

Discourse of Power and Identity in Selected Malaysian Netizens' Tiktok Comments: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media, particularly TikTok, has created a new digital discursive space in which identity construction, power negotiation, and ideological formation unfold through everyday user interactions. This study examines how discourses of power and identity are enacted in 50 comments purposively selected from five TikTok videos concerning selected social, political, and cultural issues in Malaysia. Grounded in Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis framework and Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory, the analysis focuses on the linguistic and discursive strategies used by the selected commenters to articulate stances, delineate identity boundaries, and position social groups. The findings indicate that the sampled comments contain recurring strategies of digital cynicism, moral evaluation, stereotyping, us–them positioning, perceptions of algorithmic visibility, and collective affiliation. These patterns suggest that, within this limited dataset, TikTok comments may function as sites where social dominance is reinforced, challenged, or negotiated. References to algorithms are interpreted as users' perceptions of platform visibility rather than as evidence of TikTok's actual algorithmic operations, because no direct platform or algorithmic data were analysed. Accordingly, the findings are exploratory and should not be generalised to Malaysian netizens as a whole. The study contributes a context-specific account of how language, identity, and perceived platform power intersect in selected Malaysian TikTok comment threads.

Keywords: Discourse, Power, Identity, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has significantly transformed the communicative landscape of society, not only in terms of how information is disseminated, but also in how social meanings are constructed and negotiated. In this context, TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential digital platforms, particularly among Malaysian users. Unlike more traditional social media platforms, TikTok operates through a combination of short videos, dynamic visual elements, background music, and an algorithmic system that determines the visibility of content. These features make TikTok not merely a medium of entertainment, but an active public discursive space that shapes users' perceptions, attitudes, and social identities (Zappavigna, 2020).

In Malaysia, the use of TikTok has expanded across age groups, social classes, and educational backgrounds. The platform is used not only for entertainment, but also as a source of information, a space for discussing current issues, and an avenue for expressing opinions on political, social, and cultural matters (Tan, 2023). TikTok's open and algorithm-driven nature allows certain content to go viral within a short period of time, thereby encouraging collective participation through comment sections. Accordingly, TikTok comment spaces function as sites of social interaction that reveal how language is used to construct positions, assert identities, and negotiate power relations in society.

TikTok comment sections possess discursive features that differ from those of other platforms. Comments are typically brief, spontaneous, and informal, yet they carry complex social meanings. Hardaker (2015) shows that

contemporary digital communication relies heavily on strategies such as cynicism, irony, and humour as ways of conveying criticism or dissatisfaction without direct confrontation. In the Malaysian context, such strategies are frequently used in TikTok comment sections to respond to sensitive issues involving politics, morality, religion, and cultural identity. Although these comments may appear trivial, they in fact reflect values, ideologies, and power structures rooted in society (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

In addition, identity construction in digital spaces has become increasingly complex because it is shaped simultaneously by linguistic, social, and technological factors. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory explains that individuals tend to construct identity through social categorisation, such as ingroup and outgroup distinctions. This phenomenon is clearly visible in TikTok comments when users differentiate between 'us' and 'them' through lexical choices, tone, and visual symbols such as emojis. Van Dijk (2006) further argues that identity construction through discourse is closely linked to ideology, especially when the views of dominant groups are normalised as mainstream discourse. On TikTok, this process is often reinforced by algorithmic mechanisms that promote certain comments as top comments, thereby granting social legitimacy to majority views (Cotter, 2021).

TikTok also introduces a technologically mediated dimension of visibility. Existing scholarship suggests that platform algorithms can influence which content and interactions become prominent (Bishop, 2020; Cotter, 2021). However, because the present study analyses only user comments and does not examine platform-level data, algorithmic processes are treated as part of the broader sociotechnical context and as objects of users' perceptions, rather than as directly observed causal mechanisms.

Although TikTok has become increasingly prominent in everyday communication, Malaysian scholarship has more often examined platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Research focusing specifically on TikTok comment sections remains comparatively limited, even though these spaces provide useful sites for examining identity negotiation and discursive positioning. Therefore, this study offers an exploratory analysis of how a selected group of Malaysian netizens uses language in five TikTok comment threads to construct identity, assert moral positions, and negotiate power relations within particular social, political, and cultural issues.

