

“All Mums Are Working Mums?” Discursive Constructions of Career-Oriented ‘Good Mother’ Identities on Social Media among Malaysian Mothers

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how new Malaysian mothers discursively construct and negotiate their multiple identities on social media in relation to their careers. This qualitative study draws on Baxter’s (2007) Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis, Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) sociocultural linguistic principles of identity construction, and Schippers’ (2007) concept of hegemonic femininities as its theoretical and analytical framework. The study is based on a comparative dataset comprising: (1) six months of private motherhood-related Facebook and Instagram posts from 2016, and (2) three months of public motherhood-related posts on Instagram Stories, TikTok, and Threads from 2025. The 2016 dataset includes nineteen Malaysian mothers: five working mothers (WM), seven work-at-home mothers (WAHM), and five stay-at-home mothers (SAHM). Meanwhile, the 2025 dataset comprises six Malaysian mothers (two WMs, two WAHMs, and two SAHMs) from diverse demographic backgrounds. Findings show that the selected mothers construct ambivalent identities on social media as they negotiate multiple, intersecting discourses often tied to ideals of the ‘good’ mother. Their varied accounts of ‘good’ mothering reveal identity struggles in which they orient to sometimes conflicting sociocultural expectations of ‘good’ motherhood in Malaysia, particularly those related to career decisions. The 2025 data, however, are characterised by more nuanced self-disclosures enabled by newer multimodal features of social media platforms. This study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of the complexities of discursive identity construction in mediated contexts. Tracing these Malaysian mothers’ discursive practices across spheres and time unpacks how sociocultural and digital developments reinforce and challenge dominant discourses of ‘good’ motherhood and career decisions in a multicultural society.

Keywords: Discursive identity construction, motherhood discourses, social media, careers

INTRODUCTION

The discursive construction of ‘good mother’ identities, especially within the context of career decisions, presents complex challenges for Malaysian mothers who navigate diverse expectations across offline and online domains (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; McMahan, 1995; Smyth, 2012). This study explores how career-oriented identities are negotiated by new mothers in Malaysia, responding to societal ideals and pressures that intersect with discourses of work, family, ethnicity, and religion (Abrams & Curran, 2010; Bhopal, 1998; Choi et al., 2005; Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; Smyth, 2012; Weaver & Ussher, 1997). While cultural narratives often simplify mothers as selfless and innately capable (Wall, 2013), Malaysian mothers face intricate tensions in defining ‘good motherhood’, particularly when it involves choices around employment, caregiving, and career trajectories (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Berger, 2022; Weaver & Ussher, 1997).

Existing scholarship has frequently focused on psychological aspects of motherhood in Western contexts, largely overlooking the discursive and linguistic processes through which mothers in Malaysia construct their web of identities, especially in relation to career aspirations and work-life arrangements (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Weaver & Ussher, 1997). Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram

have emerged as key sites for mothers to express, contest, and support career-oriented narratives. This enables visibility into how mothers articulate their professional ambitions alongside caregiving roles (Kemp, 2018; Othman & Mohamed, 2024).

Within Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, career decisions and the pursuit of 'good mother' identities are shaped by diverse cultural norms, economic conditions, and social expectations (Ball, 2010; Tan, 2017). The prevalence of high female educational attainment alongside lower workforce participation rates underscores the significance of discursively negotiating career choices within the context of motherhood (Halim et al., 2016; Salleh & Mansor, 2022). Against this backdrop, social media is a critical site where Malaysian mothers articulate, contest, and negotiate the meanings of working motherhood and familial responsibility (Othman & Mohamed, 2024).

Focusing exclusively on social media data, this study investigates the nuanced discursive strategies mothers employ to navigate career-oriented 'good mother' identities online. Two primary research questions guide it:

(a) What identities do the selected new mothers construct when communicating about motherhood in relation to their career decisions on social media in Malaysia?

(b) How do the selected new Malaysian mothers construct and negotiate their identities within the intersecting discourses of motherhood and career decisions on social media?

Through this lens, the research aims to unravel the complex ways mothers respond to, resist, and reproduce societal expectations around career and caregiving on social media sites, providing significant theoretical and practical contributions to applied linguistics and discourse analysis (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Berger, 2022; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). These insights advance understanding of how career, digital interaction, and identity negotiation intersect for contemporary Malaysian mothers in the ever-evolving discursive landscape of social media (Othman & Mohamed, 2024; Salleh & Mansor, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Discursive Identity Construction

Identity is widely understood as a dynamic, fluid, and discursively constructed phenomenon, where individuals negotiate their sense of self amidst intersecting social and cultural discourses (Angouri, 2015; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This construction unfolds through language and interaction, often reflecting competing influences such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and evolving digital communication practices (De Fina et al., 2006; Walz, 2018). Theories on discursively constructed identities foreground how such negotiation is situated in various contexts, shaping lived experiences and social positioning.

Motherhood identities, in particular, are socially and culturally constructed through gendered discourses that emphasise ideals of care, self-sacrifice, and moral responsibility (Butler, 1990; Sunderland, 2004). Feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) highlights how "good mother" identities are not neutral but embedded within neoliberal and patriarchal norms, amplifying pressures on mothers to perform idealised roles (Baxter, 2007; Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; Schippers, 2007). These idealisations often marginalise alternative maternal identities and neglect structural constraints and diversity in women's experiences.

