

Inside Out the Screen: The Trajectories of Malay Identity Using Hashtags

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ABSTRACT

Social media microblog Twitter's hashtags were initially intended to categorise, highlight topics, or keywords in users' tweets. However, they have since evolved into a unique mode of interactional communication. This research delves into the utilisation of the hashtag #Melayu, specifically examining how Twitter users, particularly members of Malay digital diaspora communities, leverage social media to construct and reinforce their Malay diaspora identity. The study sheds light on cultural identity construction as a sociocultural process that challenges and redefines established cultural binaries simultaneously. Positioned within the framework of positioning theory, the research presents a proposed methodological approach that incorporates Natural Language Processing (NLP) and thematic analysis to collect and analyse data associated with the #Melayu hashtag. The proposed framework highlights the transformation of the #Melayu hashtag from a simple label to a powerful medium for fostering connections, expressing cultural pride, and preserving collective memories within Malay diaspora communities. Additionally, this study underscores the hashtag's role in challenging preconceived notions and stereotypes, providing a platform for diaspora voices to counter prevailing narratives. Overall, this investigation will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the intricate relationship between social media and identity formation, particularly within the context of diaspora communities. Moreover, it underscores the importance of recognizing social media platforms as influential agents in shaping and maintaining cultural identities in our increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Trajectories, Malay, identity, Twitter, hashtags

INTRODUCTION

As the globe and humanity enter the Age of Digitalization, tremendous shifts are taking place due to the rapid growth of algorithms and big data, artificial intelligence, global communications, and cyborgs. The development of the social web brought deep changes in the way individuals see and place themselves in the online world. Hence, social media platforms seem to have emerged as powerful tools that profoundly influence how individuals shape and express their identities. Through the utilisation and active participation in media and online environments, individuals are concurrently cultivating a heightened awareness and understanding of their personal identity (Appiah, 2018).

Identity and its various manifestations are prominent in our public life, spanning a wide range of cultural, academic, and scientific disciplines (Fukuyama, 2018). Identity represents the expression of a person's individuality in the context of a person's affiliation to certain groups, the ability to differentiate oneself amidst the crowd. In terms of psychology, identity refers to the uniqueness of the individual. Hence, identity is seen as alterity and highlighting of otherness can be changed, improved or altered both individually and socially (Mead, 1936 as cited in Santarelli, 2013).

Wängqvist and Frisé (2016), on the other hand, describe online identity as the collection of distinct characteristics that shape an individual's existence in the digital sphere. Expanding on this term, De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) define it as a set of characteristics that distinguishes a person from other internet users. As a result, within the digital world, people have the ability to transcend their physical forms and create new, separate personas. At the same time, people have access to a variety of tools for cultivating and communicating their online identities. There is mounting evidence that people develop an online identity that is distinct from their offline identity (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017; Jackson and Luchner, 2018; Harris & Bardey, 2019; Geary et al., 2021; Javornik et al., 2022)

Nonetheless, the problems and opportunities given by social media have been thoroughly investigated from a variety of viewpoints, including sociology, psychology, and applied linguistics (Gündüz, 2017; Bouffard et al., 2022; Sou, 2021; Garrido-Pintado et al., 2023). While much study has been conducted on identity creation and self-management, it is critical to recognize that identity is an ongoing process of 'under-construction' (Hyland, 2011), as individuals continue to share information on social media platforms.

Previous research on online identity reconstruction has mostly focused on differentiating aspects between individuals' online and offline identities. Key features have included strategic self-presentation (Talwar et al., 2019; de Valle et al., 2021), misleading self-presentation (Ranzini and Lutz, 2017; Geary et al., 2021), and false self-presentation (Jackson and Luchner, 2018; Mun & Kim, 2021). Other research (Zhao & Jones, 2017; Durrheim et al., 2018; Farrukh et al., 2021; Petroni, 2019) have also focused on the development of identity through discourse, using a variety of methodological techniques. These analyses demonstrated that identity is discursively generated, emphasising the significance of studying identity as a process of "identity in use."

