

# Adib Inquest: A Mixed Method Analysis on Malaysiakini & Facebook

Mohd Anas Iylia bin Mohd Azlan  
Noor Nirwandy Mat Noordin

Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies  
Faculty of Communication and Media studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA  
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor  
MALAYSIA

[aaaaanaih@icloud.com](mailto:aaaaanaih@icloud.com), [nirwandy3493@uitm.edu.my](mailto:nirwandy3493@uitm.edu.my)

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## ABSTRACT

*The mass media has always played a significant role in shaping public opinion, where people relied on news to gain information that will help them form a specific set of thinking that will then influence their actions. One of the most prominent mass media effect is news framing, where some aspects of perceived reality are selected and presented in more salient ways to promote a particular issue or subject matter to its audiences. In this sense, the inquest on the death of a firefighter named Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim (also known as Adib Inquest) is one of the most prominent and racially-sensitive issue that happened recently in Malaysia, therefore this research will analyse how Malaysiakini reported this issue and how Facebook users reacted to these reports based on their racial identity, through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. This research finds that there is a significant difference among Malays and non-Malays in their 1,746 comments and 7,371 reactions towards the news items, which is based on their perception of nine narrative themes inherent in Malaysiakini's reports on what actually contributed or caused Adib's death from the testimonies by multiple witnesses.*

**Keywords:** *Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim; News Portal; News Framing Theory; Malaysiakini; Facebook; Social Media; Mixed Methodology*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> November 2018, a huge number of Indian protestors turned up near the Seafeld Sri Maha Mariamman Temple (SSMMT) located in USJ25, Subang Jaya, to express their dissatisfaction over a few issues directly and

indirectly related to the said temple. Barely a day before, One City Development Sdn. Bhd. (OCDSB) as the owner of the land where SSMMT resides, forced the temple's parishioners to evict the premises by sending a group of Malay thugs that have acted aggressively [1]. Following that, several Indian politicians such as P. Waytha Moorthy (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of National Unity and Social Wellbeing) and V. Ganabatirau (Selangor's Socio-economic Empowerment, Development and Caring Government executive councillor) criticized the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) for their 'sluggish response', while pinpointing that the attack being carried out by a 'Muslim group' [2, 3]. These developments understandably riled up the sentiments of the Indians which perceived the incident as an interference of the Malay-Muslim group towards their racial and religious matters.

As such, the protestors grew increasingly aggressive until the wee hours of 27<sup>th</sup> November 2018 and torched several cars at the vicinity, and when several Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia (Jabatan Bomba dan Penyelamat Malaysia (JBPM) vehicles and personnel tried to douse the flaming cars, they too were attacked by the protestors. In the midst of the confusion, one firefighter named Muhammad Adib bin Mohd Kassim, 24, was found critically injured. After 21 days in intensive care, he breathed his last on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2018 [4].

Thus, the tragic death of Muhammad Adib began to invite strong opinions and theories from the public and authorities alike on the exact cause of his grievous injuries. The SSMMT taskforce claims that the fireman was not beaten up by the protestors, but actually he was hit by a fire engine as purportedly shown in several video recordings that went viral [5]. However, the then-Inspector General of Police (IGP), Tan Sri Mohamad Fuzi Harun denied the allegation and reiterated that the fireman was indeed being hit by the protestors and the police is hunting down suspects [6].

Therefore, the clash between these two narratives in ascertaining the exact cause of Muhammad Adib's injuries that led to his untimely death dominated the discussions among the Malaysian public, including extensive coverages by several news outlets. To put this matter to rest, the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) had filed for an inquest to determine Muhammad Adib's cause of death to be held at the Shah Alam Coroner's Court on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2019 [7]. During the case management on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2019, Coroner Rofiah Mohamad fixed the date of 11<sup>th</sup> February 2019 to commence the inquest proceedings where 30 witnesses, including six forensic experts, will be called to testify [8].

The fact that there are some conflicting testimonies by witnesses and medical experts during the proceedings fuelled some scepticism and paranoia between the Malays and the non-Malays, even prompting a prominent Malay-Muslim NGO, Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) to openly allege that the contradicting

statements of witnesses and medical experts during the proceedings was indeed an agenda to ‘change the narrative’ of Muhammad Adib’s exact cause of injury and death [9]. Thus, the incident and the subsequent inquest puts the racial harmony in Malaysia to the test once again, as it challenges each racial community’s pre-conceptions and perspectives about ‘what really happened’ to the late Muhammad Adib.

As the most prominent online news portal that covers almost every current issues and affairs in Malaysia, *Malaysiakini* also covered Adib Inquest since the beginning, providing updates on the proceedings from Shah Alam Coroner’s Court since its case management on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2019 until the final verdict on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019, totalling 41 days where testimonies from 30 witnesses has been heard [10].

## 1.1 Research Objectives

Studies about news framing on controversial racial or religious issues have been undertaken previously through the cases of Nyonya Tahir and M. Moorthy [11], Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) rally [12], the usage of ‘Allah’ by a Christian publication [13], and the Low Yat incident [14]. As noted by Yang & De Rycker [15], the juxtaposition of how the media portrayed the ‘reality’ on a controversial issue and the subsequent public reactions or perception towards it is still largely unexplored.

Thus, this study tries to fill the said gap by analysing the news coverage of Adib Inquest proceedings by a well-known alternative news portal such as *Malaysiakini* and the accompanying public perception that is observable through each posting on their Facebook page. Aside from the users’ comments, the recent introduction of the Facebook Reactions (e.g. ‘Angry’, ‘Love’ and ‘Wow’) could serve as a simple yet effective marker [16, 17] in determining the audience initial perception towards each news report pertaining to this issue. As such, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approach towards this problem will hopefully provide valuable insights at the end of this study.

By analysing news items regarding Adib Inquest proceedings published on *Malaysiakini*’s Facebook page from 11<sup>th</sup> February 2019 until 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019 will hopefully provide the answers through these objectives:

1. to identify the narrative themes used by *Malaysiakini* in reporting Adib Inquest proceedings;
2. to analyse the reactions and comments used by Facebook users

in expressing their perception towards each news items of Adib Inquest proceedings; and

3. to compare the frequencies between the racial background of Facebook users and their reactions and comments towards each news items of Adib Inquest proceedings.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

News framing is a concept on how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences [18], and its roots can be traced back in the field of psychology and sociology before it is studied in the context of communication in the late 1970s [19, 20], alongside agenda-setting and priming. Therefore, news framing in the context of mass media can be understood as how media selected some aspects of perceived reality and presented them in more salient ways as to promote a particular issue or subject matter to its audiences [21, 22]. Therefore, news framing has become one of the most used referent in communication studies, giving direction to researchers that examined the connection between media and public opinion [23, 24, 25]. In studying media coverages during the Malaysian 10<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE10) in 1999, Wong [26] provides four major outlines of news framing that could be analyzed, namely the presentation of news items, news topic items, cognitive attributes, and affective attributes. The *presentation of news items* largely concerns about the size and placement of news reports, while *news topic items* deal with the issues selected or highlighted through the news reports, and *cognitive attributes* defines the specific details of the said issues. Lastly, *affective attributes* defines the tone of the pictures included in the news reports.

Media reporting on sensitive issues of race and religion in Malaysia is not new, as the structure of Malaysian news industry itself is an image of the pluralistic and multi-lingual nature of its society [15]. In the case of Malaysia, the marriage of Asian-Islamic values together with multiculturalism has formed its own unique news construction model [27]. As multiculturalism in Malaysia concedes more towards the ‘salad bowl’ theory (where different cultures exist but don’t merge as a homogenous culture), rather than the ‘melting pot’ theory (where cultural adaptation will turn a heterogeneous society into a homogenous one), it generally reflected in the form of polarization between the major races in Malaysia – the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Therefore, vernacular media that catered to audiences from specific language and racial backgrounds played a huge part in shaping Malaysian political and social reality when the news workers themselves are usually the ‘elites’ of their respective communities [28] and shared close ties with the then-ruling parties of Barisan Nasional (BN) [29]. However, Moses [30] explored a different facet

in racial-tinged journalism in Malaysia, as news workers are also presented with a daunting task to balance their journalistic principles with the reality of a pluralistic and multicultural society, where issues of vernacular media ownership and media professionalism dictate how they approach and report issues that touches on religious, racial, political and cultural sensitivities. Besides, there are no tangible mechanisms in Malaysia where the media plays a role in rapprochement between the races other than playing along the agenda set by the government of the day.

