

Addressing Ethnic Polarization on social media in Malaysia: A Review of Said Nursi's Framework of the Positive Action (*Müsbet Hareket*)

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is constantly caught up in ethnic polarization, which is worsened by the narratives in the social media. National mobilisation for the unity of the people has long been in place, but the divide between various ethnic groups is a nightmare, even growing, especially in the use of digital platforms where hate rhetoric can thrive. This is a study on the concept of "Positive Action" (*Müsbet Hareket*) developed by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and which can be a new perspective for understanding and intervening in ethnic conflicts. A 20th century scholar from Turkey, Nursi stressed a positive attitude, dialogue and the importance of positive action over negative conflict, which is all in line with Islamic values of compassion, justice, and equality. But the query now becomes how much of the relevance of this thought can be realised in Malaysia's complicated digital ecosystem, where algorithms can serve to reinforce extreme opinions instead of the promotion of understanding. Can the 'Positive Action' message break the wall of the cyber echo chamber and actually create positive behavioural change? This research suggests that *Müsbet Hareket* can continue to be an idealistic programme, not able to realize its transformative effect without adaptation strategies, in the difficult field of social media.

Keywords: Ethnic Polarization, Social Media, Positive Action, Said Nursi, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic relations in Malaysia are always on the verge of a flare up like embers in chaff that is ready to burst into flames at any moment. While the concept of unity is touted, the understanding between the ethnic groups is far from complete, and in fact, it is even worse due to the smartphone revolution of social media. Internet platforms, the mediums of the future, are instead being used incorrectly, as a medium for the propagation of racist ideas and hatred that wreak havoc. Once, Professor Datuk Dr. Teo Kok Seong, from the National University of Malaysia (UKM), claimed that ethnic polarization in Malaysia is on a worrying level and that social media is playing the main role in stirring up sensitive issues (Nozina, 2020). In a society, which relies so much on virtual interaction, we still do not bridge ethnic gaps well.

The big question is not simply how to limit the propagation of harmful material, but whether it is possible to plant the seeds of peacefulness and understanding in a space such as the internet that has a habit of spreading extreme ideas. The existing strategies are mostly reactive, both via law enforcement and public awareness campaigns, and do not seem to be effective enough to tackle the cause of the issue. In digital communication strategies, there is a significant lack of awareness in how moral and spiritual values can be strategically embedded in advance to foster unity in a sustainable way.

Thus, this research aims to bridge this gap by examining the theoretical framework of 'Positive Action' concept developed by the great scholar 'Said Nursi' which can be adapted theoretically in Malaysia. As a person who lived in a very turbulent period of the political and social life in Turkey, Nursi highlighted the need for positive actions, peaceful discussion and non-destructive struggle for the good of the society (Faiz, 2016). His thought, based on the teachings of the Quran and Hadith, urges unity, compassion and the absence of hostility (Faiz, 2016). Is it a concept, which originated in a different socio-political context, relevant and applicable in today's complex and contemporary Malaysian social media environment? It's not just an academic activity; it's an urgent attempt to come out of the polarization maelstrom that threatens to tear the nation apart. Transcending rhetoric and coming up with a truly transformative intervention model is what we need for our success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of ethnic polarization in Malaysia is not a new occurrence, but has been transformed by the proliferation of social media in terms of its dynamics and intensity. In previous times ethnic differences were more hidden and in some instances, flared up in isolated incidents, but today they can be viral and spread immediately, creating sentiment and increasing divisions. While traditional mass media can play a role in nation building processes at times, they also have problems in handling sensitive issues (Pandian et al., 2010). Social media, on the other hand, having a free and quick flow of content, is a good environment for the dissemination of fake information, racist provocations and hate speech which jeopardizes harmony (Kasim et al., 2022; Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia, 2025).

The issue of ethnic polarization in Malaysia has long been observed by several researchers. The gap was illustrated by Lee Lam Thye, a social activist who publicly voiced his concern on the growing polarization between the different ethnic groups, even among 'inhabitants' of schools (Nordin, 2016). Professor Teo Kok Seong also gave a warning that the state of ethnic relations in Malaysia is at a perilous level, aggravated by social media and the irresponsible politicians (Nozina, 2020). However, other studies have revealed that some ethnic groups tend to rely more on ethnic media than on Malaysian media to build their ethnic identity rather than Malaysian identity, thus exacerbating social polarization (Nor et al., 2022). This indicates that usage of media is a problem too, not only the dissemination of it.

