

# A CORPUS-BASED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE PRIME MINISTER'S COVID-19 ANNOUNCEMENTS

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## Abstract

The language used by world leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic differs significantly from that of peacetime. Under the movement control order, public responses to leaders' speeches occurred primarily through online platforms like social media. These responses reflect citizens' approval or disapproval of the measures and support implemented by the government. This study examines Malaysian public responses on Facebook to COVID-19 announcements made by the 8th Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin. Utilising corpus and discourse analysis techniques, more than 18,000 comments were extracted and examined. Two distinct groups of comments were identified: Reactions to Initiatives (RTI) and Reactions to Regulations (RTR). These comments were mainly analysed using keyword analysis. Findings show that more positive responses were identified with speeches concerning initiatives. These included emotional responses, such as *sedih* and *sebak*, and expressions of appreciation like "love you" and "thank you." In contrast, negative responses were linked to speeches discussing rules and regulations. Responses in this group of comments included sarcasm, the use of derogatory terms like *barua*, and references to wider political contexts. The findings are limited by their primarily quantitative focus with minimal qualitative examination. Therefore, a future study should delve into closer text analysis. Despite these limitations, the study contributes to an understanding of how political discourse shifts during a crisis and the public's reaction to it, and it highlights the role of corpus analysis in mapping sentiment within online crisis communication.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, social media, public attitudes

## INTRODUCTION

In the past, public announcements or press conferences by the government was a one-way communication mediated through the usage of traditional media such as national television and radio broadcasts. As time changed, so did the dynamics of communications. Social media such as Facebook and YouTube began to be introduced, and press conferences are now commonly live streamed on these platforms. This allows for a two-way communication, where viewers share their comments or responses in real-time. During the COVID-19 era, all public announcements in Malaysia by the 8th Prime Minister of that time, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, were live-streamed by the official media RTM, as well as other media. This study aims to investigate 1) the general attitude of the Malaysian online users towards the public announcements, and 2) the most significant words or expressions found in the comments in response to these press conferences.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDIES

While existing research has analysed Malaysian political speeches and the role of social media in politics, a significant gap remains in studies that examine public's online reactions to the speech delivered by leaders in the Malaysian context during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies capture the public's engagement with national events, such as festival celebrations (Sánchez-Aguirre & Van Winkle, 2022), sports events (Li, Zhao & Li, 2021), and even worldwide crises like the announcements during the COVID-19 pandemic (Landi, Costantini, Fasan & Bonazzi, 2022).

There are several studies that adopted corpus linguistic analysis on discourses related to COVID-19 pandemic. The study conducted by Liando, Tatipang, Rorimpandey, and Karisi (2022) analysed the Indonesian president's 2022 speech on easing COVID-19 health protocols. This study used Van Dijk's three levels of discourse analysis, which are macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure. The researchers aimed to identify the discourse elements and aspects, as well as the implied intentions of the president, including his statements' relation to actions, context, history, power, and ideology.

Rasool, Jan and Noreen (2021) study aims to identify and categorise the dominant conceptual

metaphors used to frame the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers used a corpus-based methodology to systematically identify and analyse these metaphors in three Pakistani English newspaper articles. This study utilised AntCont software to analyse the data collection. The researcher sought to understand how these metaphors influenced public perception, shaped people's emotional and behavioural responses, and ultimately constructed a particular narrative about the virus and the global health crisis. The study is firmly rooted in Lakoff and Johnson's 1980 framework, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

Another study conducted by McClaughlin et al. (2023) aimed to understand how the British public received and interpreted public health messages about COVID-19, as well as how individuals in different social groups understood, responded to, and discussed these messages. This study conducted an open-ended question interview with handwritten responses. The collected data were then analysed using Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADA). Sketch Engine was used to analyse the keyword. The findings showed that messages containing vague language, grammatically complex sentences, and jargon were a barrier to comprehension and uptake.

Several studies investigated the public's engagement with the government during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes Xia, Chen and Lu's (2022) study, examination of public opinions about coronavirus vaccines by analysing the language used in online newspapers and magazines to reveal public attitudes. This study also aimed to provide insights that could help governments and public health organizations in developing and implementing effective vaccination policies and communication strategies. This study employed a combined approach of corpus-based analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), following the Discourse Analytical Perspective by van Dijk. A number of corpus linguistics techniques were used to analyse this study, which were frequency list, collocation, and concordance analysis of the word 'vaccine'.