Within the paradigm of "understanding and analysing social media as an autonomous social structure for identity construction" (Gündüz, 2017, p. 86), Twitter, a widely used microblogging platform, has emerged as a significant arena for interactive exchanges, providing a platform where diverse voices can shape and redefine identities. Among these identities, the notion of "Melayu" (Malay) holds particular significance in Southeast Asia, representing a complex fusion of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics. Understanding the dynamics of identity construction in the digital realm is crucial in today's context, as it offers insights into how individuals engage with their cultural heritage, participate in political discourse, and negotiate their social positioning.

Twitter has been a beachhead of this phenomenon through its emphasis on the use of #hashtags. Their construction, a token preceded by a hash character (#), explicitly signals a desire to label an abstract notion that is either already recognizable by one's social awareness. As common knowledge representations, hashtags are useful as social coordination signals as has been seen in the rise of social movements like the #metoo, and #blacklivesmatter. With Twitter allowing real-time sharing of thoughts and experiences, it becomes a fascinating platform for studying identity formation, especially within the Malay community. Although many studies have concentrated on motivations of reconstruction of online identity (Huang et al., 2018; Hu & Huang, 2023; Fallah et al., 2021), nevertheless, less studies have been conducted to explore Malay diaspora identity in social media.

Therefore, this paper aims to delve into the intricate reality of digital diasporas as a genuine global phenomenon. The primary objective of this study is to examine the influence of technology on identity formation, with a specific focus on Twitter users. We argue that members of Malay digital diaspora communities utilise social media to construct and reinforce their Malay diaspora identity. Moreover, this paper explores the meanings and implications associated with terms such as "self-presentation" and "virtual identity."

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE IDENTITY AND DIASPORA

Social networking platforms provide individuals with abundant chances to construct and curate their online persona. Prior research has demonstrated that individuals often engage in intentional self-enhancement by adopting positive self-presentation tactics on social media platforms (Kováčová, 2022; Hong et al., 2020). As previously said, individuals have the ability to modify their online identity in accordance with their personal ideas, influenced by several variables such as the pursuit of self-improvement, establishing social relationships, reduced inhibitions, and worries regarding privacy (Hu et al., 2015; Feher, 2021).

According to Papacharissi (2018), people inside social networks and online communities have an active role in constructing visual representations, personal narratives, and engaging storytelling, thereby contributing to their digital footprints. The formation of an online self can be cultivated by intentional and voluntary behaviours exhibited by persons who desire to portray themselves in the digital domain (Hu et al., 2017; Davis & Chansiri, 2019; Turner & Ordonia, 2023; Huang et al., 2020; Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022). On the other hand, it can be viewed as a continuous progression that commences with the establishment of an electronic mail account, yet transcends its utilitarian function to assume the role of a virtual identity embodying the individual's authentic self (Brubaker, 2020). Social networks are online platforms that have been created with the intention of enabling individuals to engage in social interactions, exchange information, and develop personal or professional connections. These networks provide users with the ability to create custom profiles that cater to their specific objectives.

Looking back to the root word, "identity", which lay in the Latin term *idem*, " which translates to 'the same' (Buckingham, 2008). However, identity is far from being a closed or singular concept; rather, it is characterised by its diverse meanings and applications. It is used to describe the differences and similarities between two entities, as seen in philosophical contexts. It also refers to the information linked to an individual's identification, such as their name and social security number. Additionally, the concept of identity pertains to how individuals perceive and conceptualise themselves (Harris et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2020; Javornik et al., 2022). Moreover, it addresses the manner in which individuals choose to present and disclose themselves to others.

