Negotiating Racism in Online Apologia: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Comments on 'Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown' Al-Jazeera's (2020, July 3) Documentary

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia's vast migrant workforce, with a notably larger undocumented segment, grappled with dire conditions due to their predominantly low-skilled and semi-skilled employment. These challenges were compounded by cramped and unsanitary living conditions, exacerbated by limited access to healthcare services, especially for those lacking proper documentation. The Al-Jazeera's 101 East 'Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown' (2020, July 3) documentary starkly portrayed these hardships, illuminating the harsh realities faced by these workers. However, the documentary prompted a contentious response from the Malaysian government, accusing it of tarnishing the country's image. This paper delves into the responses to the documentary, particularly the counter-narratives presented by Malaysian netizens. Employing the critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, this paper examines the discourse of defence (apologia) in the responses, focusing on the discursive strategies, namely nomination, predication, and argumentation. The findings reveal the strategic manoeuvres employed by Malaysian netizens as they sought to restore the nation's image and reputation, shedding light on how they repositioned themselves in relation to the 'Other'. Inadvertently, these led to a nuanced negotiation process that perpetuated and reinforced discrimination and racism, widening the gap between Malaysians (in-group) and the migrant community (out-group) during challenging times like the pandemic. This paper's significance lies in its dual contribution: understanding apologia strategies and their linguistic construction's role in perpetuating racism and discrimination while also laying the groundwork for more inclusive language use that fosters empathy, combats subtle bias and prejudice, and promotes unity within Malaysia's diverse socio-political landscape.

Keywords: Apologia strategies; positive self-negative others; racism and discrimination; argumentation; critical discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's migrant worker population in November 2020 consisted of approximately 1.38 million individuals with proper documentation, whereas the estimated number of undocumented foreign workers exceeded three times that figure (Mustafa et al., 2021; Rodzi, 2020; May 9; Surendran, 2021, April 19). Previous reports spanning from 2010 to 2019 indicate that these migrant workers are predominantly engaged in low-skilled and semi-skilled occupations, commonly referred to as "dirty, dangerous, and difficult" (3D) jobs (see DOSM, 2011, 2015, 2020; Kumar, 2016; Theng et al., 2020)[1]. Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia's adoption of various phases of a cordon sanitaire has intensified the economic upheaval, resulting in further marginalisation of migrant workers. The Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) has recommended prioritising the termination of foreign employees in cases where layoffs are unavoidable (The Star, 2020a). Furthermore, a report by the United Nations in March 2020 revealed that foreign-born individuals comprise roughly one-third of the workforce in sectors profoundly affected by the pandemic across

OECD countries (UN., 2020). Here, not only are they at high risk of income loss, but they are also more susceptible to contracting the virus, especially because they have been living in overcrowded, unsanitary, squalid and unsafe conditions even prior to the pandemic – making it almost impossible for them to practise social/ physical distancing and good hygiene (see e.g., Ab Ghani et al., 2020; Lim, 2022; Wahab, 2020). In the initial phases of the Movement Control Order (henceforth MCO), all migrant workers were urged to voluntarily step forward for COVID-19 testing in Malaysia (Arumugam, 2020, March 22). However, apprehension regarding the possibility of being detained due to a series of raids (Ding, 2020; Tee, 2020a The Sun Daily, 2020)[2] and the country's inconsistent policies (Boo, 2020)[3] may have forced them into hiding, particularly when healthcare services remain unaffordable[4] and inaccessible to those low-wage migrant workers lacking proper documentation (e.g., a valid passport and/or work permit)[5]. Consequently, there has been a notable rise in self-treatment, reliance on traditional remedies, and an alarming increase in infections within this community (Enh et al., 2022; Loganathan et al., 2019; Normah et al., 2016; Wahab, 2020;).

On July 3 2020, Al-Jazeera's *101 East* aired a documentary called *'Locked up in Malaysia's Lockdown'*. The documentary depicted the plight of some undocumented migrant workers hiding from immigration raids in their dilapidated hostel while some others were being subjected to a military-style crackdown and forcibly detained in camps under the guise of implementing a COVID-19-induced lockdown in Malaysia. The Malaysian government's perceived failure to properly empathise with the most vulnerable community during hard times like the pandemic was generally seen as a violation of moral imperatives. Malaysian officials and national television criticised the documentary, claiming it was a 'misleading, unfair attempt to tarnish the country's image' (Tee, 2020b; The Star, 2020c, July 7). The response from the then Defence Minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, characterised the report as 'irresponsible', 'lacking factual bases, and filled with 'baseless accusations' and 'false news' with malicious intent (Mazwin, 2020, July 6). Since its airing, the documentary has not only been strongly repudiated by the authorities, but it has also elicited apologia (i.e., a discourse of defence) from Malaysian netizens. To thoroughly explore these responses, this paper is anchored in the critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, which views language as a site of struggle, emphasising that language is not merely a neutral means of communication but a contested arena where power, identity, and ideology intersect (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 26). Within this framework, this paper delves into responses to the documentary aimed at restoring Malaysia's/ the Malaysian government's reputation, specifically by focusing on the strategic positioning of Self and Others. The analysis delves into the discursive micro-level of online defence strategies against the construction of negative self- or in-group impressions (see also van Dijk, 1992, p.92).

