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Pemangkin Idea

Netizens' Criticisms on Social Media:

Do Their Strategies Comply with Islamic Principles of Communication?



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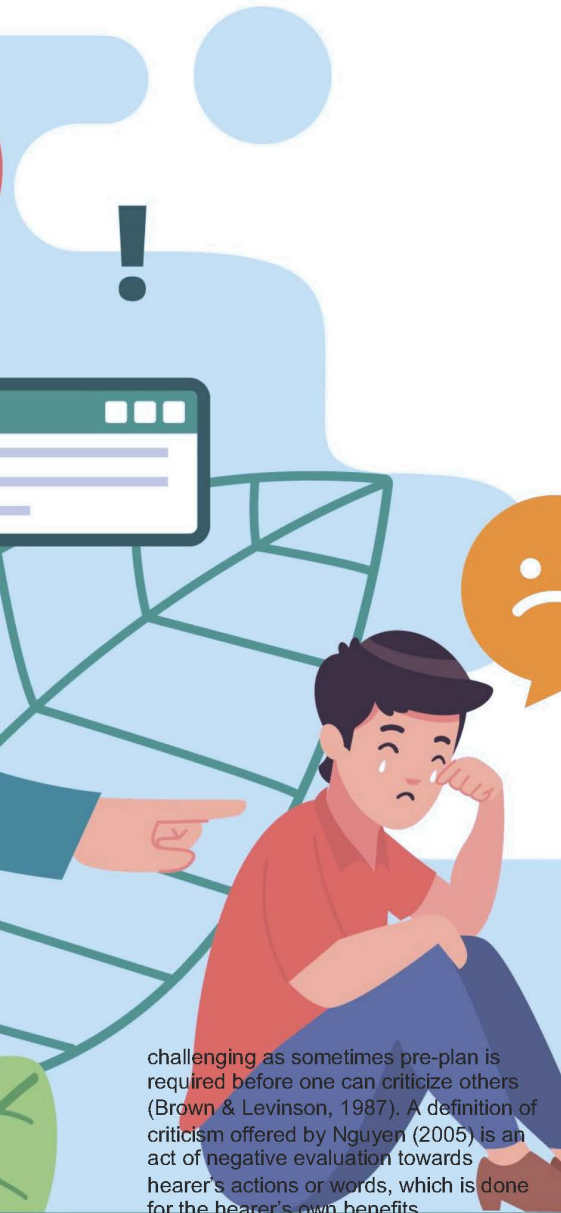
Social media has evolved significantly from merely presenting basic functions to fulfilling more sophisticated life purposes. The fundamental purpose of social media has now shifted to become crucial sources of current information. These days, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and Instagram have become a real-time channel for communication as they enable rapid dissemination of news, personal stories, and opinions on a worldwide scale.

Since the widespread use of social media has significantly transformed interactions with one another, it could have both positive and negative repercussions (Chen & Li, 2017; Moqbel & Kock, 2018; Twenge & Campbell, 2019). It is true that social

media offer a venue for open discourse but it is also crucial to acknowledge that conversations on this platform are susceptible to negative communication, such as criticism. Hamid et al. (2021) found that certain netizens exhibit a lack of adherence to ethical communication norms and proper conversational etiquette during online interactions. This occurs as social media enables direct communication between users regardless of status. Hence, netizens could take this opportunity to express their opinions without any restraint, which may result in diminishing one's favourable social reputation (Kasim & Kamarul Zaman, 2021). Researchers have been devoting a significant amount of attention to the phenomenon of online communication (Akram & Kumar, 2018; Beyari, 2023;

Carlson et al., 2016; Muhammad et al., 2018; Stieglitz et al., 2018). Despite the considerable amount of research dedicated to investigating the use of social media as a medium for expressing criticism, Malaysia has yet to adequately address this topic. As a country with a major Muslim population, it is also crucial to address whether Malaysian netizens' criticisms comply with Islamic principles of communication.

A simple explanation of criticism is that it is a type of interaction that is unfavourable because it is threatening and face damaging to the criticized individual. However, Nguyen (2013) asserts that criticism is not only threatening to the receivers but apparently to the senders as well. This is because criticizing is indeed



challenging as sometimes pre-plan is required before one can criticize others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). A definition of criticism offered by Nguyen (2005) is an act of negative evaluation towards hearer's actions or words, which is done for the hearer's own benefits. Nonetheless, what is happening in the online community right now seems to show the opposite. Criticism is now plaguing the society as the medium to criticise has become broader thanks to the rapid growth of social media platforms.