A growing body of research points out career-oriented mothers' unique struggles in negotiating conflicting demands between professional ambitions and societal expectations of motherhood (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Hays, 1996; Smyth, 2012). Working mothers regularly confront discourses that police 'good mother' behaviours, exposing them to guilt, scrutiny, and identity conflicts as they balance career and caregiving (Abrams & Curran, 2010; Austin & Carpenter, 2008). The rise of hybrid identities like "work-at-home" mothers and "mumpreneurs" reveals evolving but contested forms of maternal career identity, mediated by socioeconomic changes and digital entrepreneurship (Berger, 2022; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2011). Contemporary discourse also notes the role of gendered, sociocultural expectations in shaping women's career trajectories within motherhood (Ainuddin & Jegak, 2023; Harris et al., 2024).

Within the specific context of Malaysia, the country's sociocultural norms, informed by ethnic traditions and Islamic values, significantly influence constructions of motherhood and career (Bhopal, 1998; Tan et al., 2015; Werbner, 2010). Despite high educational levels among Malaysian women, there is a "motherhood penalty" in workforce participation and career advancement due to traditional caregiving expectations and limited family-friendly workplace policies (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018; Halim et al., 2016; Salleh & Mansor, 2022). Recent studies underscore persistent cultural narratives reinforcing women's domestic roles but document gradual shifts as Malaysian mothers negotiate work and familial responsibilities, including through digital means (Ainuddin & Jegak, 2023; Othman & Mohamed, 2024).

Many online platforms have become mainstream sites for maternal identity construction. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have become integral spaces where Malaysian mothers actively negotiate "good mother" identities in relation to career roles (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2014; Othman & Mohamed, 2024). These platforms enable performative identity work where mothers share successes, challenges, and competing narratives around career, caregiving, and cultural norms (Brookes et al., 2017; DeCesare, 2016). Digital motherhood communities offer support and increased exposure to normative pressures, with online discourses often replicating or challenging offline expectations (Ainuddin & Jegak, 2023; Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Smyth, 2012). The affordances of social media thus create complex dynamics of identity construction that are particularly salient for working mothers balancing professional and maternal roles.

Despite growing literature on discursive constructions of motherhood and identity, few studies examine Malaysian mothers' career-oriented identity negotiation within digital spaces from a discourse analytic perspective (Othman & Mohamed, 2024). Moreover, the intersection of career decision-making, culturally specific motherhood ideals, and social media-driven identity work remains underexplored. This study seeks to address these gaps, illuminating how Malaysian mothers construct, perform, and contest 'good mother' identities vis-à-vis career on social media, with implications for applied linguistics, discourse studies, and gender research.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design anchored in social constructionism, which views identity as fluid, socially constructed, and discursively negotiated (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Merriam, 2009). This paradigm aligns with examining Malaysian mothers' multiple motherhood and career identities as performed and contested on social media.

The research draws on Baxter's (2007) Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA), Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic principles of identity construction, and Schippers' (2007) hegemonic femininities framework (the *local-regional-global* levels of analysis).

Bucholtz and Hall's framework includes five principles for identity analysis: *emergence*, *positionality*, *indexicality*, *relationality*, and *partialness*. This study focuses on three:

- *Positionality* explores how mothers construct identities from multiple intersecting social positions (e.g., ethnicity, motherhood, career).
- *Indexicality* is used to analyse linguistic and multimodal signs that signal identity and social meanings.
- *Relationality* examines how identities are formed in contrast or alignment with others within social hierarchies and discourses.

Emergence and *partialness* principles, although valuable, were excluded to maintain analytical clarity, given the deductive thematic framework of this study.

In Baxter's FPDA, the study centres on:

- Power relations, examining mothers' positioning along *powerful-powerless* axes.
- A dual-level analysis: *denotative* descriptions of discourse features paired with *connotative* interpretations linking linguistic and multimodal signs to sociocultural power dynamics.

This framework robustly supports dissecting identity performances mediated by evolving social media environments.

Participants and Data

This study analyses two social media datasets, consisting of participants with diverse demographic profiles:

- *2016* dataset: Six months of private Facebook and Instagram posts from 19 new Malaysian mothers: five working mothers (WM), seven work-at-home mothers (WAHM), and five stay-at-home mothers (SAHM).
- *2025* dataset: Three months of public posts on Instagram Stories, TikTok, and Threads from six Malaysian mothers (two WM, two WAHM, two SAHM).

Data Collection Methods

For the 2016 dataset, 2,395 motherhood-related posts were collected from participants' personal Facebook and Instagram accounts over six months, encompassing a range of formats including captions, images, and videos. The posts were only drawn from mothers with active accounts and at least three motherhood-related postings during the data period, with significant variation by platform. Most Facebook posts were personal captions paired with images, while all Instagram posts included images, typically accompanied by short captions. Differences in the volume of posts across career-role categories and platforms reflected available accounts, not inherent posting behaviours.

The 2025 dataset was collected from publicly available posts on *Instagram* Stories, *TikTok*, and *Threads* over three months, focusing on Malaysian mothers with diverse career decisions. Data were purposively sampled to capture motherhood-related content reflecting evolving social media practices and multimodal communication formats. The selection focused on public, multimodal posts featuring images, videos, and captions to explore how career-oriented 'good mother' identities are discursively constructed through current features of social media platforms, some of which were not available in 2016. Public Facebook posts were not collected, as not many new mothers today use this social platform anymore. Ethical protocols were observed by restricting the data to publicly accessible posts without collecting or analysing comments to protect privacy.