Gherheș, Cernicova-Buca and Fărcașiu (2023) conducted a study on how the Romanian public engaged with the government's official social media accounts on Facebook and YouTube, where the government persuaded the population to get vaccinated against COVID-19. The researchers aimed to understand the volume and nature of the public's engagement, and to see if the government's communication strategy was effective in building support for its vaccination policy. The study used a quantitative approach to measure public engagement,

where two types of public reaction were found, first click-based reaction, which generally showed a positive attitude toward the government's vaccination campaign. The second is the linguistic contents of comments that involved content analysis to categorize the emotions and attitudes expressed in the comments. Unlike click-based reactions, the analysis showed negative public sentiments, where the comments mainly portrayed frustration, anger, and anxiety of the public. Besides that, it also found that the overall level of public engagement with the campaign messages was very low, especially when compared to the total number of subscribers and followers on the government's social media accounts.

The most recent study by Matthews (2025) investigated how and to whom the public attributed blame for the COVID-19 pandemic, its progression, and its consequences over time through a longitudinal study. This study analysed reader comments on UK online news articles published in the BBC News, The Guardian, and MailOnline Facebook pages. There are three techniques of corpus linguistic analysis used in order to identify the patterns and themes related to blame. First Keyword analysis, second is collocation analysis and third, concordance analysis. Findings showed that there are internal actors, i.e., the government and the prime minister, and external actors, i.e. China and the World Health Organization (WHO), who became the main blame agents.

Chew, Jiang, and Soh (2024) analysed the unique linguistic features used by Malaysian citizens' comments during the New Straits Times page's live streaming of COVID-19 press conferences on Facebook, including the functions of the said features. The study's framework was based on David Crystal's (2006) concept of "netspeak" features, where researchers used this feature to categorize the linguistic features found in the comments. Utilising content analysis, the findings showed that 750 out of 1,339 comments displayed net-speak features from Crystal's (2006) list, as well as some new linguistic features. A total of eight linguistic features were identified: abbreviations, emojis, stickers, particles, punctuation marks, translanguaging, capitalisation, and repetition of letters. Worth noting that the use of emojis, stickers, particles, and translanguaging was not included in Crystal's (2006) list. Chew et al. (2024) adopted content analysis and examined comments from the New Straits Times Facebook page. The study by Chew et al. (2024) is somewhat similar to this study in the sense that it examines comments in response to COVID-19 live streamed press conferences. However, instead of focusing on netspeak features, this study focuses on the public attitudes and significant words that reflect the attitudes. Additionally, the current study utilised corpus-

assisted discourse analysis and examined comments from AstroAwani’s Facebook page. The size of data examined in this study is much bigger compared to that of Chew’s (2024). Details of the data examined are presented next.

### OVERVIEW OF THE DATA

Comments were collected from AstroAwani’s Facebook page for six announcements made by the Malaysian Prime Minister concerning COVID-19. Details of the corpus collected are presented in Figure 1, and Tables 1 and 2.