APOLOGIA AS ARGUMENTATION

When there are accusations, characterised as assertions of wrongdoing by another party (Castor, 2015, p.20), there arises a necessity to vindicate one's name or reputation through defensive statements aimed at reshaping the audience's attitudes and altering their beliefs about the accused's responsibility for an act (Benoit, 2015, p.3). These utterances of defence are called 'apologia', a genre of rhetorical oration which can be literally translated as the defence of oneself (see Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Hearit (1994, 2006; see also Hearit & Hearit, 2020) distinguishes apologia from apology; while certain elements of an apology, such as admitting guilt, expressing remorse, and seeking forgiveness, can be components of apologia, an apology does not necessarily constitute

apologia. As Hearit (2006) puts it, "apologia refers to the act of *giving a defence*, whereas apology typically means the *offering of a mea culpa*" (p.vii, emphasis added), in which the latter presents the accused as defenceless with the acknowledgement of fault with/out expression of guilt. It is crucial to note that the former primarily involves a defence strategy aimed at presenting a compelling alternative account to contextualise the purported misdeed in a more positive light (Hearit, 1994). Consequently, when apologia is employed, the objective is no longer to seek forgiveness but to evade punishment and safeguard one's reputation (Lazare, 2004, p. 134). As a social activity, apologia is an integral aspect of performative discourse. Meier (1998) rightly highlights its significance as a suitable subject for exploring the relationship between underlying cultural assumptions and linguistic behaviour (p. 277).

Apologia offered in public can initiate a chain of explicit and implicit interpretations, assumptions, and implications as a result of being crafted to fit cultural expectations of, among others, atonement, remorse, and ethics (Tileagă, 2012). They serve as a means of self-defence, not only questioning the public's perception of the Self but also actively trying to discredit alternative narratives and justify the accused's actions (see Potter, 1996; Tileagă, 2012). Existing studies on apologia have always centred on public figures, corporations, and institutions addressing crises, with the defence of Self typically being directly presented by the accused individuals or entities themselves in order to assert their narrative and counter the allegations they confront. For example, Badarneh's (2020) study on apologia from prominent Jordanian figures responding to allegations of corruption reveals a deliberate construction of discourse aimed at positioning themselves as accused figures as victims of character assassination. This strategic positioning is achieved through culturally resonant narratives and symbols, such as religious, professional, and national identities, to assert their innocence and bolster their credibility. This, in turn, elicits sympathy from the public while also emphasising their own roles as defenders of national interests. Similarly, Sarfo-Kantankah (2019) examines speeches delivered by a former Ghanaian president after losing an election using content analysis. The study reveals two key strategies. First, it uncovers the strategic use of bolstering strategies to align himself with his party's accomplishments and evoke positive sentiments. Second, it reveals victimhood rhetoric aimed at garnering empathy and deflecting allegations, along with the challenge rhetoric to redirect the focus onto accusers. Additionally, the study emphasises the invocation of divine intervention, framing his situation within a cosmic struggle to bolster his moral standing and rally support.

On the other hand, Falco's (2018) analysis of 'Letters to the Shareholders' written by CEOs and/or chairpersons following wrongdoing reveals shifts in speech acts and act sets. This accentuates the crucial role of illocutionary force inherent in these linguistic structures, emphasising corporations' preference for strategic apologia over direct apologies for image repair. This approach allows them to deflect responsibility from their actions rather than merely apologising for their misconduct. While Hearit and Hearit (2020) also investigate corporate discourse in their commentary on the crisis involving JPMorgan Chase's CEO Jamie Dimon during the 'London Whale incident of 2012-2013, the study does not delve into the linguistic and discursive strategies used to address performance challenges and enhance legitimacy. Instead, the analysis highlights Dimon's adoption of a four-step approach: mortification, corrective action, justification, and authorisation to regain actional legitimation following the crisis. On the other hand, Justice and Bricker's (2020) analysis of hyper-partisan apologia challenges conventional assessment frameworks and illustrates how tailored communication can resonate within specific partisan groups, even if it does not achieve broader success on a national scale. However, similar to Hearit and Hearit's (2020) study, their analysis also lacks a thorough examination of linguistic

and discursive strategies. Instead, it primarily focuses on identifying the strategies used without delving deeply into the ways these strategies are employed to defend themselves and restore their reputations.

Within the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper argues that it is crucial to comprehend the operational mechanisms of these apologia strategies. CDA facilitates the examination of linguistic and discursive choices that underpin these self-defence strategies, revealing their nuanced application in the endeavour of reputation restoration. Moreover, in this paper, the focus diverges from the typical centring on the apologia strategies employed by the accused entities, specifically the Malaysia/ Malaysian government, as portrayed in Al-Jazeera's documentary. Instead, this study turns its attention to the counter-narratives by Malaysian netizens who not only challenge the documentary's claims but also strategically defend Malaysia or its government in order to restore the country's good image and reputation. This paper also argues that in defending one's good name, such re/positioning of Self and Other in any offered apologia forces the dichotomised in-group and out-group into van Dijk's (1998, p.267) structural opposition or 'ideological square' which:

- foreground positive actions/things about the in-group 'us'
- foreground negative actions/things about the out-group 'they'
- background negative actions/things about the in-group 'us'
- background positive actions/things about the out-group 'they'-

Against this background, in this paper, I approach apologia in netizens' responses to Al-Jazeera's documentary as argumentation. When discussing argumentation strategies in one of the approaches to CDA, Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), Reisigl and Wodak (2001, see also Reisigl, 2014) begin with a discussion on persuasion. According to Reisigl and Wodak (2001), persuasion involves intentionally influencing individuals to adopt, modify, or change their perceptions, attitudes, and views towards people, objects, ideas, and their behavioural tendencies (p.69). Therefore, this paper views apologia as a persuasive narrative that seeks to modify, mitigate, and contextualise the interpretation of the alleged act.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

I analysed the first 5,000 comments deemed most relevant by Facebook users on the 101 East – Al Jazeera Facebook page. These comments were posted on July 3, 2020, at 7:59 PM MYT. As of that date, the Al-Jazeera Facebook Page had 309,266 followers and 283,573 likes. The data extraction was performed using EXPORT COMMENTS (https://exportcomments.com/), an automated tool for exporting social media comments to Excel files. In this context, "relevant comments" refer to those automatically ranked by Facebook, which typically include high-quality comments from verified profiles and Pages, as well as comments with the most likes and replies (see https://www.facebook.com/help/539680519386145/).