Identity, on the other hand, might include an individual's perception and experience of oneself, often known as self conceptualization. Manders-Huit (2010) offers the concept of self-informative identity, which depicts how people construct their own identities and is distinguished by its flexibility and open-ended nature. Manders-Huit also proposes the concept of nominal identity, which refers to the set of characteristics that society assigns to an individual in order to ease consistent identification and re-identification. These characteristics may include social security numbers and names, which are used to identify and distinguish persons inside the social framework.

On the other hand, the proliferation of new technology has exacerbated the identity crisis. Scholarly works ranging from Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) to Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) have investigated human identity through a variety of practical experiences, manifestos, and reports that circulate on the Internet. Diasporans, for their part, map an atlas of identity that spans several physical locales, diverse ideological discourses, and multiple languages and dialects. They reflect varied degrees of assimilation into their respective countries of residency, as well as varying amounts of transnational links with both their compatriots and their motherland. As a result, nationalism evolves into a multidimensional and multifaceted collection of discourses that embrace a broad range of variety, ultimately changing the conceptions of nation, identity, and belonging.

Throughout history, diasporans have used numerous modes of communication to bridge temporal, physical, and psychological boundaries between diverse co-diasporic nodes and their nations of origin, ranging from newspapers, newsletters, radio, and television programs to the internet. Notably, being a post-geographically constrained global communication system, the internet has considerably enabled dispersed groups such as diasporas to establish, sustain, create, and reconstruct social relationships and networks with both their homeland and their scattered communities.

PORTRAYAL OF MALAYSIAN IDENTITY IN NEW MEDIA- ANIMATION

Paul Wells in his book, *Understanding Animation* (1998) stated that animation as a film language and film art is a more sophisticated and flexible medium than live-action film but maintained the frame-by-frame approach. In Malaysia, Upin and Ipin characters are the most favourable and popular animated series that are watched not only by the kids but also serves as a family entertainment at home and in the film. Omar & Ishak (2011) stated that animation films are powerful business tools that introduce the cultural characteristics by portraying a nation's culture and identity. Ghani (2015) gaze into the utilisation of Malaysian culture's iconic visual styles shown by the characters in Upin and Ipin. It acts as a melting pot where all Malaysians can watch the series as it caters to the heart's of Malaysian society. The content of each episode has the essence of symbolism, humour, creativity, good messages by educating the audiences with their first language usage that is Bahasa Melayu and also fostering the Malay identity or culture to be practised by the society. Some episodes feature the diversity of race, religion, customs, historical folklore, various ethnic groups living in harmony in Malaysia and feature a variety of costumes, traditional clothing, colourful festivities and arrays of Malaysian foods. Khalis and Mustaffa (2017) pointed out that there exist cultural influences where the character's costume design resembles the Sarawak traditional clothing.

People fail to notice that an abundance of cultural heritage will be lost if the history or folklore are not preserved well (Norhayati et al. 2004). There is an episode featuring action whereby it inspires and adopts names of famous Malay legend warriors that are Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, the original Upin and Ipin, become Laksamana Hang Upin and Laksamana Hang Ipin in the episode. The characters featured in the episode symbolised Malay identity and events in Malay cultural history which are preserved in the form of myth and legend. In one of the episodes whereby Hang Upin and Hang Ipin wear Malay warrior costumes (*Baju Melayu* and *Tanjak*,) that portrays the importance of Malaysian culture by nurturing cultural awareness and consequently preserving historical and cultural values that are essential matters to be sustained.

Salwati et al. (2013), stated that the characters in Upin and Ipin represent the true identity of Malaysians who are sensitive and accept others by respecting and acknowledging other cultures in spite of their differences. Wilson (2010), claimed that the use of animation can influence children's mind cognitively, enhance their social interactions, cultural identity, learning and self development. It focuses on the animation and visual culture which are crafted by computer animated visuals that are able to strengthen, promote unity and create awareness on maintaining our Malaysian identity by emphasising the positive traits, Islamic practice and moral values to be followed by the viewers. Social moral values like honesty, good teamwork, respect, obedience, tolerance and sincerity are the core elements in cultivating harmony and unity among the Malaysians. Thus, it signifies the Islamic values and universal good virtues to be practised in our life. Upin and Ipin is a dynamic and flexible animation that not only entertains but also cultivates the importance of adapting Malaysian culture that symbolises our roots, to be proud off, to be preserved and appreciated by the younger and future generations.