The aspect of social media algorithms has also been criticised as it tends to validate users' preconceptions and perspectives, reducing in space the dialogue between cultures (Tapsell, 2013). This creates 'echo chambers' which means people only see content that matches their opinions and any other information is excluded which leads people to be further away from alternative views and creates extremism (Nor et al., 2022). This is a phenomenon that makes it increasingly difficult to promote understanding between ethnic groups, since it goes against the way that information is generally passed on in digital environments.

Solutions are sought and the Islamic approach is often presented as a viable solution. Islam, a religion of peace and well-being, has a concept of social integration that advocates unity, compassion and avoiding division, as found in the Quran and Hadith (Faiz, 2016; Abdullah & Salim, 2014). The idea of *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin* (mercy to all worlds) highlights the aspect of compassion, justice and equality for all creation irrespective of religious or ethnic background (Ulva et al., 2021). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself applied policies that ensured harmony within a multi-ethnic society such as building mosques as centers for the community, making treaties with non-Muslims (Abdullah & Salim, 2014; Abdullah & Shaari, 2019) and encouraging brotherhood among the various ethnic groups under the name of Islamic brotherhood. This is a testament to the fact that Islamic values are very solid in making unity in a plural society.

In this discussion, a relevant figure comes into mind: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a Turkish scholar (1877-1960). In his magnum opus, *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi offers a vision of coexistence that is not apologetic, but rather a transformative dialogue model, which is grounded in *tawhid* (Divine Oneness), *rahmah* (compassion) and *adl* (justice) (Vahide, 2011). He experienced the Turkish transition and secularization period, and saw the fragility of brotherhood and the rise of the disintegrator movements (Faiz 2016; Hakim & Shuhari 2020). Nursi did not resort to politics or violence but instead adopted a cultural and scholarly route towards achieving social integration, focusing on positive action (*al-'amal al-ijabi*) which infuses moral and spiritual struggle (Faiz) into the process. It is not only educational thinking that is limited to him, but also his thoughts on Sufism, creed,

theology, history, peace, and educational movements, in which he gives great importance to progress and peace in education (Nursi, 2008). He presented the concept of integrating knowledge and tried to teach religious sciences in secular schools and modern sciences in religious schools, which shows a holistic philosophy for the integration of knowledge (Nursi, 2008; Mardin, 1989).

The main principle of Nursi's approach is the "Positive Action". It involves prioritizing construction and repair and refraining from any type of destruction and conflict. He said that the most important factor to social happiness is the exchange of ideas and opinions with consultation (*shura*) and the lack of consultation among Asian countries is the reason behind their backwardness. Nursi thought that through the social-political mechanism, the society would turn Islamic, if the majority of people are already Islamic and practicing acts that are in harmony with Islam. It is a bottom up approach as opposed to other *dakwah* movements that employ political forums and harsh approaches (Faiz, 2016).

While Nursi didn't explicitly mention social media, there is the potential for adaptation of his principles. Social media, as highlighted by Jakaria Dasan, Director of the UMS Corporate Communications Centre, must be looked at with a positive outlook and be used not for misunderstandings, but for unity (Andreas and Awang, 2021). Social media campaigns can be used strategically to improve awareness and opinions; they should include interesting and appropriate information (Nasrullah, 2017). Open digital communication, engagement, and problem-solving can foster community trust (Pamungkas et al., 2024). This, however, needs a high level of digital literacy and understanding of the ethics of social media (Hamzah et al., 2025; Agustina et al., 2023).

Previous research indicates that social media can be a force for uniting or polarizing people (Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia 2025; Tapsell 2013). It can connect people of different ethnic groups to discuss social issues but at the same time it can also be a place where fake news and racially-charged information can spread (Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia, 2025). Hence, the question is how to use social media as an educational medium to build tolerance and harmony in handling the delicate issues (Mohd Salleh & Yusof 2025).

From the literature, it is very clear that ethnic polarization is indeed a serious issue in Malaysia, with social media playing a significant factor. While there is an awareness of the importance of Islam and the need for a positive approach, the framework of Said Nursi is not usually analysed in depth with a specific focus on the Malaysian social media context. It is necessary to study and translate the principle of *Müsbet Hareket* into concrete digital communication strategies in order to overcome ethnic polarization, go beyond unity rhetoric and create a more tolerant and inclusive society.

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative and conceptual and documentary analysis as the main research method. The design was purposefully selected to gain insight into Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's thinking and his concept of Positive Action and to evaluate the relevance of the concept in the context of ethnic polarization that happened in social media platforms in Malaysia. By using qualitative research, including document analysis, the researcher can explore the rich philosophical and theological detail without collapsing it into quantitative data which could be misinterpreted. Not just for the data, but to comprehend how Nursi thought and why his thought can be a remedy to social problems arising from the digital ecosystem.

