

# Malaysian Onion Army and Othering: Radicalized Trolling Hunters on Twitter During Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

With the growing popularity of social media, inequality and discrimination in online spaces has received increasing attention. Hate speech, cyberbullying, online misogyny, and online racism are often either impractically vague or impractical narrow concepts to describe the complex ways in which "othering" speech unfolds in online contexts. Unfortunately, the pandemic has not just disrupted the affected global health crisis but also has brought up a new wave to the rise of cyber troopers or known as Onion Army ('*Bawangrians*') in Malaysia. This study delves into the othering and discrimination encountered and propagated through Twitter. At the same time, to explore the extent to which Twitter exacerbates the othering discourse in the online sphere via trolling. Drawing on Twitter data, this research employs random sampling technique using Streaming API to seek potential public tweets and identify key actors within tweet sample sets using hashtag #*Israelkoyak*. The study contributes to the academic debates about the public sphere, social media, and the role of Twitter plays in the construction of meaning, subsequent cultural and social change and understanding the trajectories across digital spheres.

**Keywords:** *Twitter, Othering, Trolling, Online Activism, Pandemic*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media, fueled by the joy of the Internet, allows people from all walks of life and all cultures to join in discussions and express their thoughts on a wide range of topics. In this realm, individuals have access to an expansion of limitless transformative possibilities for constructing their identities, connecting without borders, and expressing thoughts and concerns with one another and with the world. On the other hand, as online debates have become more prevalent in our daily lives, they have provided a forum for antisocial behaviour, which has resulted in emotional discomfort [1][2][3].

Trolling on social media has recently gained widespread attention, and it is unquestionably tearing the social fabric apart [4]. The issue has been brought to the attention of major news organisations and magazines who have begun to write pieces on both the broad description of the phenomena as well as

specific occurrences that have made a stir regarding the "poison" of various social media platforms [5].

A harmful online conduct known as 'trolling' is meant to irritate, annoy, or disturb other people's online interactions and communication. Trolling is a type of fishing that involves slowly moving the fishing lines back and forth while dragging the bait through the water in the hopes of catching a fish that will eat the bait. Trolls do the same thing by publishing incendiary stuff or sharing it with their followers. The goal of trolling isn't to spark meaningful debate, but rather to show division on the Internet and elicit an emotional response from others purely for the enjoyment of the troll [7]. Because trolling isn't necessarily aggressive, others may find it difficult to filter or exclude. By posting nave, arrogant, harmful or illogical comments trolls [8] conceal their genuine motives. Responding to trolls can lead to a proliferation of unconstructive remarks, especially when the troll uses the correct methods to

extend the exchange. If people engage in talks by responding, this can happen.

Facebook and Twitter were weaponized during the General Election (GE14) in Malaysia to serve the interests of the Barisan Nasional-led government [10]. This is an example of a satirist or ideological troll, which is a form of internet troll. Extreme opinions are frequently expressed by these types of internet trolls, especially when it comes to matters of identity, gender, sexuality, and race during the pandemic, the rise of the Malaysian onion army, also known as 'Bawarians,' has made quite a stir online. There have been a few incidents involving this onion army, including an attack on Al-Qatari Jazeera's news channel [12] and the orchestration of major attacks against Israelis and pro-Israel media by spamming or trolling on mainstream social media. During the Israeli-Palestinian crisis in May of 2021, the term "Koyak," which means "Rip," and the movement *#IsraelKoyak* involved spamming or trolling pro-Israeli information and blocking or suspending pro-Israeli social media accounts. However, in contrast to keyboard warriors, their purpose is to spit facts and evidence to refute statements, not to engage in physical combat. Due to their sheer size and dominance, they exert significant pressure on others to agree with their viewpoints.

Given the example from the above phenomenon, this line of research centers around the 'hashtag activism', which has been a current study in the online sphere [14][15][16][17] and also the act of trolling [18] [19] in their movement. Few studies have shown the function of hashtag as a medium to boost awareness and consciousness, spreading ideas, combating the subjugated knowledge. At the same time, this phenomenon has established the idea of otherness- understood as its simplest as the quality of being other or different.