As such, news framing on several high-profile racial and religious issues in Malaysia continues to attract scrutiny from the scholars, such as the religion conversion cases of Nyonya Tahir and M. Moorthy [11], Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) rally [12], the usage of ‘Allah’ by a Christian publication [13], Low Yat incident [14], and the cow head protest [31], just to name a few. Each of these cases provided valuable insights into how conventional newspapers and online news portals presented sensitive issues towards multicultural audiences in Malaysia.

Since its establishment in 1999 by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, two journalists and former activists of Network of Overseas Students’ Collectives in Australia (NOSCA) [32], *Malaysiakini* continuously irked the then-BN government with its critical and unfettered reporting on a litany of sensitive issues, including allegations of scandals, corruptions and abuses of power within the political and governmental structure. Aside from the aforementioned MSC initiative, Gan [33] said that the rise of political conscience among Malaysians, and the loss of credibility among the traditional media also contributed to *Malaysiakini*’s success in sustaining the ‘virtual democracy’ within Malaysia over the years. And as the BN government suffered a huge dent towards their public support during the Malaysian 12<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE12) held in 2008, it generally proved that independent/alternative news portal empowered by the Internet is a threat to authoritarian regimes that has long enjoyed their tight grasp over the mainstream media [34, 35, 36].

Its stature as the pioneer in covering current affairs related to human rights, open government and freedom of expressions [37] has been studied and scrutinized through numerous research, especially in the context of journalism [38, 35], political communication [39], and news business [37]. In studying news coverage on inter-ethnic issues in Malaysia, several studies noted the significant role of *Malaysiakini* in empowering alternative viewpoints, mainly from the public and opposition figures, instead of from the authorities, notably on the *keris*-waving incident by the then Youth Chief of United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in 2005 [40], HINDRAF rally in 2007, cow head protest in 2009, Bersih 3.0 rally in 2012, and Low Yat rioting incident in 2015.

In 2015, *Malaysiakini* tops the list of popular news website in Malaysia and until today, still managed to attract over 2.5 million readers every month through its reports on political and current affairs written in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil [41]. On top of that, their presence on Facebook since 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2009 has garnered 1.7 million likes and followers [42].

Developed by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, Facebook has become the biggest online SNS in the world, reaching one billion monthly active users in October 2012 [43] and currently enjoying 2.38 billion monthly active users as of July 2019 [44]. In the case of Malaysia, the number of Facebook users has almost doubled from 12 million in 2011 [45], to 23.9 million in 2018 [46], ranking among the highest in Southeast Asia.

As the number of users continue to rise, Facebook provided opportunities for social scientists to observe human behaviour in a naturalistic setting, test hypotheses in a novel domain, and recruit participants efficiently from many countries and demographic groups [47, 48]. Other than social science, Facebook also made an impact towards the news industry, especially in how it influenced the way news organizations and consumers around the world send and receive their news daily. The situation today fulfilled what worldwide news editors forecasted ten years ago that everyone would read their news online [49]. According to Mitchellstein & Boczkowski [50], news organization migration to online environments are defined by reactive, defensive and pragmatic traits, as most of them merely reacted to similar moves by their competitors in order to defend their existing territory and to pursue short-term gains in the news industry.

There are already several studies on news organization usage of SNS (including Facebook) as news platforms that provided diverse insights in understanding this phenomenon. From their observation on 66 US-based news organization presence on Facebook and Twitter, Ju et al. [51] found that even though Twitter outshined Facebook in reaching a wider base of subscribers, these subscriber base are only a small fraction (less than 10%) of their existing subscriber base in the conventional, printed form. As such, the magnitude of SNS contribution in driving Web traffic or advertising revenue for these news organizations is underwhelming and did not provide significant economic advantage despite their hype.

Meanwhile, Hille & Bakker [52] explored similar situations in Holland, where Facebook provided a symbiotic environment as news organizations could gain more participation from the audience and wider dissemination of news at lower cost, while their audiences can interact with each news items without as much hassle as on regular news websites that require additional steps of registration and taking the Completely Automated Public Turing to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA) test. Again, in observing 64 Dutch news media, they found

that the correlation between the number of subscribers on SNS and the number of their actual circulation is insignificant, but the level of audience participation strongly depends on the level of news organization participation on their Facebook page itself.

Next, Schmidt, Zollo, Del Vicario, Bessi, Scala, Caldarelli, Stanley & Quattrociochi [53] explored the news consumption environment on Facebook on a larger scale by analysing 376 million users' interactions with English language news organizations from January 2010 until December 2015, where they detected a strong polarization in how users tend to focus on small number of news sources, thus creating a sharp community structure among news organizations. The polarization of users means that each user built their own 'echo chamber' by limiting their exposure to the wide variety of news sources, contents and narratives on Facebook.

In addition to that, Winter, Brückner & Krämer [54] studied the user interaction with news items published on Facebook, especially in determining the influence behind every likes, comments and shares that each news items have accumulated. Using the Elaborative Likelihood Model (ELM) to gauge user's motivation to read other users' comments to better understand the issue at hand, it is found that negative comments are able to diminish even the most persuasive effects of news items published by renowned news organizations, while the number of likes did not contribute how users evaluated news items. The relevance between comments and likes can be explained through the exemplification theory, as statements by peers have more vivid and persuasive elements compared to a simple symbol of a 'thumbs up', except where an extraordinarily high number of likes may signal either extreme support or dissatisfaction with an initially negative impression of a news item.

However, the recent introduction of the Facebook Reactions (e.g. 'Angry', 'Love' and 'Wow') in 2016 [55] beside the existing Like button could serve as a simple yet effective marker [16, 17] in observing and determining the audience perception towards news items published on Facebook. Facebook Reactions are extensions of the popular 'emoji' – pictorial symbols that show faces with emotions, places, objects or activities – that serve as language-independent indicators of emotions [56]. Emojis is fast becoming the most used language feature since its introduction by Apple in their iOS keyboard in 2011 [57].

Therefore, it opens up new avenues and opportunities for social scientists to determine its influence and potential in current research methodologies. Basile, Caselli & Nissim [58] explored how Facebook Reactions can be used to predict news controversy among four major Italian newspapers, especially in Facebook where user polarization is dominant as noted in the study by Schmidt et al.. In this case, the higher the entropy (highly mixed reactions or significant user polar-



ization) of reactions posted on a news item, the bigger the controversy it carries. However, it is interesting to note that specific communities of left-wing and right-wing newspapers recorded low entropy as their perspectives are already homogeneously biased toward issues at hand, or in other words, each community reflected a ‘filter bubble’ environment where users tended to have similar sentiments on any arising issues.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

In the context of this study, the sequential exploratory design is deemed as the most practical approach as the first phase of qualitative data collection and analysis is followed through with the collection of quantitative data to test or generalize the initial qualitative results [59]. In the qualitative phase, the focus will be on identifying the narrative themes in *Malaysiakini* news reports (RO1), and analyzing the reactions and comments by Facebook users towards the news reports (RO2), while the quantitative phase will be focusing on determining the frequencies between the racial background of Facebook users and their reactions and comments (RO3). As noted by Bian [60], the quantitative phase will be developed based on the initial qualitative results in order to identify the relevant data that wants to be collected and studied. Therefore, the research design will involve thematic analysis within the qualitative phase, while content analysis will be applied within the quantitative phase.

#### 3.2 Operational Definitions

According to Braun & Clarke [61], themes capture something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. And as there is yet to be a general agreement on its theory, application and evaluation [62, 63], thematic analysis provides freedom and flexibility which can potentially provide a rich, detailed, yet complex account of data. Since the main purpose of Adib Inquest is to determine the main cause of the firefighter’s death by going through testimonies by eyewitnesses and medical experts, certain themes in the news items can be observed in understanding how certain characteristics are being framed as the probable cause to Muhammad Adib’s severe injuries. But as noted by Ryan & Bernard [64], themes are often abstract and fuzzy constructs that the researcher identifies before, during, and after analysis.