Problem Statement

In the rapidly evolving digital era, TikTok has emerged as an important platform for circulating cultural trends and public commentary. Although netizen comments are often regarded as spontaneous and informal expressions, they may also serve as sites where social identities are negotiated and power relations are reproduced or challenged. Studies of TikTok comments in Malaysia remain limited, particularly from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which foregrounds the relationship between language, ideology, and power. Most previous studies have focused on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, whereas TikTok has a distinct discursive ecology shaped by short-form video, rapid interaction, and algorithmically organised visibility. Nevertheless, claims about Malaysian digital discourse must be made cautiously because comment-based studies often rely on small, context-specific samples. Accordingly, this study does not seek to represent Malaysian netizens generally. Instead, it examines 50 purposively selected comments from five TikTok videos to provide exploratory insights into how selected commenters construct identity, engage in othering, express moral evaluation, and perceive platform visibility. The study also distinguishes between commenters' references to algorithms and direct evidence of algorithmic behaviour, as no platform data or technical algorithmic analysis were undertaken.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the discourse strategies used by selected Malaysian netizens in 50 comments drawn from five TikTok videos related to selected social, political, and cultural issues.
2. To examine how individual and collective identities are constructed, negotiated, or challenged within the selected TikTok comment dataset.

Research Questions

1. What discourse strategies are used by the selected Malaysian netizens in the sampled TikTok comments concerning selected social, political, and cultural issues?
2. How are individual and collective identities constructed or negotiated within the selected TikTok comment dataset?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review on digital discourse show that social media has transformed the ways individuals interact and construct social meaning. Zappavigna (2020) introduces the concept of searchable talk to explain that online communication is produced not only for immediate audiences, but also to be read, interpreted, and evaluated by wider audiences. In this context, social media comments function as markers of social identity and ideology, even when they are brief and informal. This finding demonstrates that every comment may carry social implications beyond basic communicative functions.

In a study of digital communication styles, Hardaker (2015) found that cynicism, ridicule, and dark humour are dominant discourse strategies in social media spaces. These strategies enable users to criticise individuals or institutions without facing direct social risk. This pattern is consistent with TikTok comment culture, which values speed, wit, and the ability to imply criticism through sarcasm. Cynical comments often attract high responses, thereby shaping communicative norms within digital communities.

Within the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough (1992, 1995) and Wodak (2001) emphasise that language is not a neutral tool, but a medium embedded with ideology and power. Lexical choices, sentence structures, and rhetorical strategies reflect relations of domination in society. This approach has subsequently been extended into digital discourse studies by taking into account the role of technology and algorithms in shaping discourse. Cotter (2021) shows that mechanisms such as shadow banning and visibility filtering have direct effects on whose voices gain legitimacy in digital spaces. This positions social media platforms not merely as media, but as powerful social actors.

Studies of identity in social media have frequently drawn on Social Identity Theory to explain polarisation and group formation. Tajfel and Turner (1986) explain that individuals tend to affirm their own group identities while marginalising other groups in order to maintain social self-esteem. Van Dijk (2006) further emphasises that identity framing occurs through subtle discourse strategies, including vague references, generalisations, and negative framing of outgroups. Angouri (2018) shows that online comment spaces often become sites of political and cultural identity formation because users can express opinions without strict institutional control.

Research on TikTok is still relatively new but growing. Kaye, Chen, and Zeng (2022) found that TikTok functions as a public discussion space that enables the expression of political and social identity, particularly among younger users. Literat (2021) highlights how remix, duet, and parody cultures on TikTok generate reinterpretations of social issues through multimodal forms. Interactions in comment spaces, including likes, emojis, and threaded responses, create micro-communities that share certain values and ideologies. In addition, Zulli and Zulli (2022) found that TikTok's algorithm tends to strengthen dominant sentiments, thereby creating an illusion of consensus among users.