For the purposes of this study, otherness is conceptualised in a binary manner. Traditional distancing, on the other hand, emphasises distinctions and lays emphasis on a false sense of inferiority [20][21]. Durkheim [22] held a similar point of view on the establishment of otherness between persons and societies. Technical techniques of communication have developed substantially in the last decade, particularly during the epidemic, as a means of promoting hatred, bigotry, and xenophobia [23] [24] [25] [26]. People are more likely to accept violent views or recruit for extremist groups, according to this theory [26], since the internet makes

it more accessible. Despite extensive social psychological study on activism in general and activism on social media in particular, little is known about the extent to which trolling behaviours and otherness might contribute to the establishment of unfavourable views and the commission of later hate crimes [27]. In light of the increasing development in activism studies and otherness on social media, scholarly efforts have been made to investigate and disseminate information about the othering and discrimination experienced and spread through Twitter. Furthermore, to determine the extent to which Twitter trolling contributes to the escalation of the Othering discourse in the online domain is investigated.

### ***1.1. The Effects of Trolling and Racism***

Trolling can be defined as behaviour aimed at raising reactions to others [28]. According to [29] trolling can be used to create a dispute or conflict, or it can be used to create more common interactions that troll is considered funny [30]. As a means of provocation, the Troll can be amusing, cunning, aggressive, surprising, or unpleasant [31]; [30]; [32]; [33]; [34]. Meanwhile, racism occurs when one group can perpetuate systematic discrimination through society's institutional rules and practices and the moulding of cultural ideas and values supporting racist policies and practices [35].

The previous study found that the freedom given in social media opened up opportunities for consumers to spread the feelings of hatred and racism in cyberspace [36]. The effect of the Internet has been used as a field for many users to launch trolling on members and political bodies they love and hate to convey particular political meanings and ideas [37]. Trolls take pleasure in bothering and tormenting people since there is no repercussion for the troll, who derives pleasure from others' anguish and suffering [34]. According to [38], such behaviour causes harm to the online community and may lead to its destruction. Additionally, the trolling effect also causes a person to feel dissatisfied with whom he has caused anger and also causes the person not to be interested in life and is almost twice as likely to commit suicide [39]. Excess troll in social media also provides severe physical and psychological effects, resulting in disturbed thoughts, feelings of self-esteem and depression [40].

Meanwhile, uncontrolled racist properties can cause mental health such as depression, stress,

emotional distress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal thoughts [41]. The impact of racism in life also causes you to feel lonely and isolated, and one also has less trust in the people around it, thereby affecting their social life and making it harder to create a network of friends or feel safe at all [42]. In addition, the impact of racism can be seen when it has a detrimental effect on our interpersonal interactions and relationships, ultimately diminishing us as a people. It fosters harmful tensions in the environment in which all adolescents navigate their developmental processes. [43]. Therefore, this study will investigate the troll transmitted via Twitter by Cyber Troopers or known as ‘Onion Army’ in Malaysia.

### ***1.2. Racial Discrimination on Twitter***

Discrimination was defined as the act of differentiating skin colour, race, religion, social status, and many more [44]. While discrimination took many forms, it is being categorised as discrimination against age, disability, sexual orientation, status as a parent, religious, national origin, pregnancy, sexual harassment, race, colour, and sex, as well as reprisal or retaliation [45].

Considering the rise of social media that was used to collect and read news with discussion among the other users on the Internet, fake news will also interfere with real-world issues discussed among users with genuine conversations [46]. Apparently, racism, terrorism, climate change, HIV/AIDS, human rights, pollution, disease, poverty, equality, and discrimination are among the 10 most talked-about issues that are dominating the Tweet space with over 150 million tweets about it in 2016. Regrettably, about 88% of the recorded tweets were deemed as negative in terms of words and tone, with only 5% positivity, and the remaining 7% neutral or context-dependent tweets.

Ever since COVID-19, there is a rampant on racial discrimination against Asian Americans on social media which were labelled as the “silent group” which faces racism either in-person or online [47]. Out of 288 individuals facing online harassment due to their ethnicity and race, 75% of them were the Asian American adults which was in accordance with the insensitive racist hashtags that have been lurking on social media. Hashtags in a way could instantly gain a large popularity from public prominence (mainly related to an event) [48]. Great examples for this are the #LoveWins hashtag that appeared more

than 7 million times on Twitter – reacting towards 2015 U.S. Supreme Court’s decision towards same-sex marriage – and #BlackLivesMatter.

Founded in 2006, Twitter – one of the most popular and largest social media websites, was conceived as a service for citizen communications with its line of squawk media, short and dispatch messaging [49][50]. With its ability to reach and connect with a large audience, users on Twitter could “follow” each other with similar interest on a wide range of topics which creates a unique dynamic for Twitter [51]. Another unique feature of Twitter is the use hashtags “#” that allow specific groups, people to connect with tweets of larger themes [52]. Being a great sharing news – international and local – information powerhouse, Twitter is allowing users to experience any type of event or moment as if they are there in real time simply by searching any keywords or hashtags [53].