The document selection was done on a selective and systematic basis. The works of Said Nursi were prioritized over others, particularly *Risale-i Nur* collection (Nursi, 2008), and critical and authoritative secondary studies of his thought. The following secondary sources are selected: doctoral theses, indexed academic journal articles and well-known monographs published by reputable publishers. This study avoided popular sources like blogs, general news articles or non-academic articles that were not peer-reviewed. The goal is to not fall into superficial interpretive bias, and to build arguments upon accurate and authoritative interpretation of the original sources.

Data collection was conducted through systematic search of academic books from various databases including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar and MyCite (a database of Malaysian journals). The following keywords have been used: 'Said Nursi', '*Müsbet Hareket*', 'Positive Action', 'ethnic polarization Malaysia', 'social media and ethnic unity', and 'Islam and social integration'. Carefully reading of each abstract and

introduction was done to evaluate the content with the research objectives. Thematic content analysis was then used for the selected documents. This does not simply involve summarizing what is being said, but finding the main themes, concepts, and arguments in the research of Nursi that pertain to unity, conflict, positive communication, and social justice.

An example of such questions is: What is Nursi's conception of "Positive Action"? Is there just a lack of violence or is there some positive work taking place that constructs goodness? What is his attitude towards the individual in a plural society? How to link Islamic values with social needs? This work was done by hand by underlining, margin noting and comparing interpretations between different sources with a view to consistency and accuracy.

The second phase was to make sense of Nursi's ideas in the context of the problem of ethnic polarization in Malaysian social media. This entailed a careful process of interpretation: how do Nursi's principles which emerged in the context of early 20th century Turkey, "dialogue" with the digital problems of the 21st century in Malaysia? This study does not make any assumption of literal and direct application, but it looks for opportunities of similarity, analogy, and opportunities for creative and responsible adaptation. For example, in the context of shifting the concept of consultation to a positive digital dialogue, which can be found in cyberspace. What can be gained from the emphasis on *brotherhood* (*ukhuwah*) from the 'echo chambers' created by social media algorithms?

Lastly, this study is aware of certain methodological shortcomings. The process of concept analysis is not enough to provide empirical evidence to the "Positive Action" in Malaysian social media. The primary focus of this study, however, is the development of a solid theoretical underpinning that can be empirically tested in future studies. This study is, in other words, the intellectual basis, it is a conceptual path which is laid out before the field expeditions, as it were, a theological blueprint. Any policy or community based intervention would be superficial and may not be effective without understanding the philosophical foundations. As such, this approach is intentional and intended to get to the meaning, not the superficial data.

FINDINGS

Ethnic polarization on Malaysian social media is not just a surface issue; it is a reflection of latent social tensions, amplified by the intrinsic nature of digital platforms. Our analysis reveals several critical themes that frame Said Nursi's "Positive Action" framework as a potential response.

First, the "positive action" (*al-'amal al-ijabi*) over "negative action" is a very relevant principle in an environment of social media that is provocation-prone. Nursi insisted that struggle should be conducted in moral and spiritual ways and not in a destructive and anarchistic manner (Faiz, 2016). This is not just pacifism but a positive approach to construction, not destruction. This means that in the social media landscape, it is a shift in energy from divisive debates to developing positive content, facilitating positive discussion, and disseminating unifying stories. If each and every person who is inclined to spitting hate were to opt for "positive content" (Andreas & Awang, 2021; Ministry of Communication and Informatics, 2021), the digital landscape would change. This involves a change of attitude from emotional reactivity to rational proactivity.

Second, Nursi mentioned five principles of harmony in social life which are mutual respect, love, respect for the constitution, security stability and avoiding anarchic actions (Faiz, 2016). While they are described in a physical social context, they resonate well with what happens in cyberspace. Respect between people, for instance, is one of the barriers to hate speech. In digital empathy, users make an attempt to understand other people's point of view, a form of love (Hamzah, et al., 2025). Respecting the constitution and laws turns into the groundwork for responsible digital ethics (Kasim et al., 2022). What is often the root of polarization that we see is the lack of action on these principles when it comes to the virtual. There is a significant difference between the values held and those being practiced on social media.

Third, the idea of integration of knowledge, which is one of Nursi's ideas and suggests the integration of religious knowledge and modern sciences (Nursi, 2008), can be applied to digital literacy. Nursi strongly felt that the integration of knowledge would result in a more holistic understanding (Nursi, 2008). Today, in a digital world this implies not only the skills of social media usage but also the moral, ethical and religious values to be

introduced into them. This is a deeper 'digital literacy education,' going beyond merely identifying fake news, to building a responsible and ethical digital character (Hamzah et al., 2025; Agustina et al., 2023). If we don't give people a solid value system, we shouldn't be surprised that they won't be using social media in a positive way.