Local studies in Malaysia demonstrate similar patterns. Hashim (2020) found that digital discourse in Malaysia often reflects ethnic and religious identity tensions, while Mahmud (2019) showed that moral discourse is highly dominant among Malay users on social media. In the field of digital politics, Yusof (2021) found that cynicism and ridicule are major strategies used by Malaysian netizens when discussing political issues. However, most of these studies focus on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, leaving TikTok, particularly its comment spaces, underexplored.

Overall, the existing literature indicates that digital discourse is closely related to identity formation and symbolic power. Nevertheless, TikTok comment sections in Malaysia remain underexplored through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. This study addresses that gap through a small-scale, exploratory examination of 50 comments from five selected TikTok videos. Its contribution lies in identifying context-specific discourse patterns rather than making population-level claims about Malaysian netizens or empirically determining how TikTok's algorithm operates.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory design combining Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis framework with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory. This design is appropriate for examining how language, ideology, power, and identity are articulated within a small, context-specific sample of TikTok comments. The analytical framework was used to interpret six themes: digital cynicism, moral discourse, social stereotyping, us–them identity, perceptions of algorithmic visibility, and collective identity.

The two frameworks provide complementary analytical lenses. Critical Discourse Analysis enables close examination of lexical choices, rhetorical strategies, presuppositions, modality, and positioning, while Social Identity Theory supports interpretation of ingroup and outgroup construction. The study focuses on meanings expressed within the sampled comments and does not claim that these patterns represent all Malaysian TikTok users. It also does not conduct a technical audit of TikTok's recommendation or comment-ranking systems.

Purposive sampling was used to select 50 comments from five TikTok videos, with approximately 10 comments drawn from each video. The videos concerned selected political, social, moral, cultural, and viral issues. Comments were chosen because they contained information-rich examples of stance-taking, identity marking, moral evaluation, stereotyping, or references to visibility and algorithmic influence. The unit of analysis was the individual comment, interpreted in relation to its immediate video and comment-thread context. Usernames were anonymised. Given the small and purposive dataset, the study is exploratory and does not support statistical generalisation to Malaysian netizens as a whole. References to algorithms in the data were analysed as commenters' perceptions and platform-related discourse, not as verified evidence of algorithmic behaviour.

This study is limited to 50 purposively selected comments from five TikTok videos. The dataset is therefore not statistically representative of Malaysian netizens, TikTok users in Malaysia, or Malaysian digital discourse as a whole. The comments were collected from selected issues and at particular points in time, so the findings remain dependent on those contexts. In addition, the study did not collect direct platform data, ranking histories, longitudinal engagement metrics, or technical evidence about TikTok's algorithms. Consequently, algorithm-related interpretations are confined to users' perceptions and discursive references to visibility. These limitations require the findings to be read as exploratory, context-specific insights.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings are organised into six themes that reflect recurring discourse patterns within the 50 sampled comments. The themes describe this selected dataset only and are not intended as representative categories for Malaysian netizens generally.

Theme 1: Digital Cynicism

Digital cynicism refers to a style of communication on social media that is cynical, sceptical, mocking, or questioning in nature. It is used to respond to social issues through humour, sarcasm, hyperbole, and presupposition. Digital cynicism emerges when users no longer place trust in institutions, social norms, political processes, or public discourse, and when they express that distrust through subtle mockery.

Digital cynicism emerged as a recurring discourse strategy across several of the selected videos. Within this dataset, commenters used cynicism not merely as humour but also as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with

political, social, or cultural issues. Hardaker (2015) describes cynicism in social media as a face-saving strategy that can enable strong opinions to be expressed indirectly. In the sampled Malaysian comments, cynicism frequently operated as an indirect channel for criticising institutions, politicians, celebrities, or other social actors.