By choosing the cognitive attributes, or the specific details of issues in the news reports as defined by Wong [26], these main themes are



initially identified in *Malaysiakini* news items:

1. witnesses – the civilians, medical experts, police and firefighters involved in giving testimonies during the proceedings;
2. protestors' behaviour – the characteristics of the protestors as described by the witnesses;
3. police and firefighters' behaviour – the characteristics and competency of the personnel as described by the witnesses in performing their duties; and
4. cause of injury – the probable factors or elements that contributed to Adib's injuries based on testimonies by witnesses.

However, as the news items covered many other aspects, additional themes will be identified and added later on during the analysis process.

Next, content analysis on users' comments are constructed through the valence of the comments which are either:

1. positive/supportive – showing positive and supportive identification and/or sentiment towards the news items (e.g. 'the witness is an expert in his field', 'I think he is telling the truth');
2. negative/dismissive – showing negative and dismissive identification and/or sentiment towards the news items (e.g. 'the witness is lying', 'the proceeding is biased', 'this statement is only hearsay'); or
3. neutral – showing neither positive or negative identification and/or sentiment towards the news items (e.g. 'I hope the inquest ends soon', 'I feel sorry for his family and fiancé')

Next, the number of all six available reactions – *like*, *haha*, *love*, *wow*, *sad*, and *angry*, left alongside these comments are also recorded.

The identification and classification of the racial identity of these users will be based on publicly-visible information taken on face value, whereas names like *Ahmad Yusri* will be categorized as Malay, *Mahendran Ramasamy* or *Ranjit Singh* as Indian, and *Paul Siong* as Chinese. Other than usernames, racial identity can also be discerned through their displayed profile photos, list of friends, and other brief information that is visible to the researcher. Cases of other ethnicities in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), and other indeterminable identities are classified as Others.

### 3.3 Data Collection

For this study, the purposive sampling employed focuses on news items on Adib Inquest proceedings posted on *Malaysiakini* (English) Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini>) beginning from 11th February 2019 until the final verdict delivered on 27th September 2019. In doing so, the postings will be sifted further by only selecting reports that focuses solely on testimonies given by any of the 30 witnesses involved, whilst other postings not directly related to the testimonies (e. g. forensic experts lodging police reports over alleged threats [65]) will be disregarded. By only selecting reports on witnesses' testimonies, the development of themes in the analysis stage can properly focus on the 'dualism of narratives' observed during the Adib Inquest proceedings – whether the action of the protestors or vehicular accident caused Adib's injuries.

Through this purposive sampling, 53 news items on Adib Inquest proceedings posted on *Malaysiakini* (English) Facebook page from the period of 11<sup>th</sup> February to 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019 has been selected. Each news items contain a hyperlink to the full article published at *Malaysiakini*'s website (<https://www.malaysiakini.com>) when clicked, however, most of these articles are only accessible to paid subscribers. Next, purposive sampling on comments and reactions left by the users on each *Malaysiakini* (English) Facebook posts relevant to Adib Inquest proceedings will be done by selecting the *most relevant* option available at the drop-down menu of the comments section as a precondition to collect only relevant comments. As such, only *main comments* will be selected, while *replies* on the said comment will be disregarded as initial observation finds that these comments are either repetitive and/or redundant with other main comments, irrelevant with the context of the article, or simply inane.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Software

This study will utilize *ATLAS.ti 8* for practical purposes in performing thematic analysis, especially in automating the coding process. The software will help the researcher to properly analyse the themes of all the news articles collected in portable document format (.pdf). However, for the purpose of analyzing users' comments, manual coding has to be undertaken as the data cannot be properly exported and stored in pdf format.

On the other hand, frequency analysis on the number of users and their reactions will be done through data collected in Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

## 4.0 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Major Narrative Themes

When the inquest commenced in the month of February (11th until 27th February 2019), it involves testimonies from 18 witnesses which comprises of six firefighters (including the fire station chief), six civilians, four medical experts, one medical personnel and one police personnel, which were subsequently reported by *Malaysiakini* through 21 news items. The simplified version of major themes identified through this month is illustrated in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2 respectively.

Evidently, while most firefighters appear to be alert and assertive, they are also feeling afraid and uncertain due to the hostile behaviour of the crowd that they encountered on the night of 27<sup>th</sup> November 2019. Meanwhile, the testimonies by civilian witnesses varies in describing the behaviour of the crowd, either they were hostile or helpful, and also implies that Adib is injured due to being beaten by the protesting crowd, but appear uncertain about it. On the other hand, the medical experts also appear uncertain to pinpoint Adib's exact cause of injuries, while the sole medical personnel confirmed that Adib is indeed beaten based on his interaction with the late firefighter during a physiotherapy session.