Fourth, the principle of consultation (shura) was singled out as the foundation for the happiness of the society and the reason for the backwardness of the Asian countries because they do not practice it (Faiz, 2016). Consultation can be seen as positive cross-cultural dialogue on social media. But digital platform algorithms tend to create echo chambers (Tapsell, 2013). Thus, the "Positive Action" in this context will need to involve some proactive steps to disrupt these echo chambers, including developing platforms or initiatives that purposefully allow for the convergence of different viewpoints in a respectful manner. This represents a significant challenge because it requires digital interactions designed around the difference between the human tendency to connect with like-minded individuals.

Fifth, the concept of *ukhuwwah Islamiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood) that transcends ethnic boundaries in the context of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the city of Medina (Abdullah & Salim, 2014) can be applied to *ukhuwwah insaniyyah* (universal human brotherhood) in Malaysia in a plural context. This is the foundation for developing a sense of shared Malaysian identity, as opposed to narrow ethnic identities (Nor et al., 2022). Awareness-raising, sharing stories of successful integration, and celebrating diversity are some of the ways social media can be used to promote this brotherhood. This is more than just a statement; it's an action that demonstrates that diversity is a strength, not a weakness (Mohamad & Mohamad, 2025).

In general, Said Nursi's thought offers not only a framework relevant for tackling ethnic polarization on Malaysian social media but also a framework that is essential. It calls for a change in attitude and behavior in the digital world, more than just content control, grounded on solid principles of moral standards and a clear vision of unity.

DISCUSSION

Ethnic polarization on social media is not merely a technical issue which can be "fixed" with better algorithms or more stringent laws, it is a symptom of the crisis of values and understanding that exists in our society. An alternative perspective is that of "Positive Action" brought by Said Nursi, which, if embraced with care, may provide a way forward. But discussing the application of Nursi's thought in the digital space of Malaysia needs to be done more critically.

Nursi's concept of "positive action" overturns a reactive response to polarization issues that is common. Generally, when a hate speech incident occurs, society and government act in response to the incident, focusing on punishment and censorship (Kasim et al., 2022). This is required, but is not solving the problem in a way that is directly causing it. In contrast, *Müsbet Hareket* calls for continued building of positive stories, conversation and promoting unifying content (Faiz, 2016). This is not simply "fighting fire with water" but "planting a flower garden so that fire cannot ignite. So the question is, is there a collective mind shift in the digital space from "firefighter" to "gardener"? Making this "positive action" the main focus of advertising on social media will encounter a lot of resistance due to the nature of social media algorithms which will be favoring content that raises emotions and heated debates (Tapsell, 2013; Nor et al., 2022). Rather it is a much more advanced digital communication strategy than simply posting "inspirational quotes" (Nasrullah, 2017). It requires people to be "positive content creators" who generate engaging and relevant content that can stand up to what can be virally spread and shared online negatively (Andreas & Awang, 2021).

The principles Nursi is advocating for mutual respect, love and social peace (Faiz, 2016) are commendable ideals. But the other half of the equation is getting the principles into digital behavior. In the virtual world, anonymity and physical distance can diminish social barriers, permitting users to communicate things they wouldn't in a real setting (Hamzah et al., 2025). Therefore, social media "love" may be more about the purposeful intent to show digital empathy rather than to immediately attack or condemn (Hamzah et al., 2025). This demands a digital literacy which extends beyond the technical skills to emotional and ethical literacy. If they are not reinforced at the individual level, then any proclamation of unity will be nothing more than a ploy.

The incorporation of knowledge proposed by Nursi that is a blend of religious education and modern sciences (Nursi, 2008) is a significant hint in the way of digital literacy education in Malaysia. Digital literacy is primarily technical and attention is given to detecting fake news; however it has not paid sufficient attention to the ethical and moral aspects. In order to build social harmony, youth must be educated as responsible digital citizens by understanding what actions they take on social media could be interpreted as an influence on social harmony (Hamzah et al., 2025; Agustina et al., 2023). This could include embedding civic and religious education in with digital literacy programmes, incorporating values such as tolerance, mutual respect, accountability into religious education programmes, for example by using social media. This model could potentially create technologically educated and socially responsible people, within the digital environment.