Linguistically, cynicism can be detected through expressions such as ‘as usual...’, ‘standard Malaysia’, ‘not surprising anymore’, and ‘Malaysia plot twist’. These lexical choices contain presuppositions that the issues are repetitive, clichéd, and unsurprising. They indicate a form of societal fatigue toward recurring political and social controversies. From Fairclough’s (1995) perspective, cynicism constructs a stance that reflects users’ emotional distancing from an issue while simultaneously projecting the self as someone who ‘understands how society works’. Emojis such as 😊, 😞, and 😏👉 also play an important role in modalising cynicism. The combination of text and emojis produces multimodal meanings stronger than text alone. From an ideological standpoint, digital cynicism constructs anti-institutional and anti-establishment discourse. Van Dijk (2006) argues that repeated cynicism directed at a group can form negative mental models that eventually become collective beliefs. This is evident when cynical comments become top comments and thus become the dominant narrative in the thread.

Table 1: Linguistic Analysis - Theme 1: Digital Cynicism

No.	Comment (Malay Language)	Comment	Theme	Linguistic Element	CDA Analysis Note
1	“Macam biasa la Malaysia... isu kecil pun jadi drama 🧑.”	“As usual in Malaysia... even a small issue becomes drama 🧑.”	Digital Cynicism	Sarcasm, presupposition	Normalisation of distrust toward institutions
2	“Plot twist Malaysia setiap minggu 🤔.”	“Malaysia has a plot twist every week 😊.”	Digital Cynicism	Hyperbole, emoji	Cynical criticism of social dynamics
3	“Lawyer explain pun nanti ada yang tak faham jugak haha.”	“Even after the lawyer explains it, some people still won’t understand haha.”	Digital Cynicism	Cynicism, laughter	Belittling audience literacy
4	“Tak hairan dah... negara kita memang suka kecoh benda macam ni.”	“Not surprising anymore... our country loves making a fuss over things like this.”	Digital Cynicism	Presupposition	Naturalisation of chaos
5	“Esok mesti ada video baru sambung episod ni.”	“Tomorrow there will surely be a new video continuing this episode.”	Digital Cynicism	Episode metaphor	Routine dramatisation

Theme 2: Moral Discourse

Moral discourse was another recurring theme in the sampled comments, particularly in videos concerning celebrities, youth socialisation, women’s issues, and social controversies. Several selected commenters engaged in moral surveillance by evaluating behaviour against religious, cultural, or social norms. This pattern is

consistent with Mahmud’s (2019) discussion of moral regulation in Malaysian digital discourse, but the present finding is limited to the comments included in this dataset.

Comments such as ‘Aren’t they ashamed?’, ‘Protect your dignity’, and ‘Children are watching this’ construct a normative discourse that enforces particular behavioural standards. From a CDA perspective, this is a form of symbolic power through which society regulates itself (Foucault, 1980). TikTok provides a space for the normalisation of such control through the repeated appearance of similar comments by many users.

Linguistically, modalities such as ‘should’, ‘ought to’, and ‘must’ signal the presence of moral authority in the comments. Emojis such as 😡, 🧑, and 😬 intensify the judgemental tone. From a multimodal perspective, the original video—possibly involving clothing, body movement, or sensual music—becomes an important context for interpreting the comments. Wodak (2001) argues that the interpretation of moral discourse cannot be separated from cultural contexts, particularly from what is socially constructed as ‘improper’. Ultimately, moral discourse generates collective social pressure on the groups involved and illustrates the power of the majority in regulating minority identities.

Table 2: Linguistic Analysis - Theme 2: Moral Discourse

No.	Comment (Malay Languages)	Comment	Theme	Linguistic Element	CDA Note
11	“Ini negara Islam, jaga sensitiviti la.”	“This is an Islamic country, respect sensitivities.”	Morality	Modality, stance	Moral legitimacy of the majority
12	“Tak sesuai tunjuk simbol macam tu depan kanak-kanak.”	“It is not appropriate to show symbols like that in front of children.”	Morality	Modality	Child-protection narrative
13	“Kalau masuk negara orang, hormat budaya tempatan.”	“When entering another country, respect the local culture.”	Morality	Directive	Cultural policing
14	“Isu moral ni kena tegas, bukan buat main.”	“Moral issues must be handled firmly, not treated as a joke.”	Morality	Modality	Moral compensation
15	“Tak elok bawa budaya luar ke sini.”	“It is not good to bring foreign culture here.”	Morality	Evaluation	Boundary maintenance
16	“Harap pihak berkuasa ambil tindakan cepat.”	“I hope the authorities take action quickly.”	Morality	Directive	Call for state control
17	“Benda macam ni normal ke kat luar? Kat sini tak boleh.”	“Is this normal overseas? It is not acceptable here.”	Morality	Rhetorical question	Moral comparison
18	“Takkan benda macam ni nak dibiasakan.”	“Surely things like this should not be normalised.”	Morality	Modality	Normative rejection