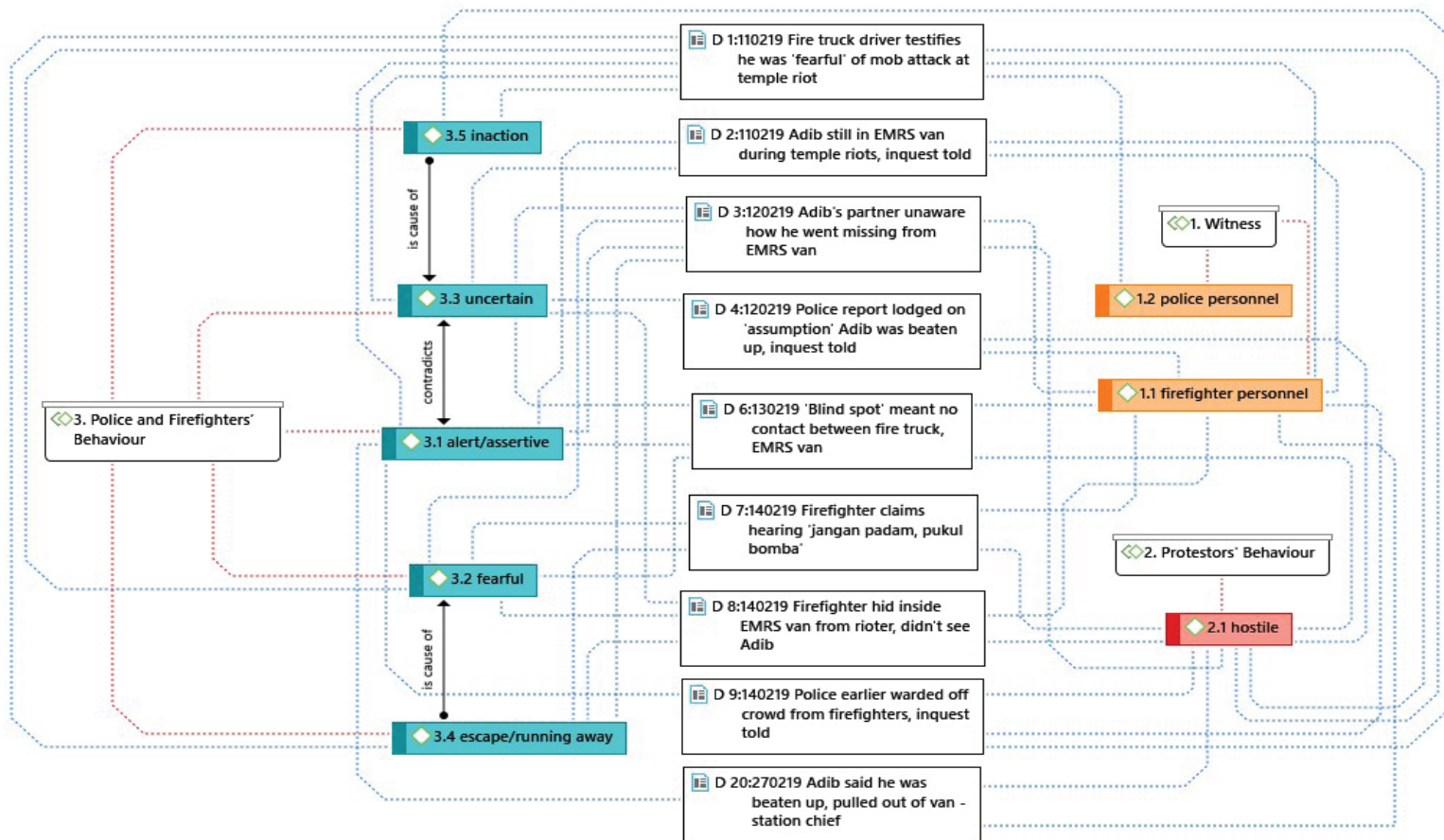


Figure 4.1 Major Themes 1 - Firefighters and Hostile Protestors

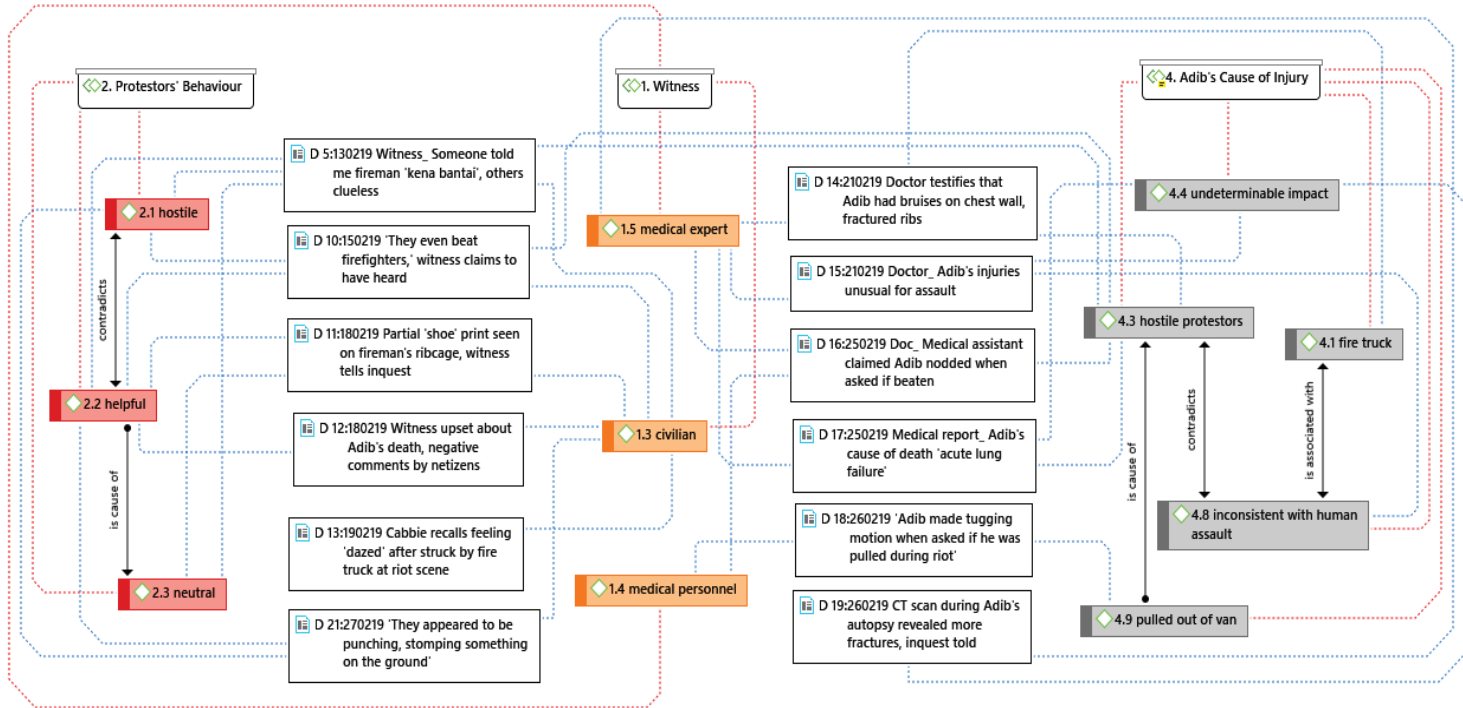


Figure 2. Major Themes 2 – Civilians and Hostile Protestors, Medical Experts Uncertain on Adib's Injuries

Next, the inquest continues into March (1<sup>st</sup> until 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019), which involves testimonies from 9 witnesses, namely four civilians (including Adib's father), three medical experts, one medical personnel and one police personnel, which then were reported by *Malaysiakini* through 12 news items. The simplified version of major themes identified through this month is illustrated in Figure 4.3.

It is interesting to note that even though testimonies by civilian witnesses describes the crowd as hostile, at least one of them, Mr. Budd Mohsin (20<sup>th</sup> witness) attests that Adib is not beaten but was hit by the EMRS van instead. This theme then continues throughout the testimonies by two medical experts, namely Dr. Ahmad Hafizam Hasmi (24<sup>th</sup> witness) and Dr. Mohd Shah Mahmood (27<sup>th</sup> witness) which argues that Adib's injuries were inconsistent with human assault, but most likely caused by the EMRS van. However, there are also other interesting developments, especially when Ms. Siti Syafika Amira Mohd Rasani (25<sup>th</sup> witness), an IJN nurse whose Facebook posting that alleges Dr. Ahmad Hafizam Hasmi was lying went viral, was called to testify. She however acknowledged that her allegation was made without any substantive proof and apologized to Dr. Ahmad Hafizam during the proceeding. On the other hand, testimony by Mr. Shuhaimi Yaakob (21<sup>st</sup> witness), a Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) troop leader explains that their inaction was due to following the standby order from the Subang Jaya district police chief.

As the inquest progresses into April (1<sup>st</sup> until 19<sup>th</sup> April 2019), one prior witness (Dr. Mohd Shah Mahmood) was called to continue his testimony, together with two new witnesses which comprise of one medical expert and one police personnel. Their testimonies were then reported by *Malaysiakini* through 10 news items. The simplified version of major themes identified through this month is illustrated in Figure 4.4.

The major themes identified through this month deals largely with the testimonies by Inspector Lew Keng Joe (28<sup>th</sup> witness), and Dr. Shahrom Abd. Wahid (29<sup>th</sup> witness), which was covered through four and five news items respectively. Again, the underlying theme about the nature of Adib's injuries being inconsistent with human assault continues with Inspector Lew Keng Joe's testimonies based on his interaction with the late firefighter and post-mortem results. Other than that, the police personnel also pointed out the difficulties in tracking suspects among the protestors, as well as implying that the then-IGP, Tan Sri Mohamad Fuzi Harun be called as a witness to explain his earlier statement to the media about Adib being beaten. Meanwhile, Dr. Shahrom Abd. Wahid testimonies shows his disagreement with two previous medical experts and supports the theme of

Adib's injuries caused by hostile protestors by pointing out findings from re-enactments, experiments and post-mortem evidence that suggests Adib was forcefully pulled out from the EMRS van.