Data Analysis

Both social media datasets were guided by a deductive analytic approach informed by a prior interview phase, the data of which were inductively analysed (Norazrin, 2019). Ten thematic codes from the interview data were applied to the collected social media posts. The 2016 social media dataset was initially analysed against these 10 themes to explore discursive constructions of identities among the participants systematically. The same data analytical method was employed for the 2025 dataset, although their newer multimodal platforms captured some shifts in identity constructions.

Based on the initial thematic analysis, some social media posts were selected for further discourse analysis, mainly through the *denotative-connotative* angle of analysis following FPDA (Baxter, 2007). *Denotative* analysis details posts' linguistic and semiotic properties, while *connotative* analysis interprets the underlying ideological and power relations within motherhood and career discourses. Institutional ethical approval was secured. All forms of data confidentiality and participant anonymity were observed, with reflexive practices addressing researcher bias, acknowledging her positionality as a Malaysian mother who was also actively engaged with social media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the initial deductive coding of 2,395 motherhood-related Facebook and Instagram posts. The analysis revealed ten major thematic categories, with ‘positivity’ and ‘responsibility’ dominating the dataset, while ‘judgments and views’ appeared least frequently.

Table 1 Social media posts deductively coded to the ten principal themes.

No.	Major themes	Number of times coded on Facebook	Number of times coded on Instagram	Total
1.	Positivity	1145	1191	2336
2.	Responsibility	836	1032	1868
3.	Familial and societal roles	601	463	1064
4.	Challenges	393	217	610
5.	Changes	271	226	497
6.	Spirituality	242	136	378
7.	Relations to career	210	65	275
8.	Ethnicity and culture	85	103	188
9.	Technology and social media	40	37	77
10.	Judgments and views	49	10	59
	Total	3872	3480	7352

Notably, the theme of ‘relations to career’ (number 7) emerged as a distinct strand, intersecting with notions of ‘good’ motherhood often articulated by Malaysian mothers across both Facebook and Instagram platforms. Table 1 demonstrates that ‘relations to career’ accounted for 275 coded instances, with more Facebook posts than Instagram posts reflecting this theme, likely owing to Facebook’s more public and share-friendly nature.

The thematic analysis revealed that the overarching concept of the ‘good’ mother serves as a link between all the other coded themes, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping identity negotiations. The timing of data collection also influenced thematic prevalence, as sociocultural factors such as religious celebrations shaped content related to family and spirituality.

The table below provides quantitative data on the number of Facebook and Instagram posts categorised under the key theme of ‘relations to career’.

Table 2 Coding information and excerpts from social media posts categorised under ‘relations to career’ and associated with the ‘good’ mother

Facebook/Instagram	Number of times coded	Snippets from the captions of social media posts
Facebook	210	<p>“**** selalu tanya “apa je awk buat harini?” Lain kali nak jwb camni la “I kept a tiny little human alive today, clean, happy and fed”. It’s a tough job I tell u 😄 ”</p> <p>Translation: “**** (my husband) often asks “what is it that you have done today?” Next time (I) want to answer like this la ““I kept a tiny little human alive today, clean, happy and fed”. It’s a tough job I tell u 😄 ”</p> <p>[accompanied by a related image with the same message of “my baby is clean, fed and happy”, originally posted on another public Facebook page]</p> <p>(Qisya, FB_C7_61)</p>
Instagram	65	<p>“9 days off (work). It’s bonding time 🥰 ”</p> <p>[accompanied by a personal image of herself (with a smile) and her daughter in a car seat in the back of a car]</p> <p>(Eva, IG_A6_192)</p>
Total	275	-

Table 2 indicates that a greater number of Facebook posts were categorised under the key theme of ‘relations to career’, a finding that may be explained by Facebook’s more public platform and the relative ease of sharing content from external sources compared to Instagram. The table also presents two examples of social media post captions assigned to both the ‘relations to career’ and ‘good’ mother themes, with one example drawn from each social media platform. These patterns highlight the nuanced ways Malaysian mothers discursively construct and *position* their identities in *relation* to career and ‘good’ motherhood, often drawing on complex socio-cultural and personal experiences. The coding process facilitated the selection of pertinent data excerpts, illustrating how the themes of ‘relations to career’ and the ‘good’ mother’ intersect for subsequent in-depth discourse analysis.

Unpacking the Intersections Between Motherhood and Career-Related Discourses

This section details some core findings on how selected participants construct their identities on social media by navigating the complex intersection between ‘good’ motherhood and career decisions.

Many of the Facebook posts of one of the participants, Lippy Morgan, exemplify this intersection, offering narratives of her dilemma as a working mother (WM). The selected post below demonstrates how her career role and maternal identity are constructed and interwoven textually and visually.



Figure 1 Lippy Morgan [Facebook post]

Denotative analysis reveals that Lippy Morgan reflects on her experiences as a mother following a two-week work-related trip to the United States. Her narrative describes her son’s emotional attachment to her return. It includes an accompanying photograph taken at home, where she appears in casual attire and glasses, thus subtly signifying a private, unglamorous side of motherhood. Through direct speech and shifting tenses, she situates mothering as a “*job*”, employing superlatives such as “*best*” and “*most*” in an exclamatory manner.