The focus of social media on echo chambers is different from the structure of social happiness (Faiz) as the basis of consultation (shura) as argued by Nursi. There is a difference between the structure of social media echo chambers and social happiness (Faiz) as the basis of consultation (*shura*) as argued by Nursi. Algorithms that are used to keep users engaged inadvertently target people into groups with similar views which inadvertently reinforces polarization (Tapsell, 2013). In this context, a digital platform or initiative may be needed to provide specific and intentional opportunities for guided and structured cross-cultural conversation. This is not simply to allow people to debate but to provide a platform for dialogue on the subject matter in an atmosphere of respect, finding common ground and developing understanding (Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia, 2025). This may necessitate the need for effective facilitators, communication rules and rewards for positive interaction.

Last, but not at all least, is Nursi's concept of *ukhuwwah* (brotherhood) which expanded to *ukhuwwah insaniyyah* (universal human brotherhood) is a concept that is most needed in Malaysia. Ethnic polarization is the increase in the salience of ethnic group identities at the expense of the national identity (Nor et al., 2022). Social media, which has the ability to create narratives and build identities, can be a tool to reinforce a sense of belonging to Malaysia. It involves the promotion of content that celebrates cultural diversity, sharing of inter-ethnic experiences, and highlighting common values that unite us (Mohamad & Mohamad, 2025; Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia, 2025). This, however, demands the sustained and ongoing actions of all – the government, civil society groups and individuals – to prevent the message of unity from being drowned in the sea of hatred. If this isn't coupled with deep awareness and commitment, Nursi's *Müsbet Hareket* may be a beautiful idealism on paper that can never truly sink in the depths of the digital polarization of Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic polarization in Malaysian social media is a major issue that can cause social, political and inter-ethnic issues in the Malaysian plural society. This is further reinforced by a virtual world that supports negative sentiment, in many cases unchecked, unaccountable and unfiltered. Current reactive measures, focused solely on law enforcement enforcement, like fines for hate speech or filtering of content, are not powerful enough to tackle the root causes of the problem. Hence it is a vision of transformation that could come from the "Positive Action" (*Müsbet Hareket*) framework of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. However, it is important to adapt to the current social media landscape in a way that is responsible, contextual and familiar with the internal logic of social media.

Nursi did not only exhort against physical violence or rhetoric; he exhorted for positive steps of creating goodness, sowing compassion, fostering meaningful dialogue, and avoiding all aspects of social destruction. If sensibly understood as online principles of mutual respect, compassion, consultation (*shura*), and universal brotherhood (*ukhuwwah insaniyyah*), then they can be effective antidote to the venom of polarization. Malaysian society should educate people to be a "digital citizen" who is technically literate, emotionally mature, ethically sound in communications and can provide a positive contribution to a healthy digital environment. Expanding Nursi's concept of *ukhuwwah* from Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwah Islamiyyah*) to universal human brotherhood (*ukhuwwah insaniyyah*) in Malaysia's plural context is an important step towards building a more inclusive national identity, transcending narrow ethnic and religious boundaries.

If *Müsbet Hareket* is to be effective, though, it can't simply be a theoretical idea that can be found in academic journals. It requires imaginative, ongoing, and responsive digital communication approaches that can break through social media algorithms to reach the 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles'. This includes three concrete

steps: first, mainstreaming the development of positive content that is engaging and relevant to the school, university and community public discourse; second, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, which is directed, structured and professionally moderated; and third, reinforcing moral and ethical values in digital literacy education at the school, university and public community levels. It is a long-term process that will need the whole-hearted resolve of government, schools, civil society groups, opinion leaders (influencers) and each one of us who uses social media.

In the future, empirical research on the effectiveness of interventions based on *Müsbet Hareket* for ethnic polarization on social media in Malaysia should be conducted. For instance, a quasi-experimental study can be employed to investigate the effect of a social media campaign based on the concept of 'positive action' of the Nursi's principles on inter-ethnic perceptions and behavior among Malaysian youth. Empirical evidence of the potential of this framework to be transformative would be stronger when exploring a comparison between a group exposed and the control group that was not exposed to this campaign. Moreover, the importance of the role of the "positive influencers" in the dissemination of the *Müsbet Hareket* narrative, the possibility of changing social media in terms of algorithm design so as to facilitate dialogue and understanding rather than a conflict of emotions.

In conclusion, if we overlook the challenge of digital polarization and do not have an effective moral value system such as *Müsbet Hareket* in Malaysian society, we risk further rending of the social fabric in Malaysia. Although social media has been heralded as a means to connect and free people from oppression, it can also be a divisive agent of chaos if not used appropriately, ethically and in terms of universal human values. Said Nursi tells us that change starts with the person, it filters out to the society, and then to the civilization. If Malaysian unity is to be maintained in the future, we must learn to blend wisdom with modern digital challenges and must have the courage to do good and not something so easily viral with hatred.

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