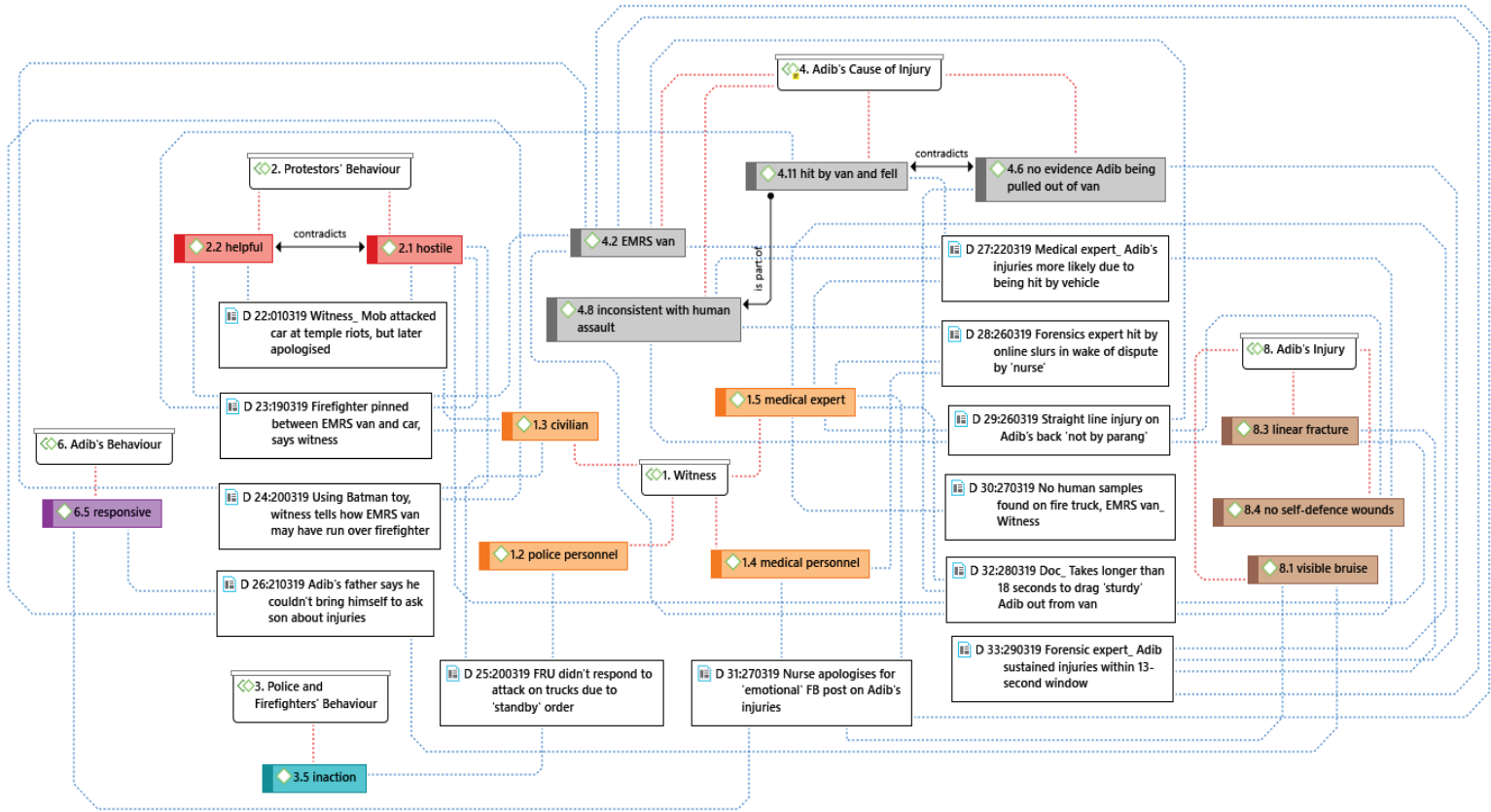


Figure 4.3 Major Themes 3 – Civilian, Medical Experts Says Adib Was Hit by EMRS Van

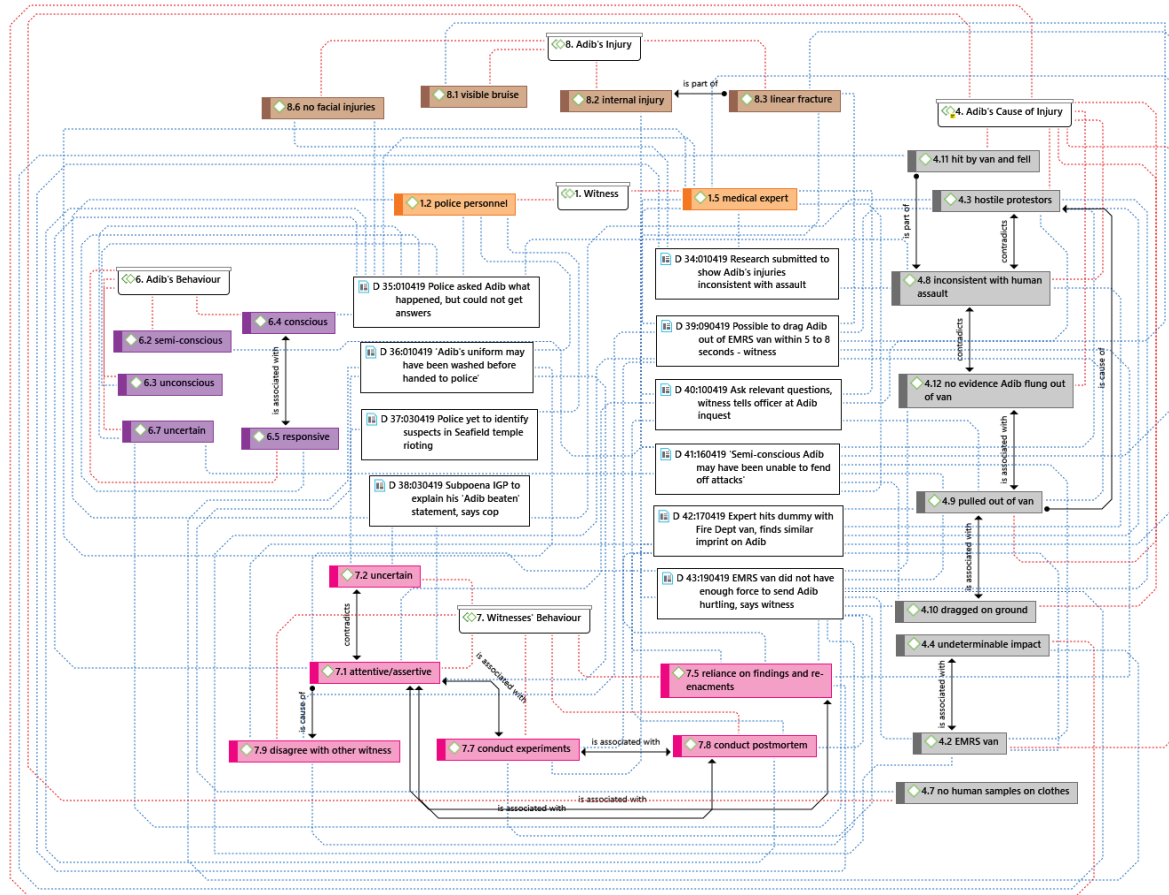


Figure 4.4 Major Themes 4 – Police and Medical Expert Differing Opinions on Adib’s Injuries

The inquest continues into the months of May (10<sup>th</sup> until 16<sup>th</sup> May), and July (3<sup>rd</sup> until 16<sup>th</sup> July 2019), until it concludes in September with the final verdict delivered on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019, which involves testimonies from two recalled medical experts, and one physics experts, which then were reported by *Malaysiakini* through 10 news items. The simplified version of major themes identified through this month is illustrated in Figure 4.5.

The clash of two themes, namely whether Adib's injuries were caused by being hit by the hostile protestors, or being hit by the EMRS van, continues through the testimonies of the two recalled medical experts – Dr. Ahmad Hafizam Hasmi and Dr. Shahrom Abd. Wahid. Again, each witness disagrees with each other's interpretations and arguments on findings from re-enactments, experiments and post-mortem evidences, which forced the Coroner to call a physics expert, Mr. Amir Radzi Ab. Ghani to offer an independent professional opinion based on their arguments. The 30<sup>th</sup> and final witness finds that Dr. Ahmad Hafizam Hasmi's method of calculation in determining the physical force between the EMRS and Adib to be erroneous.

Finally on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019, Coroner Rofiah Mohamad determined that Adib's injuries and death was caused by the hostile and criminal act of the protestors, resulting from police inaction to control the crowd. Both news items published on the same day focuses on the themes of Adib's injuries caused by hostile protestors after being pulled out of van, and also police inaction.