SOULFUL TREND OF MALAY-MUSLIMS PORTRAYED IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA - HIJABISTA

Wearing a veil or headscarves is a symbol of Islamic faith that covers the hair of Muslim women and discourages exposure of several body parts called as aurat (areas that are sacred and forbidden to the eyes' of man) protecting women from sexual misconduct and slander. Syahrul (2017) pointed out that religiosity means dressing in a modest way and covering the aurah as mentioned in the holy Qur'an. Hijabista suits urban Malay women and originated from the fusion of words "hijab" and "fashionista" (Sinar Harian 2012; Kumpulan Media Karangkrif 2013).

The Internet or social media has taken our life like a storm. Social media becomes the important source of information seeking-tool in attaining current trends. Nowadays, we can see there are numerous social media influencers and celebrities that portray their modern style of wearing their hijab or scarves (hijabista) in various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. Haswari (2013) stated the name already denotes glamour by emphasising it's catchy tagline "*stailo dan sopan*" (stylish & modest) claiming that modernity and modesty can be unified. Besides, it act as commercial for these people not only to portray good image of a Muslim by wearing hijab in a visual manner but also influence or nurture the netizens or followers to transform their life style by wearing hijab in a modern, elite or stylish presenting an urban trends of Islamic culture so as to cover the modesty of a woman (*aurat*).

Moreover, some of the local celebrities utilised the social media platforms as a common ground for their business to flourish successfully. They even sell their scarves that they designed and carry their own brand name competing with other brands in the market to be promoted vigorously in the Instagram, Twitter, Facebook platforms and online shopping such as Shopee, Lazada and others. Hence, this new media representations focuses on the modern hijab fashion in the cyberspace are well received as it portray the urbanite and elegant identity of Malay-Muslim women in Malaysian society. In addition, Muslim women who wear stylish clothing with matching fashionable head scarves known as "hijabistas" are growing in Malaysia. Immensely, the followers of hijab enthusiasts in the social media shows that they connects and utilised the platforms as point of references resulting in 537,639 likes on Facebook, 515,000 followers on Instagram and 9554 followers on Twitter.

Phenomenally, Mouser (2007) in Hochel (2013) pointed out that the majority of Malay women nowadays cover their hair more, compared to three decades ago, since modesty became homogenised with contemporary fashion and grew as a social expectation of Malay women. Wearing hijab or veil is considered as a social norm in Malaysia where it portrays a positive image or cultural identity for Malay-Muslims thus, protects the modesty of a woman in public places.

Wilson (2012) stated that consumer culture constructs and enables people to craft a specific personality they want to show, of which a consumer is subject to buy and gather items that satisfy this desire. Katz et al. (1973), claimed that the information shown through many tutorials and fashion delivered in the visuals that dominate the magazine not only serves as a source of other information, but also can be used as a form of social needs. In Facebook and YouTube, there are several videos oh hijab tutorials that show people on how to wear scarves in various form of unique styles, exposing creativity for the viewers to explore and choose the best options in fitting their own personality

This is a form of new media presentation that features culture, supports the ideas of modernity and avant garde visuals encouraging Malay or Muslim women to wear hijab that signifies the Islamic principle or value to be practised. According to Mustapha, (2017) he stated that Diyana Zainul Ehsan mentioned that, "Wearing the hijab does not forbid you from being stylish, with the right and suitable outfit, you can be proud to present yourself to the world". It is okay to wear urbanite hijab and keep up with trends with different styles as long as you are confident in wearing it and ensure that the hijab is suitable, properly worn by covering the parts of the body

and lowering the gaze of men's eye. Hence, it is not only embracing the modern trend but also fulfilling the religious principle.