The texts selected for qualitative analysis were chosen based on the most commonly employed apologia strategies identified in prior research by Ware and Linkugel (1973) and van Dijk (1992). These strategies were initially identified through a quantitative content analysis conducted before the current study, as depicted in the table below.

TABLE 1. Strategies of apologia (expanded from Ware and Linkugel (1973) and van Dijk (1992))

1. Denial	(a)	Denial of act *('I did not do/say that at all*)
	(b)	Denial of control ('*I did not do/say that on purpose, 'It was an accident'*)
	(c)	Denial of intention ('*I did not mean that, 'You misunderstood me'*)
	(d)	Denial of goal *('I did not do/say that in order to…'*)
	(e)	Denial of responsibility ('*If there were negative consequences, I did not have control over them…'*)
	(f)	Mitigations, e.g., down-toning, minimising or using euphemisms when describing one's negative actions ('*I did not threaten him, but gave him friendly advice*)
	(g)	Justification: defending the alleged act as an act of legitimate defence or by detailing that the other person was indeed guilty and therefore deserved a negative reaction
	(h)	Excuse: Acknowledging negative acts as such but simultaneously providing an excuse for them
	(i)	reversal: Shifting the blame onto someone else ('*We are not guilty of negative action, they are*)
2. Bolstering	•	Associating oneself with something esteemed by the audience
	•	Eliciting memories of positive past experiences, sentiments, objects, or relationships to the audience (the accuser)
3. Differentiation	•	distinguishing the offence from other similar but more offensive things *("It could have been worse…")*
4. Transcendence	•	placing the offence in a broader, more favourable context by reframing the offence within a positive context, portraying themselves as a hero or a good citizen

Drawing from Wodak (2001), apologia *strategies* refer to a set of deliberate actions, including the use of discursive practices, intended to restore one's good name or reputation or reinstate one's good reputation. Here, it also must be highlighted that the apologia strategies in Table 1 above are not exhaustive, but they still provide a useful preliminary point before the in-depth qualitative analysis. At this stage, I found that across the sample as a whole, as shown in Chart 1, the differences between these apologia strategies were not substantial. The use of the most apologia strategies, *Denial* (34 per cent), is just less than 10 per cent different from the use of *Differentiation* strategies (28 per cent), followed by *Bolstering* strategies (24 per cent) and *Transcendence* strategies (14 per cent).

CHART 1. Malaysian apologia strategies
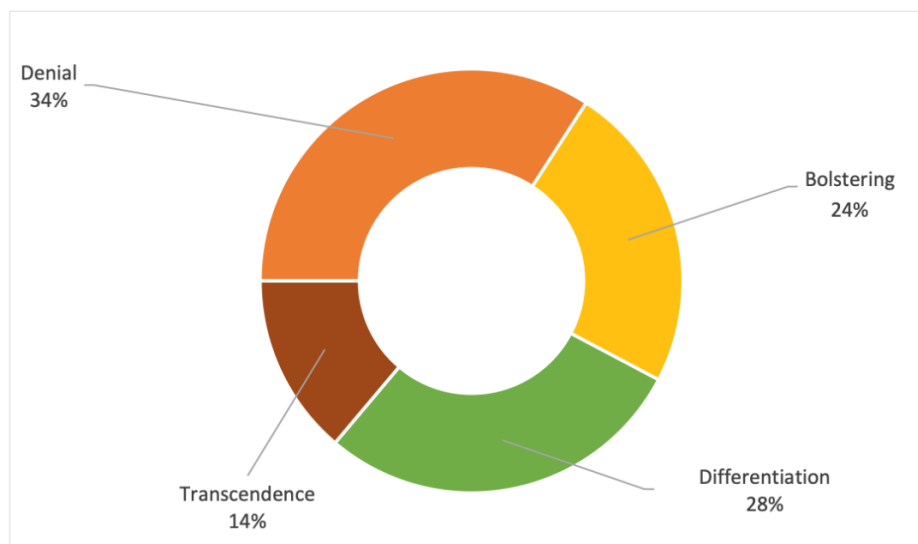
These preliminary findings aid in deducing the ways in which apologia are realised and constructed linguistically based on the typical linguistic patterns that occurred for each strategy, summarised in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2. Linguistic patterns of apologia

Denial	Differentiation	Bolstering	Transcendence
• It is not *x* to *y* those who enter this country illegally (*Justification*) • It is not *x* if we have to *y* as long as we can stop the disease from spreading! (*Control-denial*) • If not *x*, then how else…? (*Mitigations*) • They are *x*, they should be treated like *x* (*Reversal*) • We didn't do *x*, in order to *y*... (*Goal-denial*)	• Ok we *x*, but it's not like we *y* them, we didn't even *z*… • There are so many other *x* (which we didn't do)	• We do *a* for free, we *b*, we *c* for free. We *d*…. • Thank you and congratulations *A*. For *x*, *y*, *z*, not only during *c*, but also *d*. • Anyway, we have *x*, and now *y*.	• They would have been *y* already if they were not in Malaysia... • We do *x* to *y*…

Based on the patterns and absences observed, I conducted a detailed analysis of how Self and Others were positioned within the apologia, employing Reisigl and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (2016, p. 36) framework. Two specific strategies were employed to gain a deeper understanding of how social actors are constructed and the underlying argumentation scheme. The first strategy that I examined was referential or nomination strategies. These strategies involve the use of particular words to name and represent different individuals, processes, events, and entities, with the aim of either bestowing respect or holding them in low esteem. By closely scrutinising the words employed to designate various social actors, I was able to identify the establishment of in-groups and out-groups. This analysis shed light on how individuals and entities were portrayed and positioned within the apologia, illuminating the dynamics of social categorisation and group identities. The second strategy that I explored was predicational strategies. Predicational strategies revolve around the linguistic description and characterisation of individuals, events, and other entities once they have been constructed or identified. This involves attributing positive or negative evaluative qualities to them through implicit or explicit predicates. By examining the evaluative attributes ascribed to social actors within the apologia, I gained insights into the persuasive tactics employed and the overall rhetorical stance of the argumentation. This analysis revealed the ways in which positive or negative characterisations were strategically employed to shape perceptions and bolster the defence argument. Additionally, in my analysis of the apologia's argumentation, I paid attention to topos (plural topoi), which pertain to the aim(s) of a defence argument within the broader argumentation scheme. Through a thorough examination of the topoi utilised in the apologia, I identified the underlying basis of the defence strategies. This enabled me to discern the key arguments and the ways the claims of truth and normative rightness of Self and Others were justified by the netizens.