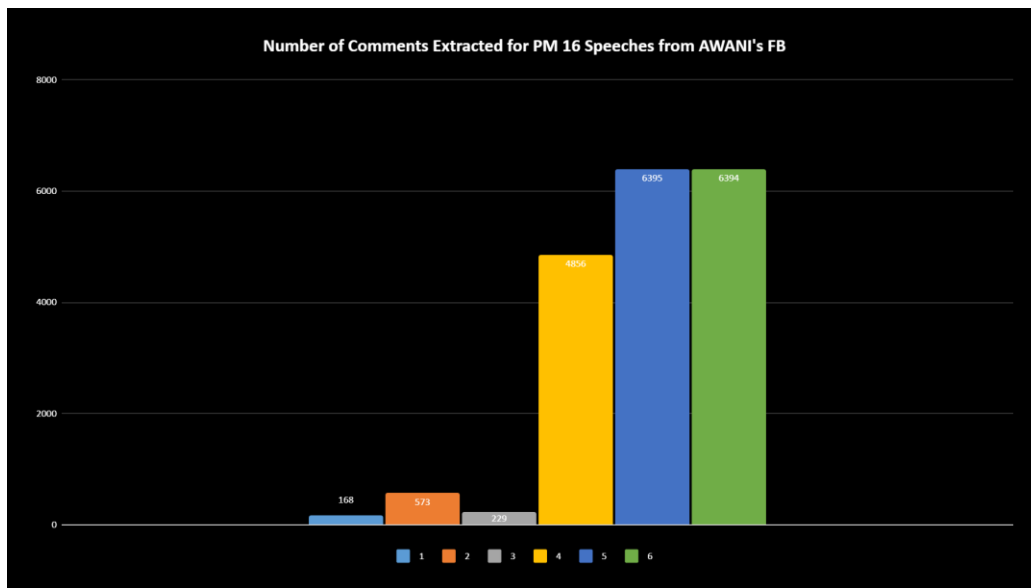


Figure 1. Number of comments extracted from AstroAwani’s Facebook page

Based on Figure 1, the first three announcements received very few comments compared to the following three later announcements indicated by the bar chart. The reason for this huge disparity in numbers, we argue, is due to the contents of the announcements. In total, the number of comments is more than 18,000. Table 1 outlines some basic information regarding the data. A summary of the contents of the press conferences is presented in Table 2 along with the number of responses (in terms of word counts) and other details.

Table 1. Brief overview of the corpus

Num.	Items	Details
1.	Number of comments	18, 615 comments
2.	Number of types	15,174

3.	Number of running words (tokens)	135,093 words
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Table 2. Summary of press conferences content and word count in comments section

Details regarding the speech delivered and live streamed on YouTube					Details about comments in response to the speech	
Num.	Date	Title of the text speech	Details in the speech by the Prime Minister	Summary	No. of running words (Token)	Sub-corpus (total)
1.	13/03/2020	Perutusan Perdana Menteri Malaysia berkaitan Penularan Jangkitan Penyakit Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) di Malaysia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. PM stating the current situation regarding to COVID- 19 pandemic that include the escalating number of COVID-19 cases.</li> <li>2. PM also stated the measures taken by the government towards health, medical, public and social aspects regarding COVID-19- 19</li> </ol>	Focuses on the government's initial reaction to managing pandemic by providing rules and regulations to the citizens.	1,864	Reactions to regulations (RTR corpus - 12, 492 words)
2.	16/03/2020	Perutusan Khas YAB Perdana Menteri mengenai Covid-19 berke naan Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Malaysian government's address on implementing Movement Control Order (MCO)</li> <li>2. PM also pointed out the escalating number of COVID-19 cases and the restrictions during MCO.</li> </ol>		7,351	
3.	18032020	Perutusan Khas Covid-19 Stay At Home	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. this text speech further the explanation on MCO.</li> <li>2. PM telling the purpose of "Stay at Home" and the rules and public appeals during the time.</li> </ol>		3,277	
4.	23032020	Kenyataan Sidang Media YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia- Pakej Rangsangan Ekonomi	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. PM provides details on the initial economic measures the government is taking to help citizens affected by the COVID-19 pandemic</li> <li>2. 4 initiatives were announced, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● EPF Withdrawal (i-Lestari)</li> <li>● Additional funding for healthcare</li> <li>● aid to state government</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	Focuses on government's support to the citizens especially in terms of monetary support and financial relief.	37,660	Reactions to government initiatives (RTI corpus - 122, 601 words)

5.	25032020	Teks Perutusan Khas YAB Perdana Menteri, Tempoh PKP Dilanjutkan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. PM updated the public compliance with MCO restrictions.</li> <li>2. PM regretfully informed the extension on MCO because of the escalating cases of COVID-19 were reported.</li> <li>3. PM announces the economic support and shared responsibility by giving new economic initiatives.</li> </ol>		43,668	
6.	27032020	Teks Ucapan YAB Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Bin Haji Mohd Yassin Perdana Menteri Malaysia Pakej Rangsangan Ekonomi Prihatin Rakyat (PRIHATIN)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. PM addressing the PRIHATIN stimulus packages that will be distributed to all Malaysians and emphasizes that "no one will be left behind".</li> <li>2. The packages include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• direct financial aid for individuals and households,</li> <li>• supporting businesses and employment through subsidiary programmes, financial schemes and bank moratorium.</li> <li>• Additional support for healthcare and frontliners through equipment distribution and special allowances.</li> <li>• Additional relief measures that include discount for electricity bills, free internet access to all Malaysians, food security, housing and rent were waived and PTPTN extended the loan moratorium.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>		41,273	
TOTAL					135, 093	