REPRESENTATION OF SARAWAK MALAY'S CULTURAL HERITAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Nowadays, the younger generation is engrossed in utilising social media platforms for acquiring information fast and sharing knowledge to other people in cyberspace. Realising the fact, the Sarawak Malay's cultural heritage are taking an effective approach on using social media as a medium to create awareness and attract the younger generations. Social media is a medium of transfer on social interaction that changes the way we look at language, expressions, love, family, friendship, and intimacy. (Singh, Priyanka and Yagya, 2013) The community has taken steps by addressing the Sarawak Malay culture, language, traditional clothing, beliefs, art, customs, music, festivals, dances, historical buildings and others for the benefits of future generations. Thus, social media are an effective platform to maintain cultural heritage so that it will not become extinct and are well preserved for the young generation. Siti Eizaleila and Azizah (2010) stated that the popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blog while the others are developed based on the needs of Malaysian netizens.

Dayang Sandrawati Abang Josmani et al. (2012) stated that most Malays ladies in Sarawak wore *Keringkam*, a gold thread piece of embroidered veil or shawl during engagement, weddings, cultural festivities or other special occasions. Basically, the most common Sarawak's Traditional Malay Clothing are *Keringkam* (traditional head scarf), *Tali Pinggang Besi/Perak* (traditional alloy belt) and Sarawak *Songket* (handwoven fabric). The popular traditional music among the Sarawak Malay is *Bergendang* or *Bermukun*, in which the main musical instrument is *gendang* or traditional drum, played by the musicians and simultaneously acts as the singers. The music begins with the drums performance or *gendang* and they start to serenade and recite *Pantun* or Malay poems accompanied by the rhythms of the *gendang*. Mohammad Syawal Narawi (2016) claimed that this music was performed for young people to gain soul mates, as the girls seldom go out of their houses.

Thus, to sustain the identity of Sarawak Malay Culture, the community had taken brisk actions by having their own social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and blog to deliver information and create awareness on the existence of the culture to be adapted, preserved and revived for the future generations. Gillet al. (2007), pointed out that YouTube has been a popular option for more than one billion users globally and has developed tremendously to become one of the largest video-sharing websites in cyberspace. Tankovska (2021) on the other hand stated that YouTube is the second most popular social media platform worldwide with more than two billion active users every month and every day the videos are constantly uploaded. The community hopes that by sharing the content, pictures, audios, videos will not only be trending and viral but also become a cultural identity and hub of information on Sarawak Malay's Cultural heritage across the nation.

PROPOSED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study incorporates two interconnected theoretical frameworks to comprehensively explore the trajectories of Malay identity through hashtags. The first framework is based on the dramaturgical theory of social interaction by Goffman (1959). Goffman's theory, initially developed for face-to-face settings, provides insights into human behaviour and performance in social situations. It explains how individuals and groups adapt their behaviour to meet the expectations of their audience, imposing "moral demands" on them to behave appropriately. In the context of virtual communication and social media, Daniel Kilvington (2021) suggests a more refined approach by situating Goffman's model within a broader framework, considering the

intricacies between the virtual frontstage and virtual backstage. Integrating this theory helps us understand the construction of identities and communication in virtual spaces.

The second framework employed in this study is Gerbner and Gross's (1976) Cultivation Theory, which posits that television exerts significant influence over viewers' concepts, beliefs, attitudes, and values within society. With the evolution of media consumption, including the simultaneous use of traditional television and digital devices, individuals are exposed to a plethora of content, especially through social media platforms. This exposure to diverse content can shape individuals' perceptions and attitudes, leading to the cultivation of certain beliefs. Particularly relevant in today's context, the theory's implications extend to social media, where individuals engage in unfiltered interactions, including exposure to hate speech and harmful content, potentially influencing their worldview akin to the effects seen with television.