Although free speech policy has been practiced in most democratic countries around the world allowing anyone to have their own will to express their opinions and beliefs as well as share and create any ideas or information [54]. On a global perspective, free speech is basically a human right in which everyone is allowed and given the right to use their voice. Hence, Twitter took the liberty to direct their Help Center in its Safety and Cybercrime towards their Hateful Conduct Policy in which the users are banned from promoting violence against or attack or threaten other people directly in terms of their race, ethnicity, national origin, social status, sexual orientation, gender (including gender identity), religious matters, age, disability, or severe illness. Twitter has been strict on such matters that it did not allow any types of hateful symbols or images to be used in the users’ profile image or header. Additionally, Twitter also prohibited the use of hateful display names (including username or profile bio) towards a group, person, or any of the protected categories.

Only recently in September 2021, Twitter began to test its newest feature that will block hateful messages automatically considering how the U.S. is facing a pressure to protect users from online harassments [55]. The “Safety Mode” once activated, will let the users’ “mentions” to be filtered for over seven days that prohibits them from seeing flagged messages containing insults or hate speech. This feature in particular will run its test on a small group of English-speaking users which prioritise the female

journalists as well as marginalised communities as they are the most common targets of abuse. Initially, Twitter like other social media giants, lets the users to report any posts they deemed as hateful which includes messages with racism, homophobic, and sexism. Such a tool was built in accordance with consultations made with experts on mental health, online safety, and human rights.

Not long before in 2020, Twitter apologised for its image cropping algorithm that was considered “racist” after users found that the feature is focusing on white faces over black ones automatically [56]. Twitter claimed that they have run the service to avoid bias before implementing it but admit that it did not reach the right target. The feature was designed as an algorithmic tool to focus on the main parts of the picture, allowing multiple pictures to be shown in the same tweet with the attempt of ensuring that faces and text stays in the image’s cropped area. Twitter denies the features of being racial or gender bias in their testing despite the clear ‘experiments’ by its users and will openly source their analysis for others to review and replicate.

Evidently, real-life hate crimes in a way were linked with online discrimination based on findings carried out by New York University’s researchers by analysing Twitter posts from 100 U.S. cities for a period of five years, in which it was discovered that if online discrimination towards race and ethnicity were common online, there is a possibility for the hate crimes in real life to be more [57]. Not only that, a study by research group Demos in the U.K. found that over 10,000 racial slurs have been tweeted in English almost every day. It is now more pervasive and unrealistic to separate discrimination be it in its online or offline forms especially with Internet is now being more a part of our life, which is now the kind of environment that we must dipped in. Fortunately, the connection between social media’s hate-filled state and the online and offline behaviour does not have to be our future considering that one is able to alter one’s social environment as much as it changes them.

To prove its stands against racial discrimination, Twitter claimed to delete over 2000 tweets in total and permanently suspended several accounts in regards with racist abuse made towards England players after being defeated to Italy [56]. The company even asserted that racist abuse has no place on Twitter, and actions towards the perpetrators

which were deemed to be violating their rules were taken through proactive detection using technology. However, with racism still ‘alive’ offline, there will always be people trying to bring such issues online which is just terrorising in which technology could not solve on its own [57]. Users, government, and the authorities need to play a role in combating such deep societal issues.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Because of the complexities of the theoretical framework and technique underlying this study, as well as the massive amount of data collected, understanding and summarising the research conclusions is a difficult task. A mixed-methods approach and a pragmatic research paradigm were used in this study. The study investigated the problem by probing the level of awareness among Twitter users during the COVID-19 outbreak and deconstructing the power dynamics encoded in the hashtag used. As a result, because no theory or hypothesis was tested at the outset, this study is inductive in nature. The power and knowledge theory of Michel Foucault is used to interpret the results.

Because web-based data collection has gained popularity among social science researchers for collecting large amounts of data in social media (58), this study employs data mining from hashtag identification, with #Israelkoyak serving as the unit of analysis. Multiplex network construction was deemed necessary to address research issues, and hashtags are a technique for organising important information about a topic on Twitter via data mining via hashtag identification [59]. Data were collected using the Twitter Application Programming Interface from May 17th to June 17th, 2021. (API). The data collection timeline was chosen because it was based on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Because large-scale quantitative data is based on raw data collected through this source, the Streaming API is the most commonly used data source for Twitter research [60]. The Streaming API is a one-of-a-kind data collection method because it is "push" based, which means that "data is constantly flowing from the requested URL (the endpoint), and it is up to the researcher to develop or employ tools that maintain a persistent connection to this stream of data while concurrently processing it" [60]. Users can access a random 1% sample of tweets via Twitter's Streaming API. The third-party Python module Tweepy was used for this purpose. It needs to use a