Within the context of the Aristotelian topical tradition, the term topoi (singular topos) refers to specific 'places' where arguments can be located. The concept of 'place' here is metaphoric and typically points to different mental areas or categories, as discussed by Eriksson (2012) and Kienpointner (1997). Analysing topoi, which involves identifying and examining the areas where arguments are made, has proven to be a valuable technique for understanding the underlying

meanings of speech and deconstructing arguments (Ariffin & Enh, 2022; Boukala, 2016; Kienpointner, 1997). The list of topoi in DHA is more specific, many of which can be connected to the Aristotelian topos of consequentiality (see Boukala, 2016). However, in the analysis presented in this paper, I primarily focus on material topoi, acknowledging the significance of contextual nuances. As emphasised by Rubinelli (2009), the selection of the argumentation scheme is influenced by the analyst's reflection of the data, which also involves the subject's local semantic coherence. Hence, when examining the data, I adhered to the Aristotelian tradition in my understanding and interpretation of topoi, placing particular emphasis on material topoi while taking context into account. In other words, the available lists of topoi (see, e.g., Boukala, 2016; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) were utilised to guide me in the analysis of my own based on the contextually specific apologia that Malaysian netizens used to respond to the Al-Jazeera's (2020) 101 East documentary. This means that the topoi presented in this paper may have varying labels and names, depending on the specific arguments found in the apologia.

The following section discusses the findings of the analysis.

FINDINGS

First, apologia was predominantly centred around the topos of the threat posed by Al-Jazeera's 2020 documentary, which can be expressed as:

Topos of threat: If the immigrants are allowed to stay in the country illegally, Malaysia will not be able to break the chain of the COVID-19 infection.

(1) You should know that these illegal immigrants do not really maintain their hygiene. Most of them who come here are dirty.

(2) Those illegal immigrants came with so many diseases, and with the current Covid19 pandemic, that's not helping. Please, if you care about them so much, take them back to your country...

(3) The Malaysian Government does its best for national securitiy, even if there is a need to arrest all illegal immigrants. Outsiders can keep their opinions to themselves.

(4) They're ILLEGAL. They don't pay taxes, they're involved in crime, and other bad stuff.

(5) What do you expect? We treat them to a 5-star hotel? These ungrateful illegal immigrants should be ashamed of themselves because we still provide food and free screening tests for them, regardless of their status in our country.

(6) They are illegal ... our government takes them and puts them in good places. Gives them food … this is our country, so we have the right to protect our country.

(7) This is very biased and very bad journalism practice. Nothing to do with racism. These are counter-measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among "ILLEGAL" immigrants.

Based on (1) – (7), Malaysian netizens generally denied the alleged discrimination through reversal. This scheme reverses the blame to put it on an Other, i.e., 'We are not guilty of negative action, *they are*', therefore 'We are not guilty of discriminating against these people because *they are guilty* of being undocumented, or 'illegal'', which potentially leads to victim-victimiser reversal. This scheme is reinforced by the nomination strategy, which becomes evident through the systematic and persistent use of third-person plural pronouns and possessive forms like

'*they/them*' and '*theirs*' in apologia. This strategic way of naming implies a distinct characterisation of the Other. Such overt linguistic pronominalization further widens the boundaries of social difference, distancing 'us' (the ingroup) from 'them' (the out-group) as, like 'them' (the out-group), 'we' (the ingroup) do not and more importantly *cannot* identify *if* 'we' want to break the chain of the Covid-19 virus. It is also crucial to note that, across the data set as a whole, a diverse group like migrant workers in Malaysia has been treated as homogenous, hence denying normal social variety and making them a more convenient target for othering in Malaysians' responses to the Al-Jazeera's documentary. This has also been very much reflected in Malaysian media's representation of migrants, at least during the early phases of the MCO when this community was typically homogenised, collectivised, genericised, and portrayed as resembling each other in appearance, behaviour, or posture, made it challenging to distinguish one from another, constructing a sense of "they all look alike to me" impression (see Siti Nurnadilla, 2023).

The consistent discursive depictions of migrant workers as a 'threat' to be feared and avoided in society form a significant aspect of the Malaysian netizens' predicational strategies, contributing to the construction of stereotypic-metonymical normative notions surrounding migrants. These depictions manifest in various ways. For instance, they are portrayed as *unhygienic* in (1), where explicit predicates such as '*do not really maintain their hygiene*' and '*are dirty*' are employed to describe their hygiene practices. In (2), they are characterised as *carriers of the disease* with explicit predicates '*came with*', followed by the hyperbolic predicate 'so many diseases', which overtly attributes the action of carrying diseases to migrants. Additionally, the stereotypical notion of *freeloaders* emerges through explicit predicates '*don't pay*' in (4), emphasising their non-payment of taxes, and in (5), they are described as ungrateful for receiving services, implying a sense of freeloading. Extract (6) presupposes that they benefit from government provisions. These evaluative attributions describe migrants as taking advantage of resources without contributing, varying in degree across the apologia. Furthermore, a sense of 'danger' is implied, particularly in (4), where an implicit predicate *'involved in crime'* attributes and generalises criminal activities to migrants, portraying them as *dangerous*. Here, it is worth noting that while not explicitly elaborated as a threat to national security, local resources, or the economy, they collectively contribute to a negative stereotype that reinforces the notion of migrants as a potential threat to society. These stereotypical microaggressions are consistently used to justify the alleged discrimination in Al-Jazeera's documentary, which is deemed to excuse Malaysia/ Malaysians from the alleged acts, further reinforcing the migrants' otherness and 'unbelongingness' at a time of pandemic.