Table 2 shows the breakdown of points in the speech delivered by the previous Prime Minister. From that, numbers of comments reach about 18, 615 comments, as can be seen in Table 1 and the breakdown of running words of those comments were provided in the last two columns of Table 2. While the whole corpus stands at 135, 093 words, it was divided into two sub-corpora due to the nature of the comments: 1) reactions to regulations (RTR corpus - 12, 492 words)

and reactions to government initiatives (RTI corpus - 122, 601 words). The RTI sub-corpus is at least 10 times bigger in size compared to the RTR corpus.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study we adopted corpus assisted discourse analysis. In particular, we used the Fairclough approach to Critical Discourse Analysis. Additionally, we adopted corpus linguistics approach involving keyword analysis and concordance analysis. We examined the key words generated from keyword analysis using corpus linguistics techniques and discussed these using CDA. The Wordsmith tool was used for the corpus analysis especially for keyword analysis, and from time to time we use concordances to examine the context and co-occurring words surrounding the key terms.

According to Fairclough (1995), there are three levels of analysis. The first level focuses on text analysis of the corpus, which is a description stage, focused on the linguistic features of the corpus. The second level involves looking at the discursive practice. This is an interpretation stage, where it connects the texts to the process of its creation, production and consumption. The final level looks at the social practice, involving the explanation stage, where it focuses on the broader social, ideological, and political context of the corpus.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS**

In the examination of the corpus, focus was given to salient key words identified through keyword analysis and other techniques. Keyword analysis was conducted with the RTR as the target corpus and RTI as the reference corpus. This keyword analysis yielded 418 key words. In Table 3, 52 numbers of keywords were presented according to positive and negative keyword categories. These are further categorised into thematic categories (e.g. emotion and state of being) and sub-categories (e.g. religious and spiritual terms). Positive keywords in this context are words that are overrepresented in the target corpus (RTR) in comparison with the reference corpus (RTI), whilst the negative keywords are words that are underrepresented in the target corpus (RTR) in comparison with the reference corpus (RTI).

Table 3. Categories of key words

Category	Sub- Category	Positive keywords	Negative Keywords
Emotion and state of being	Sentiment/ emotion	-	Thank (696), <i>sebak</i> (choked up)(102), <i>kasih</i> (love)(544), <i>sedih (sad)</i> (132), love (129), best (148), <i>sabar</i> (patience) (619)
	Offensive language	<i>Barua</i> (minion)(143)	-
Nouns/ Proper nouns	Proper Name	Yidin (42), Chinese (153), Malaysian (293)	-
Concepts	Abstract nouns	Super (31), <i>kuasa</i> (power)(20)	Hope (29), life (12), Wisdoms (2)
	Social directives	socialdistancingnow (9)	stayathome (175)
	Health and wellness	vitamin (7)	-
	Religious and spiritual terms	-	<i>Aminnn</i> (amen)(114), <i>Alhamdulillah</i> (praise be to Allah)(464), <i>aminn</i> (amen)(125), <i>amin</i> (amen)(670), <i>aamiin</i> (amen)(567)  *note that all words in this column are derived from Arabic word)
	Time and temporal unit	-	April(234)
	Power and influence	-	control(120)
Social and Professional roles	Group descriptor	<i>menteri</i> (minister)(1,729), <i>pelancong</i> (tourist)(25), association(144),	pm (1,153), <i>org</i> (shortform the word <i>orang</i> , which means people)(99), minister(654)
Descriptive and neutral	Places/ object	Wuhan(10), ring(29), <i>atap</i> (roof)(36), <i>sabun</i> (soap)(10), <i>sekolah</i> (school)(37), <i>kilang</i> (factory)(21), <i>badan</i> (body)(9)	<i>Jabatan</i> (department)(18)
Social expression	Greetings and salutation	-	hi(98)
Lexical field	Action and Behavior	<i>Tebuk</i> (to drill)(36), <i>perhimpunan</i> (assembly)(6), <i>hidup</i> (life)(134)	<i>Terima</i> (to receive)(134)