By integrating Goffman's approach with Cultivation Theory, this study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how virtual communication, media influence, and exposure to various content on social media platforms intersect in shaping the trajectories of Malay identity as represented through hashtags. Drawing upon L.J. Shrum's (2017) work, which highlights Cultivation Theory's significance in understanding media institutions and their impact on viewers, this study expands the classical perspective to encompass the realm of social media's global communication marked by both positive and negative exchanges (Refer Figure 1).

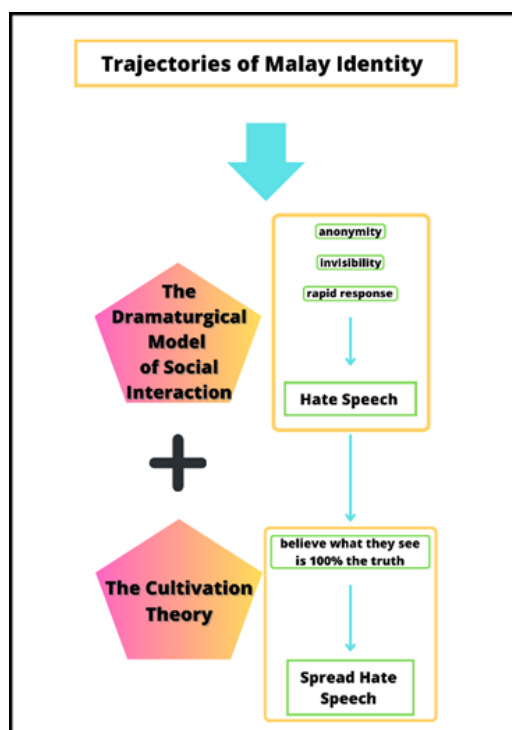


Figure 1. Proposed Theoretical Framework.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual paper adopts a pragmatic research paradigm to explore the trajectories of Malay identity using the hashtag #Melayu on Twitter. Data acquisition is conducted through the Twitter API using the keyword #Melayu, covering a three-month duration from January 2023 to April 2023. The purposive sampling is proposed to collect the hashtags. As Twitter messages are limited to 140 characters and often use informal language, data is pre-processed to normalise the text. The Natural Language Processing (NLP) pre-processing techniques such as removal of noise,

white spaces, duplicates, URL, emoticons, hashtags, and user mentions are applied to ensure data accuracy. Meanwhile, the lemmatization, removing stop words and spelling corrections techniques are used to extract meaningful insights from the unstructured text data.

A qualitative meta-summary can be beneficial for synthesising the results of qualitative and quantitative surveys, as well as producing mixed-research syntheses (Sandelowski, Barroso, and Voils 2007). This entails mapping the contents and serving as the foundation for the thematic analysis. Hence, thematic analysis following the approach by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2013), is then proposed to identify recurrent patterns and themes related to Malay identity. The thematic analysis process involves familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining them, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Ethical considerations are taken into account to ensure user privacy and data confidentiality. The study acknowledges limitations, including the constraint of 140 characters per tweet and the potential challenges of interpreting informal language. Additionally, the research specifically focuses on the hashtag #Melayu on Twitter and does not encompass other social media platforms or offline data sources related to Malay identity trajectories.