19	“Kita ada nilai kita sendiri sebagai orang timur.”	“We have our own values as Eastern people.”	Morality	Cultural stance	Eastern exceptionalism
20	“Jangan kelirukan antara hak individu dengan akhlak.”	“Do not confuse individual rights with morality.”	Morality	Dichotomisation	Moral versus legal framing

Theme 3: Social Stereotyping

Stereotyping is a discourse mechanism used to generalise individual behaviour to an entire group. In LGBT-related issues, social stereotyping appears in two forms: stereotypes directed at the LGBT community itself, and stereotypes directed at tourists or foreign cultures.

Comments such as ‘Westerners are always like that’ or ‘that group just wants attention’ demonstrate generalisations that represent an entire group based on the behaviour of an individual. Van Dijk (1998) explains that stereotyping is a simplified way of processing information to maintain ingroup dominance. This corresponds with the findings of the present study, where users frame LGBT groups as moral threats or foreign influences.

Linguistically, stereotypes emerge through adjectives such as ‘wild’, ‘immoral’, and ‘disrespectful of culture’, as well as vague references such as ‘that group’ and ‘people like this’. Wodak (2001) refers to this as a naming and referential strategy, through which group identity is blurred to avoid direct criticism while still conveying prejudicial meanings. Multimodality also reinforces stereotypes, for instance through the clown emoji 🤡 to index foolishness or the rainbow flag emoji 🏳️ used mockingly. These examples show how visual elements are used to create negative representations of particular groups.

Table 3: Linguistic Analysis - Theme 3: Social Stereotyping

No.	Comment (Malay Languages)	Comment	Theme	Linguistic Element	CDA Note
21	“Biasalah golongan tu memang suka cari perhatian.”	“That group is always seeking attention.”	Stereotyping	Generalisation	Outgroup negative framing
22	“Orang barat memang tak faham budaya Asia.”	“Westerners simply do not understand Asian culture.”	Stereotyping	Generalisation	Cultural stereotyping
23	“Golongan macam ni memang lain sikit pemikiran.”	“People like this think a bit differently.”	Stereotyping	Vague category	Group essentialism
24	“Pelancong luar selalu rasa semua benda boleh.”	“Foreign tourists always think everything is allowed.”	Stereotyping	Overgeneralisation	Tourist othering

25	“Diorang ni suka ikut trend pelik-pelik.”	“They like following strange trends.”	Stereotyping	Labelling	Trend pathologising
26	“Golongan tu memang kuat tunjuk.”	“That group really likes showing off.”	Stereotyping	Naming	Visibility stigma
27	“Selalu je nampak mereka ni buat benda sama.”	“We always see them doing the same thing.”	Stereotyping	Repetition	Behavioural stereotyping
28	“Tak hairan kalau dari negara macam tu.”	“No wonder if they come from a country like that.”	Stereotyping	Implicit reference	Coded bias
29	“Mereka ni memang suka warna-warni macam tu.”	“They really like colours like that.”	Stereotyping	Symbolic association	Symbolic stereotyping
30	“Memang perangai, susah nak tegur.”	“That is just their character; hard to advise them.”	Stereotyping	Essentialism	Fixity of traits

Theme 4: Us-Them Identity

This theme is central to CDA because it reveals how netizens construct social identity through opposition between ingroups and outgroups. In the analysed videos, comments such as ‘we Malaysians do not like things like this’, ‘foreign tourists do not understand our culture’, and ‘Malaysia has laws; do not be rude’ demonstrate the formation of a collective ‘us’ (Malaysians, Muslims, the moral majority) in opposition to ‘them’ (LGBT groups, Western tourists, and foreign cultures).