Ambiguous	Context- dependent	<i>Idah</i> (waiting period)(9), <i>mempunyai</i> (to have)(10), <i>tu</i> (short form of the world <i>itu</i> , which means that or those)(189)	<i>dh</i> (short form of the world <i>sudah</i> , which means already)(92), <i>Je</i> (short form of the world <i>sahaja</i> , which means only)(111), <i>nk</i> (short form of the world <i>nak</i> , which means want)(126), extend(237)

Based on Table 3, the positive keywords are salient words related to how commenters react to announcements about governments’ rules and regulations during the pandemic. This includes negative evaluation of the prime minister and government, and pro-government camps (*barua*, *Yidin*, *kerajaan tebuk atap*). Most of these are repetitions, either by cyber troopers or anti-government camps. Some have a sarcastic tone, *hidup Yidin* translated as *long live Yidin*. This however only appears on 16 March 2020 in response to one of the speeches. This is considered sarcasm because *Yidin* is the name of the Prime Minister at the time and calling him as *Yidin* instead of his full name *Muhyiddin*, or as the Prime Minister is considered degrading. Only a few numbers of words could be considered are supportive and neutral in the positive category key words. This is demonstrated through what is probably part of a hashtag: *socialdistancingnow*. Many comments are related to wider political contexts and power struggles (*kerajaan tebuk atap*, *super ring*). *Kerajaan tebuk atap* can be translated as a government established through questionable means. Literally *tebuk atap* is a Malay idiom translated literally as “poking holes in the roof” and according to Basyir et al. (2023, p. 1), “it is used metaphorically to refer to attempts to undermine or topple a government, usually through internal conflicts, dissent, or political maneuvering”. The metaphor is widely used in 2020 once *Muhyiddin Yassin* was appointed as the 8th Malaysian Prime Minister after a huge political turmoil forced the then Prime Minister, *Tun Mahathir Mohamad* to resign.

The word ‘super’ and ‘ring’ actually refers to a Malaysian snack called The Super Ring. The Super Ring is a well-known, brightly coloured cheesy corn snack that has been a popular Malaysian childhood favourite for decades. The snack gained significant political visibility and went viral in May 2020 when then-former Prime Minister, *Dato' Sri Najib Razak*, posted a photo of himself eating a packet of Super Ring on his official Facebook page (Lim, 2020). This post became a catalyst for political trolling because it was widely seen as *Najib* gloating over the recent

internal conflicts within the rival party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU). The post was uploaded shortly after Bersatu announced the dismissal of its chairman, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who is also a two-time former Prime Minister (Lim, 2020). The political trolling did not end there. When Dato' Sri Najib Razak was convicted on multiple counts of abuse of power, criminal breach of trust (CBT), and money laundering by the court, the opposition escalated the mockery. Ng Sze Han, then the Selangor EXCO for Local Government, Public Transport, and New Village Development, was among those who publicly trolled Najib, posting a photo of himself wearing seven rings of the snack on each of his seven fingers—symbolizing the total number of charges on which Najib was found guilty (MalaysiaKini, 2020). Surprisingly, Dato' Sri Najib enjoyed the troll directed at him by reminding one of the ministers who joined the trolling, former PKR Information Chief, Shamsul Iskandar Mohd Akin, to take care of his diet (Najib Razak, 2020). In the case of the use of the super ring in the context of online responses to COVID-19 announcements by the Prime Minister, this can be understood as anti-government blocks or Najib's supporters trolling Muhyiddin Yassin using the same way as Najib back then. This shows how political trolling can last and somehow become context and culture specific considering those outside of Malaysia and those unfamiliar with the political situations in Malaysia might not be able to understand its meaning.