Also, notice that the persistent use of the prepositive adjective 'illegal' to describe migrant workers directly foregrounds the abstract or threatening aspects of the Other, predicating migrants as being in opposition or objection to Malaysia's values, norms and laws. Having said that, it is also vital to highlight that the predication category of '*illegal* immigrants' used in the comments is legally accurate in Malaysian law. This is because, under Malaysia's Immigration Act 1959/63, immigrants are either legal/ documented or illegal/ undocumented. However, the use of the prepositive adjective '*illegal'* in '*illegal* immigrants' modifies the noun, i.e., all persons/ immigrants, instead of the specific verbs/ actions mentioned in the documentary, i.e., exceeding visa limits, unauthorised border crossings, presence in the country without proper authorisation, and engaging in employment without a valid work permit. This depersonalised nomination, pertaining to their immigration status, as opposed to individuals, heightens the sense of menace while suggesting that being illegal and all the connotations that that adjective carries is an intrinsic

feature of these migrant workers who, as can be deduced from the responses, typically hail from certain countries, i.e., Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India. Such a semantic contradiction misleadingly criminalises immigrants, permitting a crime to render the individual, as opposed to the individual's action, as illegal, and this relegates the community to a space outside the workings of the law by default. In this way, it always entails a unilinear teleological explanation of the issue solely in terms of outsiders coming in unlawfully, presumably to stay permanently, particularly in this case, when it is posited from the standpoint of Malaysia, as the migrant-receiving nation-state in the apologia. This further essentialises a generic and singular construal of migrants as criminals, even though these transgressions, as reflected in (1) – (7) above, are all status offences, i.e., offences determined by the status of the individuals, actions that would not be considered crimes if committed by citizens or 'legal/ lawful' immigrants. Here, reformative denial strategies using the topos of threat attempt to work on the understanding of the public, instead of trying to change the meaning of the alleged racism and discrimination. However, similar topoi in the transformative differentiation strategies can also be observed in the apologia below:

(8)   But did we kill them? Did we make them suffer? Discrimination is a must to save lives.
(9)   How can discrimination be cruel when it is to contain the virus? There is so much open and obvious cruelty in other parts of the world which require extra attention and here you are ... trying your very best to tarnish our reputation? Do not waste your time...
(10)   OK, it's discrimination, but the govt could have let them die or shot them before they could even set foot on our territory...
(11)   It's a lockdown. They are illegal immigrants, undocumented, untraceable. that's why they have to be put in one place to minimize the spread of the pandemic & make tracing easier. Even Malaysians under suspicion of Covid-19 were put in quarantine centres. Some of us are being put under enhanced lockdown (army control). I stand with my government's actions!
(12)   These are just normal pandemic procedures!
(13)   We did what we had to do ... better than what is happening in America eh…?

In (8) – (13), there is/an in/direct attempt to separate the alleged racism and discrimination from the larger context within which Al-Jazeera's documentary portrays that attribute. However, here, when distinguishing the alleged discrimination/ racism from more offensive acts, the embedded suggestive violence/ threatening rhetoric or 'threatoric' against the migrant community (out-group) in the apologia cannot be left unnoticed. For instance, the rhetorical questions in (8) and (9) intentionally assert implicit propositions bearing relevance, which consequently aids in the focus-shifting strategy *A is not B,* suggesting that *B is worse than A* (see Table 3 below). While in (10), the use of epistemic probability (as opposed to possibility) '*could* have let' emphasises a degree of likelihood of the ability/ power of the in-group (Us: Malaysians/ the Malaysian government) to cause *B*, in this case, the death of the out-group (Them: the migrant community) by the in-group's own action/ inaction, but We (the in-group) chose *not to cause B, but A to C,* which consequently helps restore the damaged credibility of Self.

TABLE 3. Differentiation strategies scheme

Accusations (A)	Other offences (B) to shift attention away from the accusations	Aims (C)
• Being *discriminating* • Being *racist*	• It was not *killing* • It was not *torture* • It was not open *cruelty* • We didn't *let* them *die* • We didn't *shoot* them • It was *worse* in America [than in Malaysia]	• To save lives • To contain the virus • To minimize the spread of the virus • To have more convenient tracing

Here, in contrast to the denial strategies, the accusations are subtly or explicitly acknowledged, but they feature a differentiation stance to redefine the alleged act(s) that should be judged in a different temporal perspective (i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic), which consequently shifts the focus of the offences and mitigates their severity using the argumentation scheme '*A is not B, and for C, we need A*' in Table 3. In other words, while racism and discrimination may have occurred, Malaysia/ the Malaysian government really has limited culpability for those acts, locating the responsibility/ guilt for those acts not with Malaysia/ the Malaysian government, qua Malaysia/ the Malaysian government, but instead in the circumstances of the external context, i.e., the pandemic, or its management/ control. Here, it is also worth noting how differentiation strategies are heavily laden with presuppositions that the migrant community presents a homogenous threat, where it emphasises community accountability for the disease. Such valenced grammatical patterns generalise the whole community as the active agents of COVID-19 (X); therefore, any Malaysian(s) (*Y*) who gets COVID-19 is or becomes infected with or by *X*. More significantly, with such linguistic nomination patterns, individuals in the migrant community when they have contracted COVID-19 are not seen as 'victims' of the immediate threat, i.e., COVID-19, because of the generic presumption of the metaphorical framing that they are 'carriers' or 'cases' or, worse, the virus itself. Similar dehumanisation strategically continues to consider them as 'a danger' rather than objects of compassion, which is then employed as a means to seek exoneration from accusations, aiming to restore Malaysia/the Malaysian government's reputation.