Figure 2. Tweets from Israel Official Account

In contrast, when we looked at the most shared tweets, we found that they were mostly counter-narratives in support of Palestine/Hamas, with nine out of the top ten retweets being such. As a result, it became clear that many of the derogatory phrases being used in the tweets were directed towards Israel's attack on Masjid Al-Aqsa, as well as those who remain silent in the face of despicable attacks on the holy site. While on the other side, a flood of insensitive tweets from the Israel Official Account during the ongoing crisis has also been cited as one of the primary reasons why the post went viral and drew widespread condemnation from internet users (Figure 2). The tweets drew widespread condemnation, especially in light of the high death toll in the ongoing situation, and they demonstrate how arrogant and powerful the Israeli government has been in its representation of the Palestinian people in the media (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Tweets that received criticism from netizens

At the same time, a chart showing the human toll of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between 2008-2020 was also received huge retweets from netizens with

1,383 of retweets (Figure 4). Netizens who were part of the activism responded with their own series of emojis to show their solidarity with the occupation.

However, despite the fact that the counter-narrative was supported by the biggest number of tweets in our sample, this was a rather short-lived phenomenon. In the following section, we will describe the outcomes of a qualitative study of the most widely circulated tweets, which will help us understand these patterns even better.

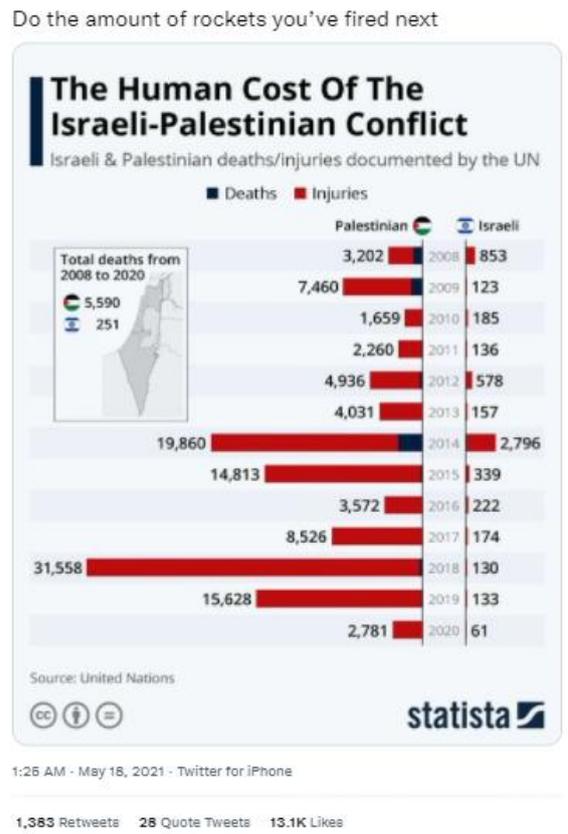


Figure 4: Human toll chart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between 2008-2020

### 3.2. Otherness and Activism behind #IsraelKoyak

Tweeting serves as a public arena that is "rendered real in written discursive interactions in which participants reflect on, revise, reject, and reproduce social knowledge as influenced by their offline experiences" [63], thus it is a form of social media. According to this case study, the hashtag #IsraelKoyak on Twitter was widely used to express opposition to the activist effort as well as a variety of reasons for participation in it. During the Israel-

Palestinian attack, the hashtag #IsraelKoyak was retweeted more than half a million times, and most users took advantage of the opportunity to mass spam Israeli private and public accounts with trolling in order to silence pro-Israel sentiments.

During the attack, some of the posts and tweets were labelled sensitive content and been hidden from the public, especially stories including bombing aftermaths, Palestinians being threatened by the Israeli army and the heart-wrenching pictures of injured children and parents grieving. Amid the posts, this is actually an initiative to share unrelated picture and mark algorithm breaks as an attempt to ensure their posts will not be detected and deleted by AI. Hence, it is important to really understand what is happening through the lens of oppressed Palestinians and what has been subjugated.



Figure 5. Tweet using #IsraelKoyak

This can be seen from the tweets examples below (Figure 5) (Figure 6). Note that, oppression is also embedded within individual consciousness; it includes personal bias, bigotry and social prejudice, and restricts self-development and self-determination [64].



Figure 6. Tweet using #IsraelKoyak

Similarly, [65] discourse is formed not only by pre-existing social formations and historical accounts, but also by social groups, subject positions, and identities. This is applied to current situations in which Twitter users tweet and retweet the #IsraelKoyak, demonstrating how knowledge is constructed.