Hashtags like #diaryofaworkingmom and #mysonmyworld are used, explicitly referencing her working mother identity and maternal priorities.

Connotatively, the caption, image, and hashtags reflect Lippy Morgan’s feelings of regret, affection, and changing priorities. This Facebook post draws attention to her maternal role, accentuating self-evaluation and future intent. The post conveys movement from a previously *powerless position* – imposed by the demands of her job and regret over leaving her son – to a more agentive, *powerful* stance, as she voices a commitment to prioritise motherhood. Notably, her candid, unfiltered portrayal of everyday domesticity challenges the notion of the ‘glamorous’ mother often suggested in social media contexts. This deliberate honesty, staged in image and language, underlines the complexity and multiplicity of negotiating ‘good’ motherhood as a working professional.

This finding brings attention to the nuanced ways Malaysian working mothers can explicitly and visibly construct their identities, drawing on both personal reflection and broader societal discourses around work, care, and gender.

Constructing and Negotiating Identities Through Career Role Categories

In this section, the discourse analysis focuses on three more social media posts in which the selected new mothers positioned their identities within the discourses associated with three leading career roles among Malaysian mothers: stay-at-home (SAHMs), work-at-home (WAHMs), and working mothers (WMs) (Irwan Nadzif & Nor Azaian, 2011; Tang, 2017).

As a disclaimer, while these career categories aid in analytic clarity, they are recognised as heuristic distinctions rather than absolute identities. In other words, their boundaries remain fluid and contested.

(i) Navigating Opposing Narratives: The conflicting discourses of SAHMs versus WMs

This section presents one of the mothers' distinct challenges regarding their specific career choices. The following Facebook post reveals such a dilemma by Lippy Morgan:



Figure 2 Lippy Morgan [Facebook post]

In the reflective post above, Lippy Morgan describes her rewarding two-week Raya (Eid) break, during which she devoted herself to caring for her son and was comforted by a fellow working mother who reassured her that she need not feel guilty about her career. The post conveys gratitude through the phrase “*Alhamdulillah*”, signalling her Muslim faith. She candidly reflects on her previous feelings of guilt about working instead of choosing to be a stay-at-home mother, reaffirming her commitment to being the “*best mother*” she can be for her son. Assertive phrases such as “*it is the quality of time spent that matters most, not the amount*” emphasise her resolve to “*give my all*” and remain “*fiercely adamant*.”

Connotatively, LM positions herself primarily as a WM, explicitly juxtaposed with the SAHM role within the ‘quality versus quantity’ discourse. She argues that the meaningful time she dedicates to her son compensates for her lesser physical presence than stay-at-home mothers, restoring legitimacy to her career despite earlier guilt. Her language signals a shift from past *powerlessness* to present *empowerment* regarding her maternal identity. Moreover, generic sentence structures, inclusive pronouns, hashtags, and images reinforce shared motherhood experiences, fostering solidarity with SAHMs.

This nuanced *positioning* reveals her consideration of other mothers’ experiences within her social network. While openly discussing her dilemma, her social media post adopts a tactful tone, reflecting different identity co-constructions on digital platforms, which are asynchronous and non-interactive. The overall post portrays LM’s complex identity as distinct from and similar to SAHMs, suggesting her career role allows her to be equally ‘good’ and perhaps excel beyond traditional motherhood confines. Her religious expression also *indexes* simultaneously constructed Muslim identity within the ‘good mother’ and career discourses. Through this, LM challenges *local* stereotypes about working mothers by invoking *global* ideals of ‘good’ motherhood.

(ii) *Dual Benefits: Empowerment through Work-at-Home Motherhood*

The work-at-home mother (WAHM) identity is shaped by positivity and challenges, primarily due to domestic conflicts. This is evident in participants’ social media posts, such as Sarah’s, where her Instagram serves both personal and business functions.



Figure 3 Sarah [Instagram post]

In her post, Sarah highlights increased business difficulties linked to childcare responsibilities, referring her elder son with “*this here*” and intensifying her challenges as “*multiply it by two!*” Her apologetic tone (“*I’m*

sorry”) addresses followers for less frequent updates. Still, it grows hopeful as she outlines plans, citing religious phrases like “*Insyallah*,” “*Allah knows best*”, and “*Please pray for me*”. Sarah’s use of singular pronouns underscores a personal perspective.

Connotatively, the post shows Sarah negotiating motherhood and work by running a “*less demanding*” part of her business to prioritise her children, implicitly framing herself as a ‘good’ mother who sacrifices career ambitions. The absence of collective pronouns echoes discourses of absent fatherhood, suggesting she faces these challenges alone, though religious references reveal her faith-based acceptance. Sarah’s narrative reflects *powerlessness* and *empowerment*, illustrating how faith intersects with motherhood and the construction of career identity in Malaysian cultural contexts.

(iii) *Challenging Demarcations: Uniting Motherhood Beyond Career Labels*

Some selected participant mothers use social media to question the usual link between being a ‘good’ mother and specific career choices, particularly at the *regional* level in Malaysia. Although they often present themselves as aligning with dominant motherhood discourses elsewhere, their posts sometimes challenge the demarcated differences in motherhood identities regarding career roles. Sarah’s Instagram post below reflects a similarly minded perspective.



further asked, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Then your mother. The man asked again, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Then your father. (Bukhari, Muslim)"

Figure 4 Sarah [Instagram post]

Denotatively, Sarah’s Instagram post draws on a quote from the Huffington Post, emphasising that all mothers (SAHM, WAHM or mothers working outside the home) “*never stop working for your kids*”. This is in line with the message in the image, “*All mums are working mums*”. The tone moves from earlier self-questioning towards encouragement, with the uplifting phrase, “*you are awesome!*” and a reference to the Islamic hadith, elevating mothers above fathers in respect.