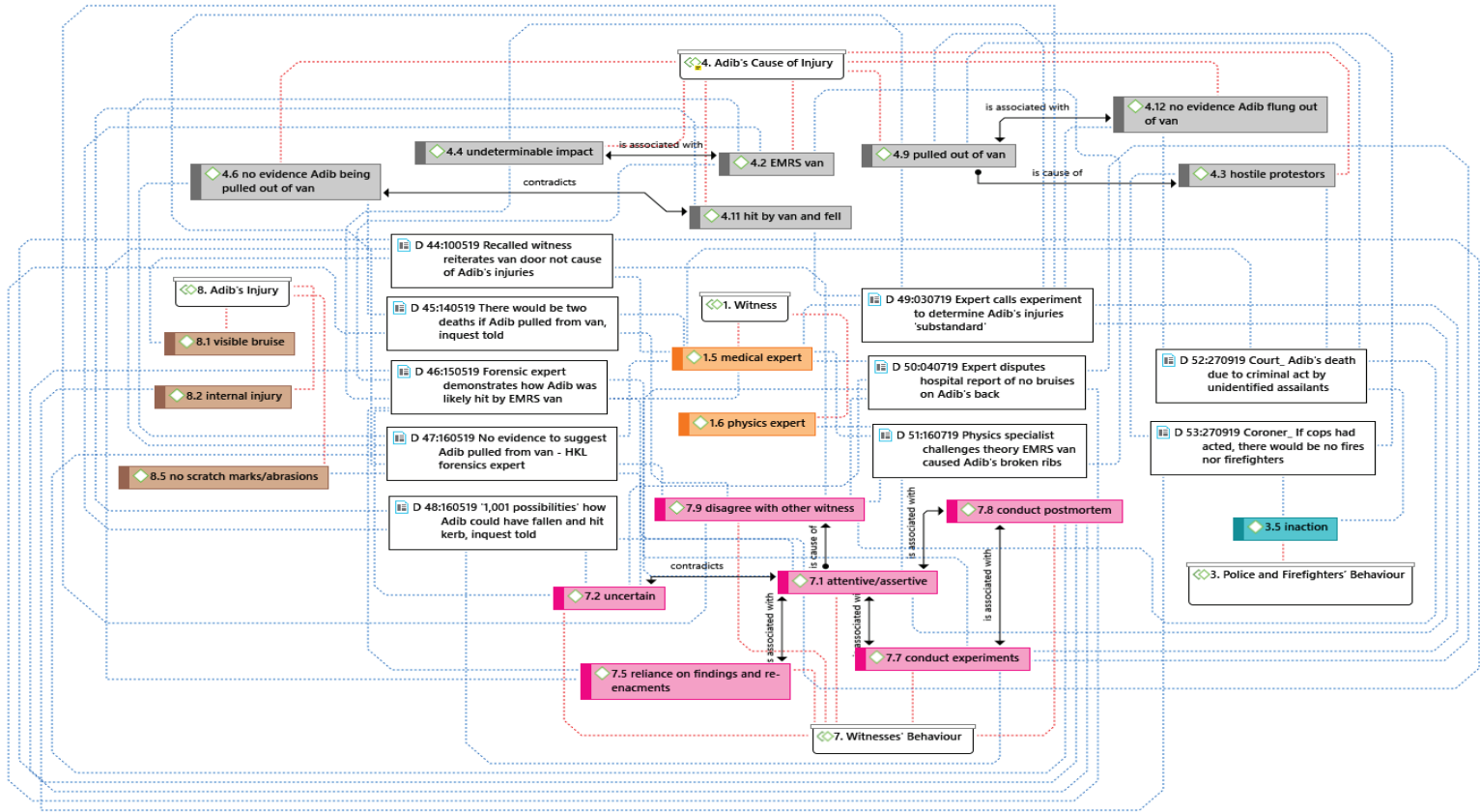


Figure 4.5 Major Themes 5 – Differing Opinions between Medical Experts, and Verdict on Adib's Injuries

## 4.2 *Malaysiakini* Narrative Approach

As Entman [21] defines that news framing selected some aspects of the reality and presented them in more salient ways to promote a particular issue or subject matter to the readers, *Malaysiakini* narrative approach in reporting the proceedings of Adib Inquest tries to reflect the situation as much as it can with reality, while avoiding any overtly racial or religious undertones. Instead, the varying and oftentimes conflicting testimonies are framed through the behaviour, professional background, and/or expertise of the witnesses, and at the same time, assisted the readers to understand and compare conflicting information by including ‘recaps’ of earlier testimonies. However, there are instances where controversial and negative keywords (e.g. ‘*pukul bomba*’, ‘emotional’, ‘subpoena IGP’) are used in their headlines to attract reader’s attention and also to imply the content of the news items.

However, there are four instances where headlines displayed at *Malaysiakini*’s Facebook page are different from the headlines displayed at their website, as shown in Table 4.1.

While headlines on postings number 2 to 4 are minor re-writes within the same context, the headlines on posting number 1 portrays different themes of protestors’ behaviour, whether they are being hostile or helpful, and this may contribute to how Facebook users ingest and interpret the news items based on their own preconceptions. In all fairness, the news item does actually contain two varying behaviours of the crowd as described by the 4th witness (Amirul Adli M. Yussli), but it also shows that the media enjoys the ability to frame it either positively or negatively towards their audiences to get different reactions and possibly, different understanding on a particular issue or subject matter.

**Table 4.1 Mismatches between Facebook and Web Headlines**

No.	Date of Posting	Platform	Title	URL
1	13/2/19	Facebook	Group helped Adib at temple riot scene, inquest told	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156011483980906">https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156011483980906</a>
		Website	Witness: Someone told me fireman ‘kena bantai’, others clueless	<a href="https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/463824">https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/463824</a>

2	21/2/19	Facebook	Doctor: Adib had bruises on chest wall, fractured ribs	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156027694110906">https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156027694110906</a>
		Website	Doctor testifies that Adib had bruises on chest wall, fractured ribs	<a href="https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/465053">https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/465053</a>
3	22/3/19	Facebook	Medical expert: Adib's injuries not consistent with assault	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156088827160906">https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156088827160906</a>
		Website	Medical expert: Adib's injuries more likely due to being hit by vehicle	<a href="https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/469138">https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/469138</a>
4	16/5/19	Facebook	HKL forensic expert maintains Adib not pulled out of EMRS van	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156212471095906">https://www.facebook.com/Malaysiakini/posts/10156212471095906</a>
		Website	No evidence to suggest Adib pulled from van - HKL forensics expert	<a href="https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/476363">https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/476363</a>

### 4.3 Facebook Users' Comments, Reactions and Racial Background

Overall, there are 1,746 comments and 7,371 reactions from Facebook users that have been identified throughout this study.

As such, the number of comments according to the positive/supportive (showing positive and supportive identification and/or sentiment towards the news items), negative/dismissive (showing negative and dismissive identification and/or sentiment towards the news items), and neutral (showing neither positive or negative identification and/or sentiment towards the news article) categories is illustrated in Figure 4.6.

From the total of 1,746 comments, there are 957 negative/dismissive comments (55%), compared to 447 positive/supportive comments (26%) and 342 neutral comments (19%). Evidently, more than half of Facebook users' comments on Adib Inquest news items are negative in nature, which also doubles the number of positive comments. Next, the overall number of all six available reactions – *like*, *haha*, *love*, *wow*, *sad*, and *angry* is shown in Figure 4.7.

