is usually the main focus in their news reports, i.e. news items on Covid-19 statistics, monetary and personal protective equipment (PPE) donations and the collective effort against the pandemic. The news reports depict a narrative of a nation united against the pandemic, with almost no mention of politics in relation to Covid-19 or controversial issues related to Covid-19, despite the turbulent political climate in Malaysia just a month prior. In contrast, *Malaysiakini* focuses not only on the pandemic statistics, but also on issues related to it, such as aid during the lockdown to indigenous communities, i.e. the *Orang Asli* in the country, the debate surrounding the refusal of entry for Rohingya refugees on the grounds of virus transmission concerns, the problem of migrant workers, and political controversies surrounding it, i.e. the inefficient distribution of food baskets to the needy. Unlike news reports in *The Star Online*, those in *Malaysiakini* show that there are still other news-worthy

happenings in the country other than the fight against the pandemic. The difference in topical focus could be the reason 'Covid-19' occurs more frequently in *The Star Online* than *Malaysiakini*. However, it is noteworthy that despite the difference in topical focus and reporting style, Covid-19 is similarly represented in news reports by both news portals. This indicates that the representation of Covid-19 is relatively free from any governing ideologies and is a consequence of common pandemic reporting practices.

The negative prosody of Covid-19 in both sub-corpora suggests that the representation of Covid-19 in news reports is undeniably negative, with frequent news reports on people contracting the disease and the fatalities that happen as a result. However, there is no indication that the negative representation of Covid-19 is exaggerated or overly negative. From the findings, Covid-19 is presented as a pandemic and nothing more. It is not described as apocalyptic or devastating. Even MCO 1.0, the drastic lockdown measure that impacted and changed the way of life that existed before the pandemic, is not heavily associated with Covid-19. Although not exaggerated, the choice to focus on certain aspects of the pandemic in news reports is interesting to note. The word 'cases' is the most frequent collocate of Covid-19 in both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*. The analysis of the concordance lines shows that 'cases' appears as the immediate right collocate of 'Covid-19' and is always pluralised. These observations show that emphasis is placed on the number of cases, as the measure of severity of the pandemic. With regard to Covid-19 representation, a high or increasing number of cases would not only be interpreted as the pandemic becoming more severe but also that the efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic were failing and that the country and her people were losing the fight against the virus. This painted a very grim outlook on the pandemic situation.

The interaction between Covid-19 and its collocates in the current study suggests that node words with strong semantic prosody are able to influence the prosody of its collocates, which is in keeping with Lin and Chung's (2016) findings. It is possible that the negative semantic prosody of Covid-19 may have influenced the news items, causing them to be perceived as negative news, and invariably leading to the inaccurate assumption that all Covid-19 related news items are negative news. One such example is the issue of migrant workers in Malaysia. During the early stages of Covid-19 testing during MCO 1.0, the migrant workers, both legal and illegal, were overlooked by the government as a possible active disease cluster. This led to the spread of the virus within the migrant worker community, which contributed to the total case numbers, and subsequently spread to other communities as well. Although the news reports regarding the issue did not shift blame onto any of the people involved, the migrant worker community suffered discrimination and borderline scapegoating practices for their perceived role as virus spreaders. This shows that the negative associations of Covid-19 may be transferred to other issues, and no longer just to its collocates. This observation serves as a reminder to media practitioners to be mindful when choosing to associate other issues with the pandemic, as it has now gone beyond just merely stating facts and might lead to serious consequences.

While the current study set out to fill the gap in the literature on the semantic prosody of Covid-19 and its representation in Malaysian English online news reports, it also seems to have shone light on other matters. The data collection and data analysis methods used in this study, for instance, merit attention. Intersecting statistical scores to determine statistically significant collocates for further analysis is one notable insight. Given that the news reports used in this study were collected from the implementation period of MCO 1.0, it would have been acceptable to assume that the MCO, would be a statistically significant collocate of 'Covid-19'. However, this proved not to be the case as 'MCO' did not have a significant MI score although it has a significant T-score. The high T-score shows that MCO does have a connection with Covid-19 but the low MI score reflects a lack of association between the two.

By using both measures, it makes the relationship between the node word and its possible collocates clearer.

The choice of using semantic prosody as the framework of analysis as opposed to using discourse analysis frameworks is quite unique. Without the semantic prosody analysis of Covid-19, the news reports could be considered in line with pandemic reporting practices and become statements of fact as shown by the highly similar choice of words when reporting on the pandemic. However, the analysis of the semantic prosody of Covid-19 allows the observation of the prosody that permeates between the node word and its collocates, the determination of Covid-19 representation, and subsequently an understanding of the emotional response of the readers towards the issue. This method of analysis shifts the focus of studies on representation from the how and why a text is produced to the how and why a text is received.

The current finding on the negative representation of Covid-19, although limited to two online newspapers and the first lockdown, reflects the reality of Covid-19 news during lockdowns in Malaysia. The extent to which the barrage of negative news affects the public may not be immediately evident but in considering studies on mental health, it may be possible to see a link. Huckins et al. (2020) for instance demonstrated a strong inferential link between anxiety and Covid-19 news, and a marginally significant link between depression and Covid-19 news, while Garfin et al. (2020) discuss the link between media exposure to community crisis and mental health issues using past examples such as terrorism incidents and past pandemics. With regard to Malaysia, a nationwide scale study on the progression of mental health disorders in Malaysia between 12 May and 5 September 2020, Wong et al. (2021) found that on average, 21.3% of the respondents reported depressive symptoms, 28.6% reported anxiety symptoms and 12.5% reported stress symptoms. The study also notes that the psychological impact persisted and, in some cases, worsened post MCO 1.0, i.e. during the implementation of the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO). These studies suggest the possible causal relation between Covid-19 news and crisis fatigue.

## CONCLUSION

Covid-19 has acquired negative semantic prosody in news reports because it co-habitually appears with words that are associated with disease. On the one hand, its negative prosody may have also been amplified by ‘fight’ and ‘curb’ by giving it an antagonistic nature. On the other hand, the negative prosody of Covid-19 may have also permeated to ‘spread’ and ‘positive’, giving them undesirable connotations. In both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* news reports, Covid-19 is represented as a pandemic that needs to be curbed and fought against, the severity of which is measured by the number of cases and deaths. The representation is not exaggerated and does not fall under doom-and-gloom reporting, as the reporting falls in line with general pandemic reporting practices. However, when examining the prosody of the node word and its collocates, the negative prosody does present a grim outlook on the pandemic situation.

The findings of the current study based on the two sub-corpora suggests that there was heavy news coverage on Covid-19, with 3,539 mentions in *The Star Online* sub-corpus and 2,721 mentions in the *Malaysiakini* sub-corpus during MCO 1.0, Malaysia’s first lockdown. The barrage of bad news on the pandemic situation may have been amplified by the negative representation of Covid-19, possibly contributing to crisis fatigue among Malaysians. These findings substantiate the recommendations by health experts to limit consumption of news as a method to cope with stress build up and crisis fatigue. Media practitioners are made aware that even routine reporting can have unintended effects on readers, while news readers are

offered an explanation regarding the way they feel towards certain news topics and how it might affect their emotional and mental well-being as a result.

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