Connotatively, Sarah transitions from doubting her WAHM career choice to asserting herself as an *empowered* mother who rejects strict career-based labels. By embracing the broader meaning of “*working mums*”, she motivates herself and others to focus on what unites mothers instead of differences. Her post blends Western and Islamic perspectives, aligning her experience with *global* communities of mothers, particularly Muslim mothers whose value, she suggests, should not hinge on their career paths. Religious references further support and justify her views on maternal identity and decision-making.

A Reflection of Motherhood Social Media Posts in 2025

This section discusses three selected social media posts from the 2025 dataset, which continue to unpack the similarities and differences in how mothers conform to, challenge, and negotiate dominant discourses of motherhood, career, and identity across various social media contexts. The following public post on the *Threads* platform reveals Rina’s specific motherhood experience as a working mother.



Figure 5 Rina [Threads post]

Denotatively, this Threads’ post features Rina’s selfie next to an image of a breast milk bag and a caption reflecting on her first year returning to work after childbirth. She describes returning to work two weeks early, enduring a long commute, and adapting to changes such as moving house and parenting. The caption is tenderly addressed to her child, frequently using “*Ibu*” (mother) and direct second-person language to point to her sacrifices. The use of the Threads format that combines captions with visual media, along with Rina’s direct, personal addresses, is quite similar to the style of some analysed Facebook and Instagram motherhood posts in 2016, underlining the continuity in how mothers narrate their experiences across platforms and time.

Connotatively, this post *positions* the mother as resilient, adeptly managing the intricate demands of both career and family. Her maternal identity is signalled by affectionate language and caregiving references, while breastfeeding equipment visually *indexes* her role as a working, breastfeeding mother, a culturally resonant symbol *locally* and *regionally*. *Relationality* shows in her implicit contrast between past city convenience and current sacrifices for family. Sharing this personal, vulnerable journey in the *local* language and *globally* understood symbols bridges specific cultural experiences with broader international mothering discourses. This post demonstrates how a mother publicly negotiates her identity through personal storytelling and symbolic imagery within layered sociocultural contexts.

Figures 6 (a), (b), (c) below depict Suraya’s motherhood identities as a WAHM, which she shared on *Instagram* via three of the platform’s multimodal features: her user profile, reel video, and story.

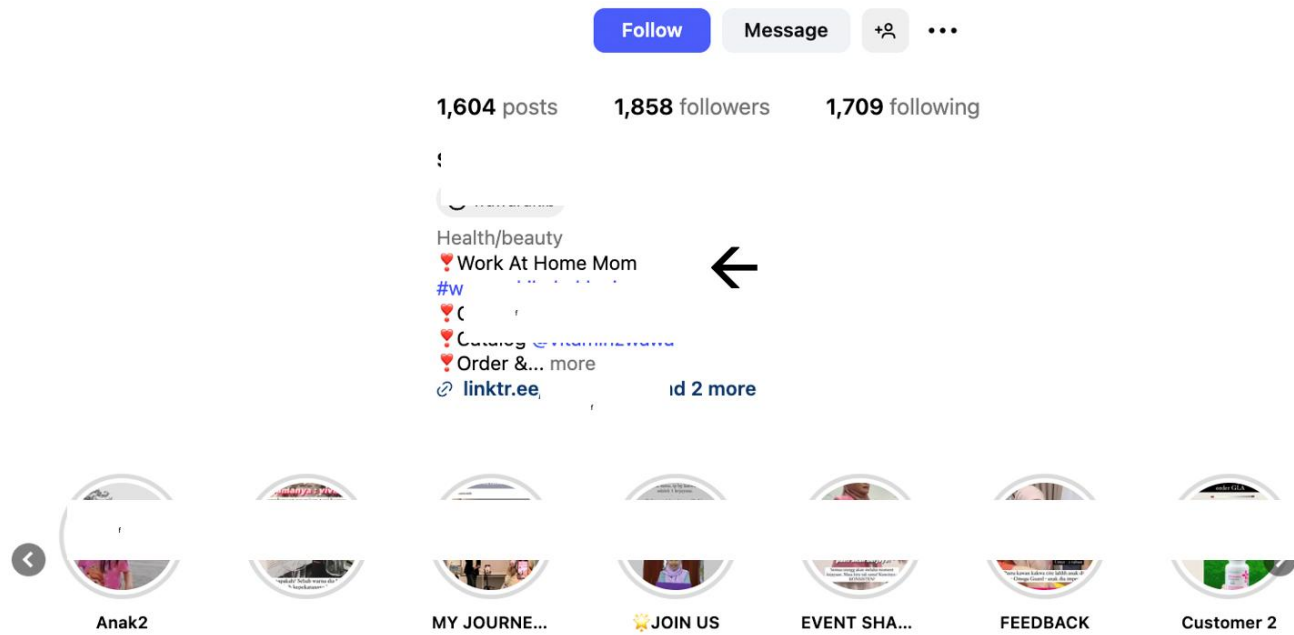


Figure 6a Suraya [Instagram profile]