Closely related to the topos of threat is the topos of prioritisation in the apologia, which can be expressed as:

Topos of prioritisation: If this is our country, then we should be prioritised over outsiders in order to protect ourselves from the virus.

(14)   Malaysia is doing its best ... This is our country … what's illegal will stay illegal ... it's not about human rights...

(15)   It's all about our country ... we need to make our people safe first... 👿👿👿👿

(16)   It is the right move! And we Malaysians support it, it's not for you to judge!

(17)   We are Malaysians ... we keep our nation safe during this difficult time…

(18)   Malaysian is for Malaysians … Not for illegal migrants. It is imperative to make sure our people are safe, no matter what it takes.

(19)   No, our country does not recognize illegal immigrants ... other than us Malaysians who support the government for the sake of the people of Malaysia. You don't need to interfere with what our government does ... because we Malaysians are united. We support our government

(20)   This is our country ... It up to us how to manage illegal migrants

(21) This is OUR COUNTRY! OUR LAND! OUR HOME! Not yours. Let our government do what they do to protect US, the citizens!

(22) What the Malaysian government did is to protect its own citizens. Look what happens now. Our country is almost free from Covid-19. If Malaysia did not take steps like this, we would become like the USA. Criticizing a country that is trying to take care of its citizens is totally stupid and unfounded. We, Malaysians, totally support our government. Now, we go out feeling safe because of the actions taken by our government.

In the comments above, the apologia patterns begin with denial (justification) strategies, defending the alleged act as an act of legitimate defence and, therefore, did not deserve a negative reaction. However, it is worth noting how comments (14)–(22) above were followed by an implicit/ explicit denial of responsibility towards the undocumented migrant community and emphasis on the responsibility of the Malaysian government towards its citizens, that is, 'even if we discriminated against the migrants, or were being racist, if there were negative consequences from what I did, then I did not have control over them…'. To realise these defence strategies, we can first and foremost see the use of the hegemonic nomination inclusion of the accused groups (Malaysia, the Malaysian government, Malaysians), primarily via first-person plural pronouns: '*we, us, our'*. Such collectivised grammaticalisation of the accused individual (commenter/ netizen on Facebook) to him or herself conceptualises a group identity between insiders and outsiders, hence emphasising the sense of un/belongingness. The repeated use of *Malaysia* provides a sense of territorial rootedness, which is organically accompanied by an emotional attachment to an imagined space and members' place within it, which must be protected, defended, and cared for, as no stakes are more compelling than the safety of our nation (as an imagined space, metaphorical HOME) and everything within it. These strategies of naming then neutralise the alleged act as it puts the topos beyond argument, as the process of argumentation itself rhetorically reaffirms such values and belongingness and, to a certain extent, ownership as well as autonomy: *This is our country, our rules.* And if this is our country, it is right that 'we' possess 'our' own state and our exclusive right (to feel safe from the virus) should be acknowledged. As a result, the alleged actions expressed in Al-Jazeera's documentary are constructed as reasonable and uncontroversial because the state is normatively obliged to prioritise the interests of the *rakyat*. This, hence, helps to support, in particular, a denial strategy: "We are not racist … we just need to protect ourselves." Consider the denial strategies schemes adopted in the apologia earlier:

- It is not *x* to *y* those who enter this country illegally [because we need to make sure our people are safe] (justification)
- It is not *x* if we have to *y* [as long as we can stop the disease from spreading!] (control denial)
- If not *x*, then how else [are we going to curb the virus]? (mitigation)
- They are *x*, they should be treated like *x* [especially during the pandemic] (reversal)
- We didn't do *x*, in order to *y* ... we do *x*, [because we need to protect our people] (goal-denial)

When unpacking these schemes, it becomes apparent that the topos of reality predominates. This argumentation scheme often relies on tautological reasoning, where assertions are reiterated using varied phrasing, rendering the denial proposition in the apologia logically irrefutable. This topos can be expressed as:

Topos of reality: Due to the existing circumstances, the alleged action is justified or necessary to be done/performed.

In other words, because the reality of COVID-19/ the issue of undocumented migration is as it is, the alleged action, as depicted in Al-Jazeera's documentary, should be performed/ done. This scheme also strengthens the triggered conditional presuppositions, i.e., implicit assumptions about the world or prevailing beliefs relating to undocumented migrants whose 'illegality', as argued earlier, is depicted as a threat during the pandemic. However, this triggered conditional presupposition, i.e., *if* there are illegal migrants in the country, we are not safe from the Covid-19 virus, is further strengthened and emphasised to justify an unconditional one through the predicational strategy in the topos of reality, i.e., by projection of the assumption that the antecedent, i.e., the if clause: *if there are illegal migrants in the country* and apodosis, i.e., the consequent: *we are not safe from the Covid-19 virus* of these conditional presuppositions are independent of one another. By independent here, I mean the projection on the migrants' "illegality" will not change what has been projected as the factual apodosis that we are not safe from the COVID-19 virus. Here, what I shall refer to as 'illegal migrants conditionals'(IMCs) lacks the characteristic 'conditional' meaning associated with typical if-clauses. In canonical conditionals, if-clauses restrict the situations in which the consequent is true, while in IMCs, if-clauses restrict the circumstances in which 'the consequent is relevant' (in a broad sense, encompassing aspects of social appropriateness). In this case, from such projections, we can say that there *are* illegal migrants in the country, whether we feel safe or not from the COVID-19 virus. And somehow, if we put it in the context of apologia/ self-defence, we can see how the focus here is shifted and the issue of 'illegal migration' is problematised and further emphasised earlier, hence helping to offset the offensiveness of the alleged discrimination highlighted in Al-Jazeera's documentary. This also again helps to consistently foreground the discursive depictions of migrant workers as a 'threat' to society during the pandemic, which produces and further reproduces the construction of the stereotypic-metonymical normative notion of migrants.