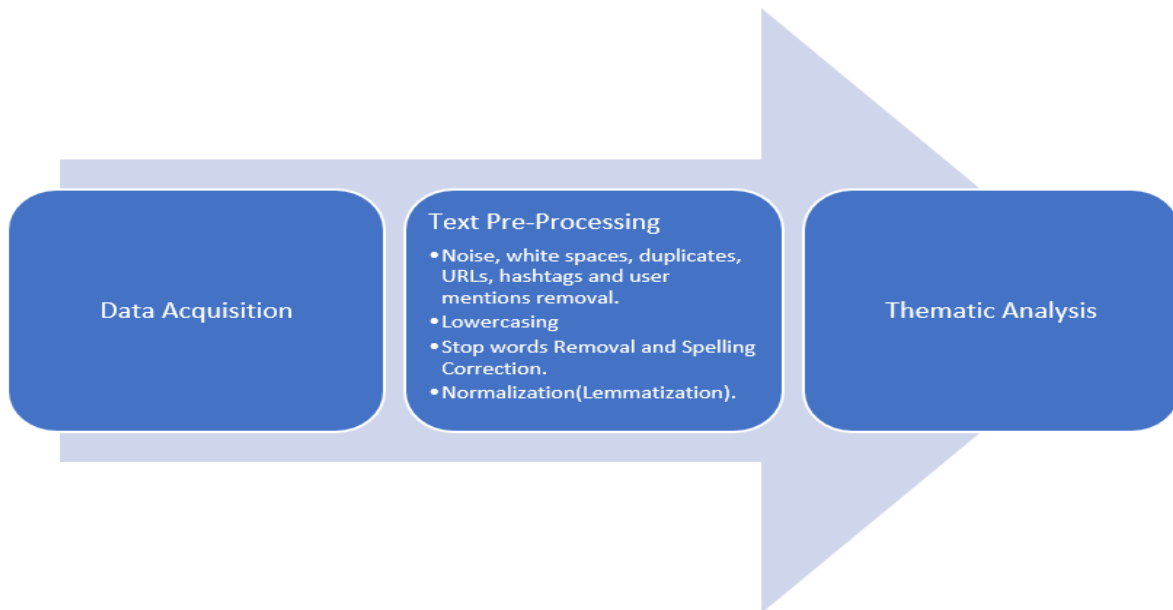


Figure 2. Data Acquisition Process.

Phase 1: Data Acquisition

Twitter messages are restricted to 140 characters, so the language used on Twitter is normalised to this limitation, i.e. unstructured, and very informal at times. So data acquisition is done via Twitter API using the keyword #Melayu in the duration of 3 months starting from January 2023 to April 2023. The raw tweets are to be pre-processed before being analysed in the thematic stage using Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques that will be explained in the next section.

Natural Language Processing (NLP) Pre-Processing

Step 1 - Removal of noise, white spaces, duplicates, URLs, hashtags and user mentions

Unwanted strings and Unicode, considered as a leftover from the crawling process, contribute to noise in the data. Also, almost all tweets posted by users contains URLs that reference additional information, user mentions (@username) and use the hashtag symbol (#sometrendingtopic) to associate their tweet with some particular topic, and

these hashtags can also express the sentiment. These clues give extra information, useful for human beings, but do not provide any information to machines, and can be considered as noise which needs to be handled. Researchers have presented different techniques to handle this extra information provided by users.

Step 2 - Lowercasing

Converting a word or text to lower case is necessary in NLP because it could lead to loss of information and produce more dimensions in vector space where two same words like 'Book' and 'book' could be represented as two different words in a vector space model.

Step 3 - Stop Words Removal and Spelling Correction

The stop words used to complete sentences are called stop words. By using the stop words removal technique, both Malay and English stop words are removed from the dataset. The spelling correction method is used to correct spelling errors such as abbreviations. Nevertheless, due to the Malay language's poor resources, it is challenging to remove stop words and spelling correction automatically.

Step 4 - Normalisation (Lemmatization)

The normalisation technique is used to replace abbreviations and replace them with their actual meaning. For example, "ketuanan melayu dah muncul semulaaaa" is normalised to "ketuanan melayu sudah muncul semula", A lemmatizer is used to change the words into their roots. For example, "hapuskan" is lemmatized into 'hapus'. In order to do the lemmatization process, a Malay Python tool called Malaya NLTK is used. Malaya NLTK contains text cleaning, sentence word tokenizer, word lemmatizer and part-of-speech tagger.