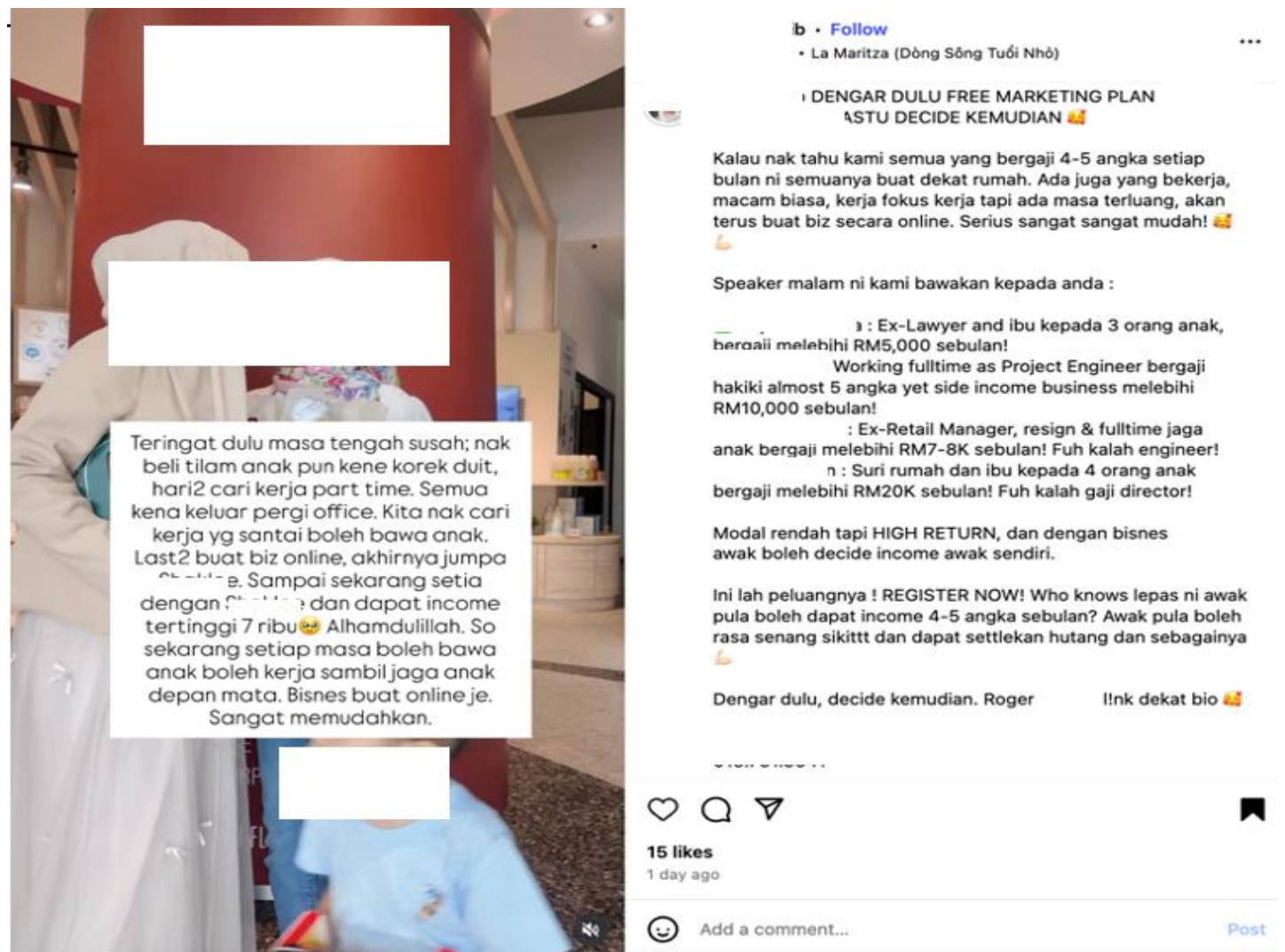


Figure 6b Suraya [Instagram reel video]