In the attempt to continue reconstructing a positive Self in the self-defence discourse against Al-Jazeera's (2020) documentary, the ways similar topos of reality are used are also worth noting. Here, instead of focusing on the evaluative attributions of negative Other/ circumstance-presentation (derogation) to deny the alleged acts in the apologia, the topos of reality is used as a conclusion rule to reinforce the existence of positive deeds, experiences, sentiments, or relationships (face-keeping/ saving) in order to identify Malaysia/ the Malaysian government more favourably. Such predicational strategy can be observed in the bolstering and transcendent strategies as the counterpart or complement to denial and differentiation strategies in the apologia below:

(23) Are we racist? We screen them and treat those who are Covid-positive in our health facilities. This has proven to curb the spread among the immigrants as well as among the community. Malaysia has now succeeded in controlling the pandemic when others are still struggling.

(24) Thank you and Congratulations Malaysia. For protecting our country and caring for the illegal immigrants for years, not only during the pandemic. Malaysia is among the top

countries donating and assisting Palestinians in Gaza, Syria, Yemen and many war-torn countries, even Bosnia before. Thank you, Malaysians.

(25)   Anyway, we saved thousands of lives by allowing you to breathe in and stay in Malaysia to support your family. We are proud to do so compared to those countries who fought for "human rights" but end up (still increasing) with the highest case numbers of Covid-19.

(26)   They should thank the Malaysian Government because they have received treatment like the locals, medical attention, good hospitality without paying a single cent to the government!!! Discrimination my ass!

(27)   Malaysia is among theos countries fighting Covid-19 with the highest success rates to reduce causalities in the world ... don't take it personally – it's not racism.

(28)   Where is the discrimination? Do you know that Malaysia provided a hotel, including free meals? Do you know that Covid tests here for everyone are free? Our government pays for everything.

First, it can be observed that the alleged acts in (24), (25) and (26) are not in/directly acknowledged if not wholly ignored. When bolstering, the reputation of the Malaysians/ the Malaysian government is leveraged using the implicit speech act of *reinforcement* in declarative statements. However, here, argumentative acts centre more specifically on 'remembering' and not simply 'thinking', hence establishing a connection between previous thoughts and future thoughts through present ones. It does not merely bring all Malaysians'/ the Malaysian government's positive past reputation into consciousness but also *emphasises* that these memories/ experiences/ deeds are held there and hence must be revived. In this way, bolstering strategies distance the focus away from the alleged acts, consequently overshadowing or at least mitigating them. In contrast, the use of transcendent strategies implicitly/ explicitly recognised the accusations, for instance, through ironical questions: 'Are we racist?' in (23) and 'Where is the discrimination' in (28). As opposed to the rhetorical questions in (8), propositions *p* (racism, discrimination) in (23) and (28) are made irrelevant in themselves, asserting contextual inaccuracies and challenging the meaning of such acts, especially when these offences are put in the immediate larger context of the pandemic (see Table 4, below):

TABLE 4. Bolstering and transcendent strategy schemes

| Reformative	Transformative	Appeal to higher values
Bolstering strategies [past positive deeds, experiences etc.]	**Transcendent strategies** [seeing the offence within the current larger positive context]	[implicit/ explicit positive outcome]
• has been caring for illegal immigrants for years (24) • top country donating (*a*), and assisting *b* (25) • saved thousands of lives (*a*) by allowing the out-group to breathe in (*b*) and stay in Malaysia (*c*) to support their families (*d*) (26)	• screen them (*a*) and treat those who are Covid positive (*b*) in our health facilities (23) • similar treatments to those received by locals (*a*), with medical attention (*b*), good hospitality (*c*) for free (27) • provided a hotel (*a*), free meals (*b*), free Covid tests (*c*), the government pays for everything (*d*) (28	• to curb the spread [of Covid-19] • to successfully reduce casualties • to control the pandemic

The transcendent appeal (in 23, 27–28) has two entailments: (i) the redefinition of alleged acts and (ii) an appeal to higher values, invoking the supposition that the acts serve a larger domain or purpose, hence mitigating the severity of the accusations. Also, notice that 'thank you' is also repeated in the apology. Here, it is an expressive illocutionary act that not only expresses the gratitude of the commenter but also asserts his/her judgement that a grateful response is appropriate. When engaging in expressive sentiment within apologia, the aim is not to align the world with the words or the words with the world. Instead, the focus lies on the truthfulness of the expressed proposition, *p* (e.g., for protecting our country, caring for illegal immigrants for years, not only during the pandemic (24)) is presupposed, expressing a particularly positive attitude or emotion to restore Malaysia's/ the Malaysian government's good name. Simultaneously, asserting the appropriateness of gratitude expresses one's belief in proposition *p* and strives to align the words with the world, emphasising the psychological state of belief (that *p*). Here, the communicative function of 'thank you' (and congratulations) invests in the presence of a belief *p* as well as presenting the belief *p* to be added to the common ground in apologia (e.g., with the use of deontic and epistemic *should* thank in (26)) to background the accusations, while foregrounding recognition, acknowledgement and, hence, restore respect, especially when this leads to implicit/ explicit positive outcomes in a time of pandemic. Here, similar to denial strategies (i.e., to negate), when netizens bolstered (i.e., to identify), there is no direct/ indirect attempt to change the meaning of the alleged racism and discrimination, as they stress the accepted understanding of the public.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This present paper has shown not only apologia strategies (*the whats*) but also the linguistic construction of such strategies (*the hows*) using three discursive strategies: nomination, predication, and argumentation, when Malaysian netizens sought to justify, explain, or excuse the events portrayed in Al-Jazeera's documentary, with the intention of improving, repairing, and ultimately restoring the tarnished image or reputation of Malaysia and its government. This specific case study involving responses from Malaysian netizens offers a departure from generalised assumptions often found in apologia theories (see, for example, Benoit, 2021; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Moreover, by shifting the focus away from the accused, specifically in this case Malaysia/Malaysian government, this study provides a more targeted perspective on the dynamics of apologia in the context of Malaysia. This approach stands in contrast to existing scholarship, including research by Justice and Bricker (2020), Hearit and Hearit (2020) and Falco (2018). Evidently, here, the argumentative nature of imputations (X did Y, Y is bad) *asserted* in (as opposed to *presupposed* from) Al-Jazeera's (2020) East 101 documentary is not merely a relational concept, i.e., one that not only emerges from, and is accomplished by, relevant participants in the discourse, but also one that crucially ought to be responded to, i.e., contested and negotiated in order to reinstate one's good repute. Since Malaysia/ the Malaysian government was already put in some unfavourable positions in the documentary, in the course of responding to the allegations, in line with Badarneh (2020), this paper has also demonstrated acts of forced self-re/positioning (the in-group) which simultaneously imply or require a re/positioning of others (the out-group) and vice versa to be meaningful, in the netizens' responses to the documentary. These reformative (denial/ bolstering) and transformative (differentiation/ transcendence) strategies fall under three key legitimatory overarching topoi, namely, topos of threat, topos of prioritisation and topos of