Phase 2: Data Analysis

The utilisation of thematic analysis proves to be indispensable in uncovering patterns within qualitative data, particularly when the research aims to extract the experiences and meanings of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). By employing thematic analysis, a "realist method" that seeks to grasp the authentic reality of Twitter users and their interpretations of experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9), this study embarks on an exploration of the intricate reality of digital diasporas as a profound global phenomenon. The central objective is to investigate the impact of technology on identity formation, with a specific focus on Twitter users belonging to the Malay digital diaspora.

The crux of argument lies in the assertion that members of Malay digital diaspora communities actively employ social media platforms to construct and reinforce their sense of Malay diaspora identity. Furthermore, this research delves into the meanings and implications associated with terms like "self-presentation" and "virtual identity." To achieve this, thematic analysis is harnessed, whereby coding categories are systematically created and applied to the collected tweets. Themes are then identified based on the frequencies of the codes, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the diverse dimensions of Malay identity as manifested through hashtags and online interactions. Through this methodical approach, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms shape and influence the trajectory of Malay identity, shedding light on the intricacies of contemporary identity formation within the realm of social media and digital diasporas.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this conceptual paper undertakes a thorough investigation of the paths of Malay identity via hashtags, utilising two interrelated theoretical frameworks to offer a nuanced comprehension of identity formation and communication in the digital domain. Goffman's dramaturgical theory of social interaction (1959) elucidates the manner in which individuals modify their conduct and self-presentation in order to conform to the perceived expectations of their virtual audience. By situating the aforementioned theory within the specific context of virtual communication and social media, as previously examined by Kilvington (2021), the present study acquires significant and noteworthy insights into the multifaceted dynamics that exist between the virtual frontstage and virtual backstage. Consequently, this investigation illuminates the intricate nature of identity representation within digital spaces.

Simultaneously, the incorporation of Gerbner and Gross's Cultivation Theory (1976) recognizes the substantial impact of media, encompassing social media platforms, on individuals' cognitive frameworks, affective dispositions, and interpretive constructs. The study acknowledges that individuals' perspective might be influenced by exposure to various content on digital platforms, similar to the effects shown with traditional television. The significance of analysing media influence and content exposure is emphasised by this framework in order to comprehend the construction and portrayal of Malay identity via hashtags.

In order to accomplish the research aims, the study utilises a rigorous technique focusing on theme analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a methodological approach that enables a structured identification of recurring patterns and themes in qualitative data. By employing this approach, researchers can conduct a thorough investigation into the experiences and interpretations of individuals belonging to the Malay digital diaspora on Twitter. Through the utilisation of the "realist method," this study seeks to comprehensively depict the genuine reality of individuals and their engagements inside the virtual domain. Consequently, it endeavours to provide significant observations regarding the utilisation of hashtags as a means to express and mould the identity of the Malay community.

This conceptual paper aims to make a substantial contribution to the understanding of modern identity development and representation in digital diasporas by integrating theoretical frameworks and a proposed method in a synergistic manner. Through an exploration of the intricate relationship between virtual communication, media impact, and the utilisation of hashtags, this study aims to offer a more profound understanding of the intricate complexities and dynamics that form the foundation of Malay identity in the era of digitalization.

The primary objective of this study is to provide a scholarly contribution to the fields of identity studies, digital sociology, and diaspora literature. By doing so, it aims to offer useful insights into the dynamic process of constructing virtual identities. These insights will be beneficial to scholars, policymakers, and society as a whole, as they navigate the constantly changing landscape of virtual identity formation. The relevance of comprehending the complex pathways of Malay identity through hashtags becomes more significant in promoting a globally integrated and inclusive society, as technology continues to influence human interactions and communication. The anticipated outcomes of this conceptual paper are expected to lay the foundation for subsequent empirical inquiries, enhancing the existing knowledge base on identity, communication, and the digital experience in the contemporary day.

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