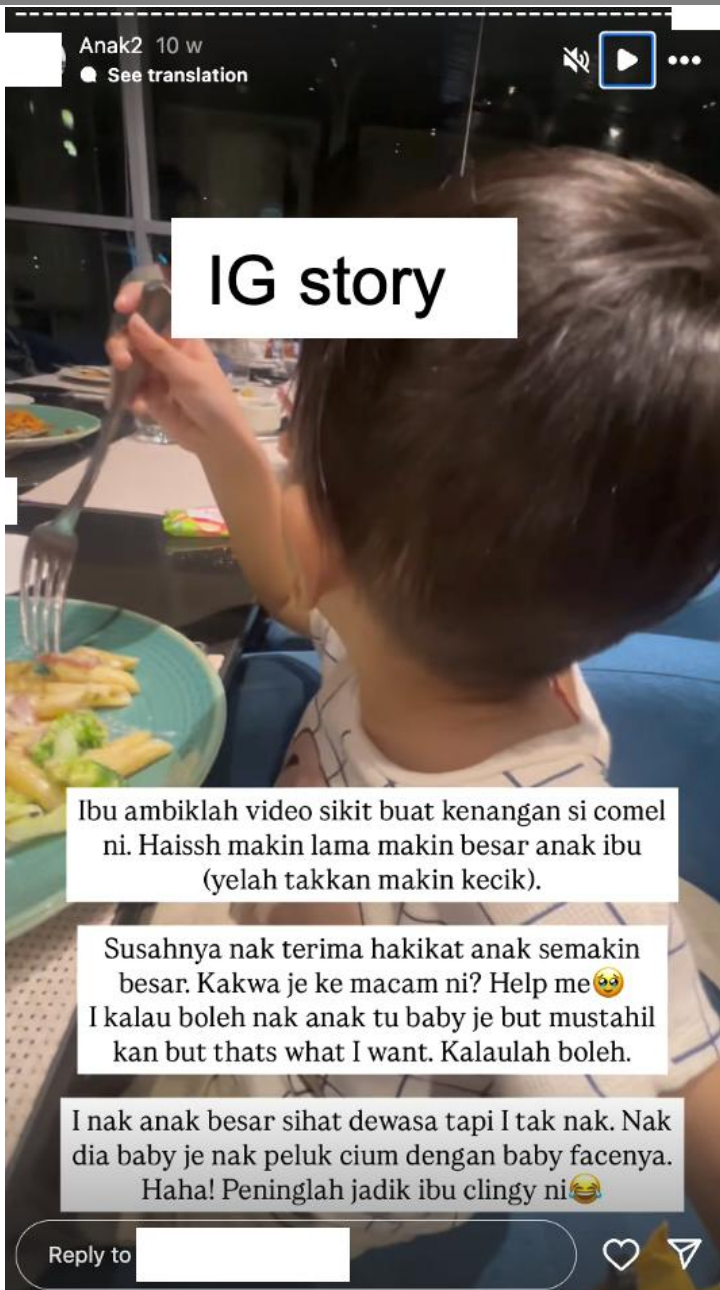


Figure 6c Suraya [Instagram story]

Denotatively, the Instagram post features Suraya presenting herself through the reel video and story formats (Figure 6b and Figure 6c) with a blend of personal reflections and business promotion. The reel’s caption (Figure 6b) recalls her financially challenging past, contrasting it with her success as a well-paid WAHM who can now raise her child flexibly. In the video, she describes transitioning from part-time office jobs to establishing a thriving online business that allows her to work from home while caring for her children “*anywhere and anytime*”. The story (Figure 6c) uses intimate, local language addressing her children and followers, conveying affection and concern over her children growing up too fast and her struggle to let go. In the Instagram profile (Figure 6a), Suraya explicitly labels herself as a “*Work At Home Mom*”, showcasing her dual role as a mother and entrepreneur.

Connotatively, this post constructs the mother as *empowered* and resilient, successfully combining career and caregiving roles through online entrepreneurship. *Positionality* appears as she embraces the WAHM identity, emphasising the advantages of flexible work that enables close childcare. *Indexicality* is conveyed in the *local* language and cultural references, embedding her narrative in Malaysian Muslim identity; she explicitly attributes her achievements to God, linking career success with religious faith. *Relationality* emerges in her tension between professional empowerment and the sentimental maternal desire to hold on to her children’s early years, expressing power and vulnerability. Using social media platforms as dual promotional and intimate

spaces reflects contemporary mothering discourses that balance public visibility with personal storytelling. Overall, this post illustrates how a WAHM actively negotiates her identity at the intersection of motherhood, career, and faith, projecting empowerment and affection through digital narratives grounded in *local* and *global* sociocultural contexts.

Figure 7 represents another popular social media platform among mothers today: *TikTok*.