Using Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) Social Identity Theory, this process occurs when a majority group seeks to defend its identity and cultural values by marking others as threats. Fairclough (1995) argues that identity framing through language reflects power structures by showing who has the authority to define social norms and who is positioned as violating those norms. From a multimodal perspective, the use of the Malaysian flag emoji MY, religious symbols , or expressions such as ‘we Muslims’ visually reinforces ingroup identity. This indicates that digital identity is constructed not only through text, but also through a combination of national and religious symbols.

Table 4: Linguistic Analysis - Theme 4: Us-Them Identity

No.	Comment (Malay Language)	Comment	Theme	Linguistic Element	CDA Note
31	“Kita rakyat Malaysia memang tak setuju benda ni.”	“We Malaysians definitely do not agree with this.”	Us-Them	Ingroup marker	Collective identity
32	“Pelancong tu tak hormat negara kita.”	“That tourist does not respect our country.”	Us-Them	Accusation	Boundary protection

33	“Orang Malaysia bukan jenis open sangat bab ni.”	“Malaysians are not that open about this matter.”	Us-Them	Generalisation	Cultural self-definition
34	“Ini tanah kita, ikut aturan kita.”	“This is our land; follow our rules.”	Us-Them	Possessive	Territorial identity
35	“Malaysia ada undang-undang, bukan macam tempat lain.”	“Malaysia has laws, unlike other places.”	Us-Them	Comparative	Norm assertion
36	“Budaya kita tak sama dengan mereka.”	“Our culture is not the same as theirs.”	Us-Them	Polarisation	Us-them binary
37	“Kita orang Islam tak boleh terima macam tu.”	“We Muslims cannot accept something like that.”	Us-Them	Religious identity	Moral majority stance
38	“Kalau datang sini, hormat sensitiviti kami.”	“If you come here, respect our sensitivities.”	Us-Them	Directive	Cultural respect framing
39	“Malaysia bukan macam tempat kamu.”	“Malaysia is not like your place.”	Us-Them	Contrastive	National identity
40	“Kami tak marah, cuma jangan paksa budaya tu.”	“We are not angry, but do not force that culture here.”	Us-Them	Softening + boundary	Norm protection

Theme 5: Perceptions of Algorithmic Visibility

The sampled comments included users’ observations and suspicions about why certain comments appeared more prominently than others. Statements about top comments, viral reactions, and the disappearance of neutral or supportive views were interpreted as perceptions of algorithmic visibility. These comments reveal how users make sense of platform power; they do not provide direct evidence of how TikTok’s ranking or recommendation systems actually operated in the five videos.

Existing scholarship on algorithmic amplification and visibility provides a useful contextual lens for interpreting these perceptions (Tufekci, 2015; Bishop, 2020; Cotter, 2021). However, because this study did not collect ranking histories, engagement metrics over time, platform metadata, or technical algorithmic data, no causal claim is made that TikTok amplified majority voices or suppressed minority perspectives. The analysis is therefore confined to how selected commenters discursively attributed visibility outcomes to the platform.

Table 5: Linguistic Analysis - Theme 5: Perceptions of Algorithmic Visibility

No.	Comment (Malay Language)	Comment	Theme	Linguistic Element	CDA Note
41	“Kenapa komen macam naik dulu? Algoritma pilih ke?”	“Why do condemnatory comments appear first? Did the algorithm choose them?”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Rhetorical question	Algorithm suspicion