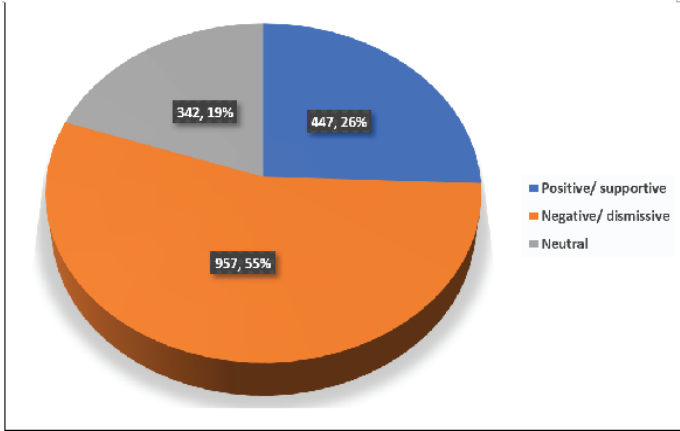


Figure 4.6 Types of Comments

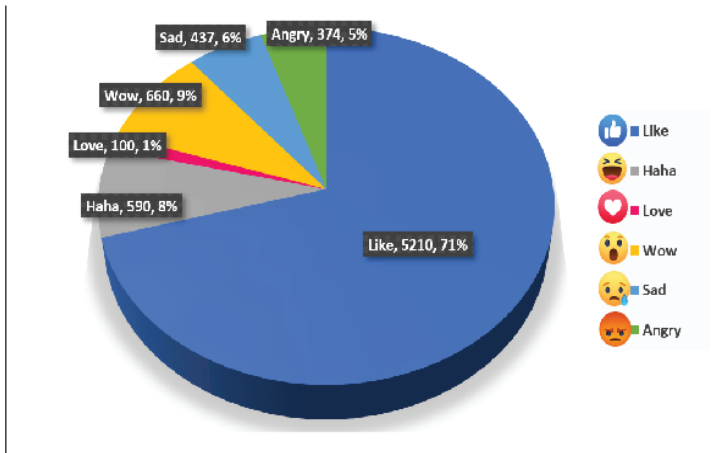


Figure 4.7 Types of Reactions

Out of the total of 7,371 reactions, *like* proves to be the most popular reaction among Facebook users with a total of 5,210 or 71% of the total reactions. Next, *wow* came at second place with a total of 660 (9%), followed by *haha* with 590 (8%), *sad* with 437 (6%), *angry* with 374 (5%), and finally *love* with 100 (1%). It is interesting to note the disparity between the first and second most popular reactions which recorded a staggering 155%.

Facebook Reactions are quite unique when compared to comments, as when any user can post multiple comments on each news items,



the same user can only select only one out of the six available options on each news items. As such, this feature serves as a unique and practical marker for Facebook users to reflect their initial feelings or opinions towards the news items.

Next, all of these 1,746 comments together with 7,371 reactions will be juxtaposed with the racial background of each Facebook users as illustrated in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2 Juxtaposition of Comments and Reactions with Users' Racial Background**

Race	Comments			Reactions					
	Positive/supportive	Negative/dismissive	Neutral	Like	Haha	Love	Wow	Sad	Angry
Malay	131	163	78	1,193	67	22	71	123	93
Chinese	151	351	112	1,885	235	30	394	190	156
Indian	126	345	121	1,676	235	41	150	88	87
Others	39	98	31	456	53	7	45	36	38
Total	447	957	342	5,210	590	100	660	437	374

From this result, it is evident that the Chinese generally posts more comments and reactions compared to users from other races, except for neutral comments and also the *love* reaction, which came in second after the Indians. Next, Indians posted more neutral comments and the *love* reaction compared to the others, but trailed behind the Chinese in the second place when posting negative/dismissive comments and the *like* reaction. Interestingly, they posted the same amount of the *haha* reaction alongside their Chinese counterparts. Malays only seconds the Chinese in posting positive/supportive comments, as well as the *sad* and *angry* reactions, but trailed behind the Chinese and also the Indians when posting negative/dismissive and neutral comments, together with the *like*, *haha*, *love* and *wow* reactions. Finally, the Others (mainly those from Sabah and Sarawak, together with other indeterminable racial identities) are generally behind every other race due to their small number.

Next, this juxtaposition can be divided further into categories of comments and reactions as shown in Table 4.3 and Table 4.4 as follows:

**Table 4.3 Total Number of Comments per Race**

Race	Comments			Total per Race
	Positive/ supportive	Negative/ dismissive	Neutral	
Malay	131	163	78	<b>372</b>
Chinese	151	351	112	<b>614</b>
Indian	126	345	121	<b>592</b>
Others	39	98	31	<b>168</b>
Total	447	957	342	1,746

**Table 4.4 Total Number of Reactions per Race**

Race	Reactions						Total per Race
	Like	Haha	Love	Wow	Sad	Angry	
Malay	1,193	67	22	71	123	93	<b>1,569</b>
Chinese	1,885	235	30	394	190	156	<b>2,890</b>
Indian	1,676	235	41	150	88	87	<b>2,277</b>
Others	456	53	7	45	36	38	<b>635</b>
Total	5,210	590	100	660	437	374	7,371

From these results, it can be said that the Chinese forms the most dominant racial group in posting comments as well as reactions about Adib Inquest on *Malaysiakini*'s Facebook page, while the nature of the comments and reactions from the Indians almost mirrors the Chinese. While the Malays are generally posting positive/supportive comments, but they are also feeling sad and angry about Adib Inquest.

As illustrated in Table 4.2, from the total of 957 negative/dismissive comments, almost 73% of them are from both Chinese and Indian users, and understandably, they tend to proffer negative/dismissive comments towards news items that directly or indirectly suggests that Adib was indeed beaten by the hostile protestors. Meanwhile, the 163 negative/dismissive comments by Malay users are almost half the amount of Chinese and Indian users, which are 351 and 345 respectively, and when it shows disagreement towards news items that directly or indirectly suggests that Adib was hit by the EMRS van, it became insignificant due to their low numbers (less than 10 comments per news items). Meanwhile, the number of positive/supportive comments among Chinese, Indian and Malay users are almost similar, which are 151, 126 and 131 respectively.

Next, by using the amount of overall reactions to indicate the number of users, it is found that Chinese users project the highest number (2,890), followed by Indian users (2,277) and Malay users (1,569), and lastly those categorised under Others (635) forms a unique mixture of East Malaysians, possible non-Malaysians and also other indeterminable accounts.

By excluding the Others, Table 4.5 illustrates the connection between the highest number of reactions proffered by each racial group with the news items.

Evidently, each racial group have unique reactions towards specific news items. For Malay users, the final verdict delivered on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019 (*'Coroner rules Adib's death was a result of criminal act'*) prove to be the most important news item compared to their Chinese and Indian counterparts, as it affirms their preconceptions that Adib was indeed beaten by the protestors. As such, they proffered the highest numbers of *like* as well as *sad* reactions toward this news item. Next, the news item titled *'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'* attracted their highest number of *wow* and *angry* reactions, showing astonishment and outrage towards the firefighters for allegedly destroying the evidence on Adib's clothes. Meanwhile, the news item titled *'Subpoena IGP to explain his 'Adib beaten' statement, says cop'* attracted their derision as they posted the *haha* reaction.

However, the same news item has different impact towards their Chinese counterparts, as they generally posted their most number of *like*, *haha* and *love* reactions, implying their sense of endorsement as well as amusement towards it. For their highest number of *wow*, *sad*, and *angry* reactions, it involves three different news items, namely *'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'* (similar with Malay users), *'Forensics expert hit by online slurs in wake of dispute by 'nurse'*, and *'Nurse testifies at Adib inquest, apologises for 'emotional' FB post'*.

Interestingly, Indian users posted similar reactions with their Chinese counterparts on the same news items, namely the *wow* reaction for *'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'*, *sad* reaction for *'Forensics expert hit by online slurs in wake of dispute by 'nurse'*, and *angry* reaction for *'Nurse testifies at Adib inquest, apologises for 'emotional' FB post'*. Meanwhile, the news item titled *'Doctor: Adib's injuries unusual for assault'* understandably attracted their highest number of likes.