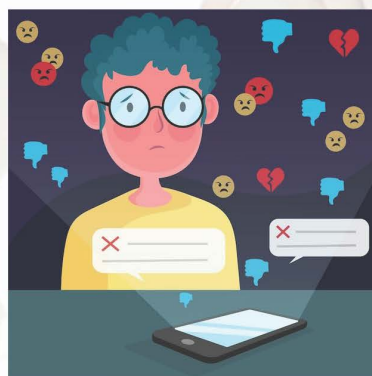
Our research analyzed 360 Facebook comments collected using the purposive sampling method. These comments were posted in response to some news about Malaysian 15th General Election on a local Malaysian English newspaper's Facebook page. 360 comments written to twelve news articles which received the highest number of comments at the time of data collection were extracted into our research corpus. The comments were written either in Malay or English language, or a code-mix of Malay and English. Firstly, we analyzed the data based on Nguyen's (2013) criticizing strategies and secondly, we examined whether the criticisms aligned with Islamic principles of communication based on Jaafar and Md Sham's (2022) taxonomy.

Our first analysis found 467 strategies employed by netizens to criticize politicians in social media. A closer examination of the data yielded 67.45% of indirect criticisms and 32.55% of direct

criticisms. These figures indicated that netizens would more often criticize politicians using indirect strategies. A possible explanation could be that criticism is an act that can threaten an addressee's (in this case a politician's) positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

A more detailed analysis of each direct and indirect type of strategies shows that 'giving hint' was the most preferred choice (33.19%) to express criticism. This was followed by 'request for change' which represented 20.34% of the data. The third most frequent strategy was 'explicit disapproval', representing 17.99% of all the selected strategies. 'Explicit statement of problem' was also another strategy preferred by netizens which constituted 10.28% of the findings. Other strategies including two new strategies – query and support others that emerged in our analysis were present in our findings, but these were very infrequently opted by netizens in their comments that were meant to criticize politicians.

Communicating via social media is ubiquitous in a technology-driven world. Islam does not forbid the use of technology to communicate provided that we convey correct information, avoid prejudice and slander, verify fact, avoid provocation, avoid depreciating others, and be wise in utilizing social media (Juminem, 2019). People who communicated on social media had two options at their disposal – either to communicate messages in a positive or negative manner. In the case of online criticism, we found instances of criticisms stated in both positive and negative manners in our data. If criticisms were communicated positively, netizens would incorporate positive words in their comments although these were meant to criticize others. Indeed, it can be said that the positive words used in their criticisms abide by the Islamic principles. These positive messages emphasized the importance of living according to the law such as "perkhidmatan yg bersih berintegriti", "bijak menilainya", "learn respect all races & religions", and "true leadership". Besides, the messages also reminded others to not solely live for worldly gains such as "baik cari saham akhirat pasti2 dunia will follow sape2 jua yg menjejarnya" and "org2 tertentu kna jwb pda Allah prbuatan mereka". Other messages contained words of advice for their own benefits as fellow Malaysian citizens such as "jaga ukhwah", "jangan



memperjudikan nasib negara dn rakyat", "perkhidmatan yg bersih berintegriti", "rasuah di malaysia akan dapat di hapuskan dan ekonomi pun bertambah baik rakyat pun senang", "kindly learn respect all races & religions", and "know what's good for the country".

We also found some comments that violated the principles. Although these comments had the same purpose – to criticize, they contained words that carried negative connotation. These criticisms were usually conveyed in a sarcastic manner. In the excerpts, there are words used to negatively label others using negative words such as "puak² penyamun", "berperangai buaya", "mother of all ulaq", "kaki kencin, putar alam", "syaiton", "sudah mabuk masuk longkang", and "sudah gila masuk rambutan". Other than these negative labels, these comments also contained remarks meant to mock others such as "their aim to sakau money", "buat semak wall aku la", "lembab betul", and "do stupid and talk stupid but get big income". In one of the excerpts, there is one comment that was conveyed as advice but these were stated negatively because the exclamation "woiiii" can actually sound rude.



Although netizens applied more indirect strategies than direct strategies in their criticisms, their comments contained words or phrases that were conveyed in positive or negative manner. Islam emphasizes the importance of ethical communication. In Arabic this is known as "adab" (Juminem, 2019). The most prominent model in Muslim society is Prophet Muhammad PBUH, who demonstrated the best example of effective communication. When communicating with others, he would consider their psychological and emotional traits besides expressing affection to them (Khalil, 2016). Muslims are also reminded that every good action is considered ibadah, hence, even when using social media they should instil faith, knowledge and taqwa in posting their messages (Mokhtar & Bahari, 2021). From our findings, it is safe to say that comments which incorporated positive words and phrases abide by the six principles of Qaulan Sadida, Qaulan Ma'rufah, Qaulan Balighah, Qaulan Maysura, Qaulan Layyina, and Qaulan Karima whereas those that were posted using negative words and phrases can be regarded as violating these principles. In conclusion, using social media is not an offence in Islam, but Muslims must be wise and conscious of their language choice in communicating their messages via online platforms.

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