42	“Asal komen pro-LGBT tak nampak?”	“Why are pro-LGBT comments not visible?”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Suspicion	Visibility control
43	“Tengok, komen marah je viral.”	“Look, only angry comments go viral.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Observation	Rage amplification
44	“ <i>Algorithm boost content sensitif.</i> ”	“The algorithm boosts sensitive content.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Technical	Platform critique
45	“Top comment mesti vibe sama.”	“Top comments always have the same vibe.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Pattern	Homogenisation
46	“Yang neutral tenggelam cepat.”	“Neutral comments sink quickly.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Metaphor	Silencing effect
47	“Kalau tak kecam, memang tak timbul.”	“If you do not condemn it, it will not surface.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Conditional	Bias toward negativity
48	“TikTok suka push benda panas.”	“TikTok likes pushing heated issues.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Attribution	Engagement economy
49	“Komen panjang tak naik, komen marah naik.”	“Long comments do not rise; angry comments rise.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Contrastive	Algorithm favouring short emotion
50	“Algoritma pilih suara majoriti je.”	“The algorithm only chooses the majority voice.”	Perceived Algorithmic Visibility	Assertion	Democratic illusion

Theme 6: Collective Identity

Collective identity was evident when selected commenters expressed agreement, solidarity, or alignment with particular viewpoints. Through supportive replies and shared evaluations, temporary group affiliations were formed around common moral, cultural, or national positions. Zappavigna’s (2020) concept of ambient affiliation helps explain how such connections may emerge among users who do not know one another personally. In this study, the pattern is interpreted only within the selected threads.

Within the analysed videos, some sampled comments constructed a collective Malaysian identity by asserting that local cultural norms should be respected and by contrasting those norms with perceived external influences. These comments illustrate how national, religious, or moral identities can be discursively assembled in particular TikTok interactions. They should not be taken as evidence of a single or homogeneous Malaysian public position.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the selected TikTok comment threads functioned as discursive sites in which language, identity, and power were negotiated. Within the 50-comment dataset, commenters used strategies such as cynicism, presupposition, modality, stereotyping, us–them positioning, and emojis to construct stances, express criticism, and mark identity positions in selected political, moral, cultural, and LGBT-related discussions.

The analysis also indicates that individual and collective identities were constructed through ingroup and outgroup marking, consistent with Social Identity Theory. In several sampled comments, an ‘us’ identity—such

as Malaysians, Muslims, or a perceived moral majority—was contrasted with tourists, outsiders, or minority groups. Within this limited dataset, such framing contributed to discursive polarisation and the normalisation of particular stereotypes. These patterns should be understood as context-specific findings rather than as reflections of Malaysian netizens in general.

Comments concerning algorithms reflected users' perceptions that emotionally charged or majority-aligned views received greater visibility. Because the study did not analyse platform metadata, ranking histories, or TikTok's technical systems, it cannot establish whether the algorithm caused these visibility patterns. Algorithm-related findings therefore concern perceived platform power and algorithmic discourse, not verified algorithmic behaviour.

Overall, the study provides exploratory insight into how discourse, identity, and perceived platform power intersect in five selected TikTok comment threads. Its principal contribution is a close qualitative account of the sampled comments rather than a general explanation of Malaysian digital discourse. The study is limited by its small purposive sample of 50 comments, the selection of only five videos, the absence of longitudinal observation, and the lack of direct platform or algorithmic data. Future research should use larger and more diverse datasets, compare platforms, examine interactions over time, and, where feasible, incorporate engagement metadata or platform-audit methods to investigate algorithmic visibility more directly.