**Table 4.5 Highest Reactions according to each Users' Racial Group**

No.	Race	Reactions	Highest per Total	News Item
1	Malay	Like	125 per 1,193 (10%)	Coroner rules Adib's death was a result of criminal act
		Haha	10 per 67 (14%)	Subpoena IGP to explain his 'Adib beaten' statement, says cop
		Love	4 per 22 (18%)	No human samples found on fire truck, EMRS van: Witness
		Wow	22 per 71 (30%)	'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'
		Sad	19 per 123 (15%)	Coroner rules Adib's death was a result of criminal act
		Angry	11 per 93 (15%)	'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'
2	Chinese	Like	345 per 1,885 (18%)	Subpoena IGP to explain his 'Adib beaten' statement, says cop
		Haha	32 per 235 (13%)	Subpoena IGP to explain his 'Adib beaten' statement, says cop
		Love	18 per 30 (60%)	Subpoena IGP to explain his 'Adib beaten' statement, says cop
		Wow	104 per 394 (26%)	'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'
		Sad	37 per 190 (19%)	Forensics expert hit by online slurs in wake of dispute by 'nurse'
		Angry	91 per 156 (58%)	Nurse testifies at Adib inquest, apologises for 'emotional' FB post
3	Indian	Like	175 per 1,676 (10%)	Doctor: Adib's injuries unusual for assault
		Haha	42 per 235 (17%)	'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'
		Love	19 per 41 (46%)	Subpoena IGP to explain his 'Adib beaten' statement, says cop
		Wow	60 per 150 (40%)	'Adib's uniform may have been washed before handed to police'
		Sad	25 per 88 (28%)	Forensics expert hit by online slurs in wake of dispute by 'nurse'
		Angry	44 per 87 (50%)	Nurse testifies at Adib inquest, apologises for 'emotional' FB post

Amongst other findings from this study is the unique significance behind *likes*, and also the varying nature of negative/dismissive com-

ments. Firstly, the huge prevalence of *likes* fits well with earlier findings by Tian et al. [17] as they found that it occurs at least 70% or more compared to other reactions. Being the oldest, if not the defining, feature of Facebook, it seems that the usage of *likes* only carries its weight in certain circumstances. In the case of this study, *like* can be perceived as a basic user interaction towards the news items that they encountered, but these numbers of *likes* don't necessarily indicate that users generally agree with the content of the news items, as these can only be supported if there is also a similarly high *love* reaction. Therefore, *like* is a unique reaction that is used differently by users, that will be discussed in the context of the users' racial background later on.

Next, as this study used 'negative and dismissive' comments as its operational definition in identifying comments that possess negative and dismissive identification and/or sentiment towards the news items, some instances where 'negative' comments did not necessarily mean being 'dismissive' of the news items has also been found, especially in news items titled '*Forensics expert hit by online slurs in wake of dispute by nurse*'. Majority of these negative comments are in fact showing supportive identification towards the news items, which is agreeing that the nurse's negative remarks towards the doctor were uncalled for (supportive identification) and calling for her to be punished (negative sentiment). To understand this further, a small number of positive/supportive comments shows that while the users agree that the nurse's negative remarks towards the doctor were uncalled for (supportive identification), they actually called for her to be forgiven (positive sentiment). As such, the relationship between 'supportive or dismissive identification' and 'positive or negative comments' can be explored further by re-defining the operational definition of the coding scheme.

Finally, by using the Elaborative Likelihood Model (ELM) and the exemplification theory employed by Winter et al. [54] in their study, the significance behind every *likes* and negative comments in this study can be better understood as negative comments can actually diminish even the most persuasive effects of news items, while the number of likes did not contribute how users evaluated news items as statements by peers have more vivid and persuasive elements compared to a simple symbol of a 'thumbs up'.

These findings also illustrated that there is indeed a significant disproportion among the Malays and non-Malays (Chinese and Indians) in their negative/dismissive comments, but not among their positive/supportive comments. As mentioned earlier, negative comments can actually diminish even the most persuasive effects of news items, and in this case,

the negative comments by all three major races shows their attempt to discredit the notion of whether Adib was indeed beaten or not according to their own racial preconceptions.

Besides the comments, there is also a significant difference among Malays and non-Malays in their reactions towards the news items, again showcasing their different perceptions on whether Adib was indeed beaten or not. This contrasting perception can be clearly seen between the Malay and Indian users, as each racial group have different 'stakes' from the outcome of this inquest. If the verdict rules that Adib's death was caused by the hostile act of the protestors, it will affirm the Malays contention that the Indian protestors directly caused his death, but if the verdict rules that Adib's death was caused by the EMRS van, it will exonerate the Indian protestors.

In a diverse multicultural society like Malaysia, ethnocentrism is indeed present among all races, where elements of stereotyping, mistrust, avoidance and differential treatment between the Malays, Chinese and Indians impede intercultural communication between them [66]. And as the number of users joining social networking site (SNS) continue to grow together with each technological leap, ethnocentrism also pervades itself in the Malaysian online landscape through 'cyber ethnocentrism' [67]. However, it is found that even though elements of stereotyping and mistrust is still visible compared to other elements, the overall level of ethnocentrism is insignificant as tolerance helped to narrow the gap of communication and interaction between them in the online landscape.

Adib Inquest is indeed a racially-sensitive issue that initially pits a race against another, and the outcome will surely reverberate in the context of Malaysian social and racial harmony. In the context of this study, 'cyber ethnocentrism' clearly rears its ugly head again as the differing opinions and reactions among the three races shows that the elements of stereotyping and mistrust is still significant. However, to use the findings of this study to indicate the overall level of 'cyber ethnocentrism' among Malaysians is insufficient, as it observes only a mere fraction of how media affected its audience from varying racial background through a single issue.

## 5.0 RECOMMENDATION & CONCLUSION

For this kind of study to have a clearer picture about 'cyber ethnocentrism' or racial polarization in the Malaysian online landscape, several improvements should be made in terms of its scope. As this study only observes a single façade of a news portal that actually have other vernacular base of readers, namely *Ma-*

*laysiakini Bahasa Melayu (BM), Mandarin and Tamil*, an inclusion of the Facebook fanbase of these language niche can provide an additional and much needed dimension into similar studies in the future. On top of that, cross-comparisons between reports from other media outlets, such as *Free Malaysia Today (FMT)*, *The Star*, *Sinar Harian* or *Harian Metro* on the same issue can also be made for researchers who are interested in this kind of study. However, as mastery of additional languages is also needed, exploration into other vernacular media, namely the Chinese and Indian community continues to be known as a ‘limitation’ instead of an ‘opportunity’.

On the other hand, the increase of research scope also means an increase in the pool of data that needs to be collected and analysed. As mentioned by Kosinski et al. [48], mastery of technical skills in computer software can ease the arduous journey ahead as it automates many tedious processes such as data collection, data management and also data analysis. Therefore, basic mastery of *ATLAS.ti*, as well as other related softwares such as Python or MySQL can provide a much-needed edge for social scientists to explore other opportunities in the field of ‘data-driven human subjects research’.

A combination of both qualitative and quantitative method clearly provides an extra advantage in exploring and understanding the overall relationship between media and its audience, as this study managed to catch a glimpse of how news framing can accentuate the underlying racial polarization among Facebook users.

Being at the forefront of the ‘democratization of information’, *Malaysia-kini* surely enjoyed its own base of followers on Facebook from varying racial groups, but as argued by Schmidt et al. [53], Facebook can also be a highly polarized community as its users tend to focus on small number of news sources, thus creating a sharp community structure among news organizations. In the case of this study, observation on a single news organization have found that polarization is not only limited to inter-news organization, but also intra-news organization, as *Malaysia-kini*’s Facebook followers consume their daily news, reports that touches on their racial identity can trigger the ‘cyber ethnocentrism’ amongst them.

On the other hand, Adib Inquest is just one of many other racially-charged issues that have cropped up recently, together with the backtracking of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) ratification, mandatory learning of *Jawi* and *khat* in primary schools, detention of several Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sympathizers, and many others. On top of that, the simmering political tension between Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Barisan Nasional (BN) that switched places as the government and the opposition through the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election in May 2018 did little to alleviate the stifling situation. Ironically, statements by the Minister in charge of National Unity



and Social Wellbeing following the SSMT furore is one of the many contributing factors that led Indian protestors to turn up at the night of 27<sup>th</sup> November 2018, which as we learn, led to the untimely death of Muhammad Adib bin Mohd Kasim.

In light of these developments, Malaysians from all walks of life – be it civilians, politicians, academicians or media practitioners – need to look beyond their racial, cultural as well as religious differences in order to find solutions through education, media awareness and information literacy to foster better understanding between each and every one of us, so that everything that we see, listen or read can eventually minimize, if not eradicate, the stereotypes, misconceptions and mistrust among each racial community. To do so, we can no longer remain apathetic within our own ‘echo chamber’ built from a single source of information just because it uses our language, pamper our beliefs and perpetuate our (mis)perceptions about events happening around us.

If not, it is feared that even a single misplaced word on a racially-charged news report can spark an explosive pandemonium that will destroy all that we have built.

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