To some extent, the negative key words are reflective of the responses received during the speeches by the former Prime Minister about initiatives and support roll outs for the Malaysian citizens. Most of the comments are positive evaluations of the prime minister (pm, love, best), and the government ( thank [you], best). Other categories in Table 3 that can be considered positive evaluations include emotional responses *sebak* (*choked with emotion*) and *sedih* (*sad*) as well as religious and spiritual terms (*AlhamduLillah*, and *aminn*). Most of the religious or spiritual terms are repetitive. Arguably, the comments (*Aminn*) might have been posted real time during the live event, and the religious terms were posted in conjunction with du'a recitation by the Prime Minister for the wellbeing of the nation and citizens especially on 25th March 2020. The distributions of religious terms like *Aminn* were commonly spread in speeches posted on 23th, 25th, 27th March 2020. Over 300 instances of Aminn were identified in each comments section for videos posted on 25th and 27th March.

## **Discussions**

To a certain degree, users' engagement on live streamed announcement video of a country's leaders, is an indication of the grassroots support to the leader and the reigning government. By comparing the comments in response to two very different groups of speeches (RTI and RTR), the most obvious difference is in terms of the amount of comments. The number of comments is at least ten times more when the Prime Minister announces an initiative to support the nation and citizens (RTI corpus -122, 601), compared to when he announces the rules and regulations in place to curb the pandemic.

Looking at it from another angle, immense support on social media, could indicate two possible realities. First, it could indicate actual grassroots support from the people of the country. This is evident from the high number of expressions of gratitude (thank you, best), and expression of solidarity and connection with the leader (saying *Amin* when the leader recites du'a). This kind of grassroots support is needed by both government and leaders to legitimise any action they plan to take. Second, it might also be possible that the immense support could be the case of astroturfing. The term "astroturfing" originated from the brand product AstroTurf, which manufactures synthetic, artificial grass (Badade & Dhanaraj, 2024). Badade and Dhanaraj (2024) stated that there are four main fields of astroturfing. One of the fields is political, whereby astroturfing is described as a carefully planned and strategic process involving the creation of fake online individuals, accounts, and websites to manufacture and distribute a specific political agenda (Badade & Dhanaraj, 2024). However, without a thorough investigation that involves linguists (language patterns, repetition) and computer scientists (origin of posts, validity of account/profile), it is quite impossible to pinpoint which content is human-generated and which content is generated by non-humans or AI content.

Regardless, more comments do reflect higher engagements, and if those comments are positive, it reflects possible grassroots support for the leader and governments. What's interesting from the findings is that *Aminn* and *AlhamduLillah* is one of the topmost significant words in the corpus that show responses towards initiatives. This indicates that an act from a leader, like reciting du'a, will increase the number of comments and engagements. It also increases emotional responses, as indicated by a report from a news portal (BERNAMA, 2020), that many citizens feel overwhelmed with emotions. While no evidence was provided in the news report, the number of emotion words in Table 3 corroborated this, with words like thank (689), *sebak* (102), *kasih* (539), *sedih* (132), and love (129) were frequently posted in the

comments sections.

With regards to negative evaluations that are evident in the comments within the RTR corpus, that it is a given considering that the Prime Minister is talking about putting restrictions in order. When leaders or governments deliver controversial and highly sensitive announcements, this creates a perfect time for political rivals to attack and link the situation back to a wider political issue (hence instances of *kerajaan tebuk atap* and *barua*). It could also reflect a genuine feeling of non-confidence among the grassroots in the reigning government.

Low public engagement in relation to highly controversial topic like regulation is in line with the study by Gherheş, Cernicova-Buca and Fărcaşiu (2023). Their study also found lower engagement and generally negative public sentiments in response to government's vaccination policy. When presented with controversial topic, the public might prefer to refrain from commenting or responding. However, when the announcement is something desirable like support, cash out or rebate, the public are more engaging, leaving comments showing gratitude and many time writing short responses like '*Alhamdulillah*' or '*ameen*'.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the nature of responses on social media in relation to announcements from a leader. In general, the attitudes of the public are positive when the announcements involve initiatives and support given to the citizens, and negative attitudes are shown when the announcement involves reducing mobility and establishing regulations. These are given and expected attitudes, in which the government and leaders would brace themselves for any backlash from announcement that would be considered something that could be negatively perceived by the public. Regardless, certain action by a leader might boost positive comments like reciting du'a, at least in the case of our data. Public responses are also tied to the political situations and history of the country. Consequently, comments are often unique from one country to the other, as can be seen through the use of terms like *super ring* and *kerajaan tebuk atap*. More research should be carried out in the future to see how responses from other nations or cultural backgrounds align with or differ from this study.

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