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APPENDIX: COMMENT DATASET

Table: TikTok Comment Dataset by Comment Code and Video Issue

No.	Comment Code	Video Code	Video Issue	Date Collected
1	A1-01	VT1	Politics / Subsidies and Cost of Living	12 Jan 2025
2	A1-02	VT1	Politics / Subsidies and Cost of Living	12 Jan 2025
3	A1-03	VT1	Politics / Subsidies and Cost of Living	12 Jan 2025
4	A1-04	VT1	Politics / Subsidies and Cost of Living	12 Jan 2025
5	A1-05	VT1	Politics / Subsidies and Cost of Living	12 Jan 2025
6	A2-01	VT2	Social Issue / Youth Morality	15 Jan 2025
7	A2-02	VT2	Social Issue / Youth Morality	15 Jan 2025
8	A2-03	VT2	Social Issue / Youth Morality	15 Jan 2025
9	A2-04	VT2	Social Issue / Youth Morality	15 Jan 2025
10	A2-05	VT2	Social Issue / Youth Morality	15 Jan 2025
11	A3-01	VT3	Culture and National Identity	20 Jan 2025
12	A3-02	VT3	Culture and National Identity	20 Jan 2025
13	A3-03	VT3	Culture and National Identity	20 Jan 2025
14	A3-04	VT3	Culture and National Identity	20 Jan 2025
15	A3-05	VT3	Culture and National Identity	20 Jan 2025
16	A4-01	VT4	LGBT Issue / Morality and Minority Rights	22 Jan 2025
17	A4-02	VT4	LGBT Issue / Morality and Minority Rights	22 Jan 2025
18	A4-03	VT4	LGBT Issue / Morality and Minority Rights	22 Jan 2025
19	A4-04	VT4	LGBT Issue / Morality and Minority Rights	22 Jan 2025
20	A4-05	VT4	LGBT Issue / Morality and Minority Rights	22 Jan 2025
21	A5-01	VT5	Celebrity Issue / Viral and Social Issues	25 Jan 2025
22	A5-02	VT5	Celebrity Issue / Viral and Social Issues	25 Jan 2025
23	A5-03	VT5	Celebrity Issue / Viral and Social Issues	25 Jan 2025
24	A5-04	VT5	Celebrity Issue / Viral and Social Issues	25 Jan 2025
25	A5-05	VT5	Celebrity Issue / Viral and Social Issues	25 Jan 2025

A1. Theme: Digital Cynicism

1. "As usual in Malaysia... even a small issue becomes drama 🧑🏻."
2. "Malaysia has a plot twist every week 😂."
3. "Even after the lawyer explains it, some people still won't understand haha."
4. "Not surprising anymore... our country loves making a fuss over things like this."
5. "Tomorrow there will surely be a new video continuing this episode."
6. "A simple matter, but netizens will definitely turn it into a world war."
7. "Whatever it is, Malaysia remains Malaysia 🤔."
8. "Every time an issue goes viral, the script is always the same."
9. "As people say, I am too tired to be surprised."
10. "Our country is truly the champion of moral panic 😂."

A2. Theme: Moral Discourse

1. "This is an Islamic country, respect sensitivities."
2. "It is not appropriate to show symbols like that in front of children."
3. "When entering another country, respect the local culture."
4. "Moral issues must be handled firmly, not treated as a joke."
5. "It is not good to bring foreign culture here."
6. "I hope the authorities take action quickly."
7. "Is this normal overseas? It is not acceptable here."
8. "Surely things like this should not be normalised."
9. "We have our own values as Eastern people."
10. "Do not confuse individual rights with morality."

A3. Theme: Social Stereotyping

1. "That group is always seeking attention."
2. "Westerners simply do not understand Asian culture."
3. "People like this think a bit differently."
4. "Foreign tourists always think everything is allowed."
5. "They like following strange trends."

6. "That group really likes showing off."
7. "We always see them doing the same thing."
8. "No wonder if they come from a country like that."
9. "They really like colours like that."
10. "That is just their character; hard to advise them."

A4. Theme: Us-Them Identity

1. "We Malaysians definitely do not agree with this."
2. "That tourist does not respect our country at all."
3. "Malaysians are not that open about this matter."
4. "This is our land; follow our rules."
5. "Malaysia has laws, unlike other countries."
6. "Our culture is not the same as theirs."
7. "We Muslims cannot accept this openly."
8. "If you come here, respect our sensitivities."
9. "Malaysia is not like your place."
10. "We are not angry, but do not force that culture here."

A5. Theme: Perceptions of Algorithmic Visibility

1. "Why do condemnatory comments appear first? Did the algorithm choose them?"
2. "Why are pro-LGBT comments not visible? Did they disappear?"
3. "Look, only angry comments go viral."
4. "This is all algorithmic boosting of rage content."
5. "Top comments always have the same vibe."
6. "Neutral comments sink quickly."
7. "If you do not condemn it, it will not surface."
8. "TikTok likes pushing sensitive issues."
9. "Long comments do not rise; angry comments rise."
10. "The algorithm actually chooses the majority voice."