reality, which discursively re/position Malaysia/ the Malaysia government (the in-group) more positively, and the migrant community (the out-group) negatively.

Here, the findings also reveal that apologia strategies go beyond the primordial social categories of apology's Offender and Offended because the apologia offered had subtle or no genuine intention to openly acknowledge the offence and express regret, thus failing to provide reparations to the victims affected by the alleged acts. More relevant to apologia are the Accused and Accuser social categories, where the accuser is not necessarily the victim as in the case of apology, as summarised below:
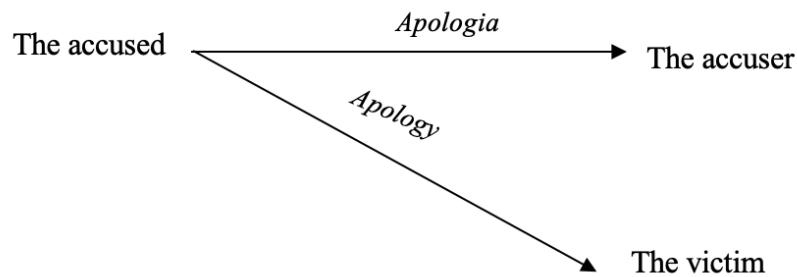
In contrast to Sarfo-Kantankah's (2019) findings, which emphasised President Mahama's shift in focus towards accusers in his speeches following the electoral defeat, this paper reveals a distinct redirection of emphasis primarily towards the migrant community (the Other) rather than towards Al-Jazeera, the producer of the documentary. This becomes particularly evident when accusations call into question the accused's claim to a positive social and cultural belief, values, and identities. Consequently, the findings also illustrate a significant emotional investment in restoring one's reputation, which drives effort to dispel/mitigate aspersions rather than seeing the alleged discriminating/ racist attitudes or actions themselves as more serious social contraventions, especially towards the out-group during difficult times like in a pandemic. This is potentially problematic for two reasons: first, defending one's positive traits/ track record to save one's reputation has often been done at the expense of others, and this on its own is capable of triggering discrimination/ racism; second, any accusations also suggest that the victim is a lesser human being who somehow deserves mistreatment by the accused. Therefore, when the focus was solely on clearing Malaysia's/ the Malaysian government's name and reputation, it is hard not to notice how the alleged acts of discrimination/ racism (what are supposed to be non-negotiable acts) are also negotiated at the same time. The dislike of or prejudice against outsiders, undocumented migrants, for being *perceived* as X (as opposed to being X) in this case is not always openly hostile or aggressive – but rather can come in the form of innocent concerns and fears, anxieties caused by the pandemic. This aligns with the warning conveyed by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres (2020) regarding the heightened surge in emotions like animosity, xenophobia, scapegoating, and fear, all of which contribute to a growing undercurrent of bias and hostility that disproportionately impacts migrant workers.

To conclude, defending one's name against the alleged discrimination/ racism only further abnormalises the presence of this community while neutralising the discriminatory/ racist reactions to their presence and responses during the pandemic. It is crucial to highlight the insidious nature of less overt or virtual forms of discriminatory/ racist speech in apologetic discourse that continues to reinforce the polarisation of Us and Them – which are often downplayed as harmless expressions and consequently lead to social disintegration.

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END NOTE

[1] 3D jobs, which include working on the factory floor, serving, cooking and cleaning restaurants, and building MRTs, houses and offices (Theng et al., 2020), are often persistently avoided by the locals due to the stigma, as opposed to the small salaries. According to the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan, 3D jobs are often construed as lowly or demeaning by Malaysians (Kumar, 2016).

[2] Bernama, May 2 2020; Ding, June 19 2020.

[3] The Ministry of Health exempted all infected migrant workers from coronavirus-related fees regardless of their immigration status (Boo, March 13 2020). However, the Prime Minister later announced that only citizens would receive free testing, which was disputed by the health director-general (Tee, March 23 2020). Despite repeated assurances, the policy of not arresting or requesting documents from migrants during testing was reversed on April 29 2020 (The Sun Daily, April 29 2020).

[4] All government subsidies for non-citizens were removed in 2014, making their charges up to 90 times higher. See http://www.hkl.gov.my/index.php/advanced-stuff/hospital-charges for a comparison of healthcare charges between citizens and non-citizens.

[5] The need for legal documents (i.e., valid passport and work permit), language barrier, discrimination and xenophobia, physical inaccessibility and employer-related barriers were found to be among the reasons why migrant workers do not seek treatment from local healthcare services.

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