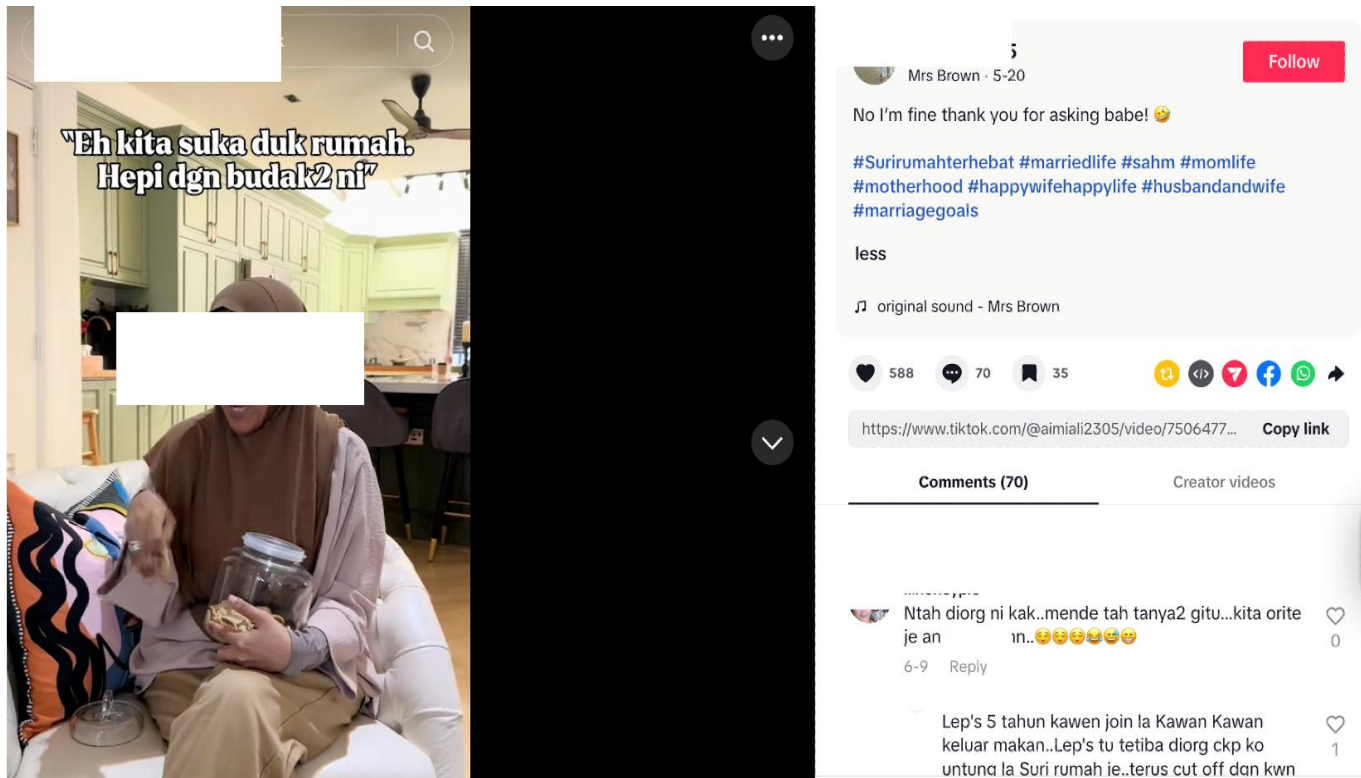


Figure 7 Zakiah [TikTok post]

Denotatively, the TikTok video features Zakiah, a SAHM, responding humorously and sarcastically to common questions about being a SAHM. The visual shows only the mother at home, acting out exaggerated expressions of frustration such as crying and screaming. The caption and hashtags reinforce pride and solidarity in the SAHM role with sarcastic phrases like “*Eh kita suka duk rumah. Hepi dgn budak2 ni*” [“We like staying at home. (We are) happy with the kids”]. The post replies to hypothetical queries like “*Best ke jadi mak-mak surirumah?*” (“Is it great to be stay-at-home mothers?”) with a mix of irony and direct personal assertion.

Connotatively, this post constructively reclaims power for SAHMs using wit and sarcasm to challenge stereotypes and dismiss patronising assumptions. The mother asserts her identity by openly referencing herself as a SAHM while critiquing societal misconceptions that undermine the role’s difficulty. The humour softens expressions of struggle, portraying the SAHM role as both challenging and fulfilling, which *positions* the mother in a contested space of *powerlessness* and *empowerment*. The interactive *TikTok* format with likes, comments, and sharing further fosters collective support among SAHMs, strengthening communal identity and relationality. The post also situates *local* Malaysian cultural nuances in digital mothering discourses. Overall, this TikTok post exemplifies how SAHMs strategically negotiate their identities by combining humour, irony, and personal assertion to resist marginalisation and foster solidarity within digital mothering communities.

The analysis of findings, thus far, contributes substantively to understanding how Malaysian new mothers construct and negotiate their identities concerning motherhood and career within social media. The integrated analytical framework, melding sociocultural linguistic identity theory (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), feminist poststructuralism (Baxter, 2007), and hegemonic femininities (Schippers, 2007), provides a comprehensive lens to capture the complexities and fluidity of identity performances across platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Threads*, and *TikTok* (Irwan Nadzif & Tang, 2017). The findings reveal that mothers actively use

intertextual cultural and religious resources, adapting their self-representations to reflect both *local* socio-religious norms and *global* motherhood discourses (IKIM, 2025; Yoong, 2022).

One salient feature is *temporality*: mothers reflexively construct their identities not solely in relation to social expectations or peer networks but also relative to their prior selves, such as navigating transitions from feelings of doubt or ambivalence to empowerment and agency (Tang et al., 2017). This temporal dimension is evident in social media narratives documenting evolving career and motherhood experiences. Together with evidence of persistent career–motherhood tensions (Ho, 2024; Statista, 2024) and the increasing prominence of work-at-home entrepreneurial identities (Mohd Noor et al., 2024), the research highlights social media as a dynamic arena for mothers’ ongoing, context-sensitive identity work that challenges rigid binaries while fostering solidarity within Malaysia’s unique cultural landscape. Also, these identity negotiations are shaped and performed in platform-specific ways, where, for instance, Facebook’s public affordances support confessional narratives and Instagram’s visual focus facilitates curated representations (Irwan Nadzif & Tang, 2017).”

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the complex discursive construction of motherhood and career identities among Malaysian new mothers, mediated through digital communication and shaped by intersecting cultural, social, and religious discourses. Applying an integrated analytical framework outlined above, the study captures dynamic, multimodal, temporally situated identity work reflected in diversified social media practices. It foregrounds mothers’ reflexivity in *repositioning* themselves across relational and temporal axes, enriching scholarship on digital motherhood beyond Western-centric paradigms.

Addressing gaps in existing literature, this study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary, multimodal analysis to appreciate the interplay between online and offline identity work. The findings spotlight social media’s dual role by potentiating, reinforcing, and transforming motherhood and career discourses, extending theoretical and empirical understandings of discursive identity construction. These contributions invite further research exploring diverse cultural contexts, longitudinal identity trajectories, and richer digital textualities in parenthood discourses.

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