Consider how Palestinians have been subjugated; the concept of 'othering' has been developed and packaged as 'outsider'. It entails the formation of the self, or 'in-group,' and the other, or 'out-group,' by identifying the former's advantages and disadvantages in comparison to the latter [66]. It is a technique for establishing the existence of a 'subordinate' group [67].

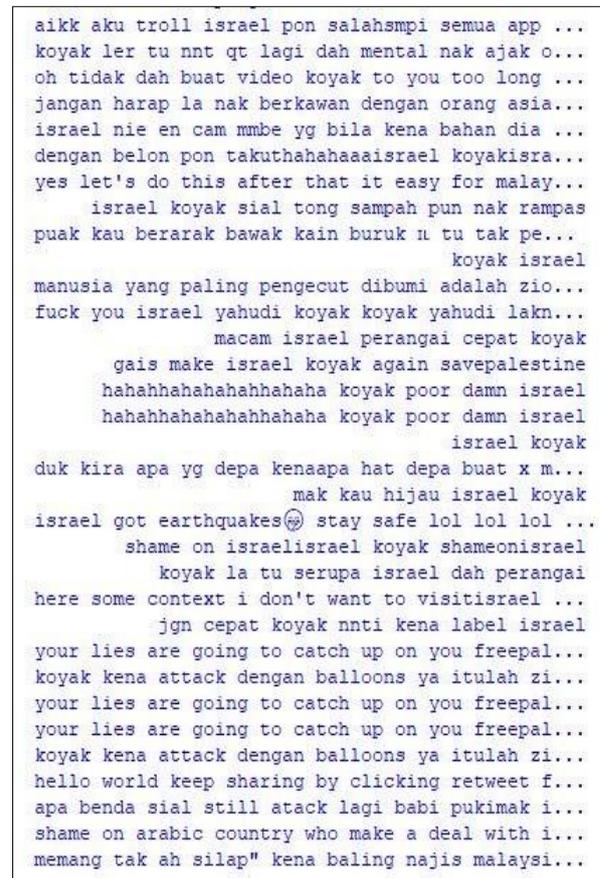


Figure 7. Examples of tweets #IsraelKoyak

In the speech examined in (Figure 7), the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy reaches a crescendo. The majority of the tweet can be interpreted as individualization. This racist outburst is related to the inner self, which demands that the racist be a better person than others.

The influence of hashtags such as #IsraelKoyak is frequently cited as an example of how this process may bring injustices to the attention of a wider public, increasing pressure to hold criminals accountable, and even leading to power relations challenges [68]. The study also discovered that a significant proportion of tweets are conveyed either by reinforcing negative other-presentation or comparing the self and the other. This collective voice was represented by utilising the words ‘*Kau*’ and ‘*Aku*’ to demonstrate empowerment (**Figure 7**). Racism, once again, is about a damaged character. It is all about hubris and arrogance.

Nonetheless, discursive interactions with larger publics influence racialized digital counterpublics. #IsraelKoyak is a social justice activist who uses empowering processes to give people pride in their group identity and a sense of community while working in solidarity with others to right wrongs [69]. Due to the "call" and "response" structure of Twitter discourse and the ability for users to tag one another, users can hold one another accountable and directly criticise one another. Additionally, Twitter is both impersonal in terms of face-to-face interaction and incredibly personal in terms of in-user interaction.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of hashtags in assisting progressive efforts, as ordinary people and those without access to traditional forms of power create compelling, unavoidable narratives. Hashtags have become popular and spread to other social media platforms since Twitter employee Chris Messina sent the first ever tweet containing a hashtag in 2007 [70]. Besides, hashtag has demonstrated its role and plays a minor role in networked counter-public actors, and it possesses political and cultural power. Twitter is one of the mediums that aids in the digital and physical construction of narratives through the use of hashtags. It represents a golden opportunity for an oppressed group of people to reframe a public narrative that has been misrepresented or ignored by the public sphere. The public is now aware of what was previously hidden. The hashtag #IsraelKoyak demonstrated how twitter activism, within this interconnected environment of media and platforms, has raised people's awareness of this issue. The Twitter hashtag has inspired people not only in Malaysia, but all over the world, to focus on Israel's oppression of Palestinians. It demonstrates

that hashtags are significant for conveying more than linguistic meaning, as they influence how users interact with the Twitter platform [71]. Hashtags also demonstrate themes or topics, and they represent an important innovation in social media communication [72]. Furthermore, the hashtag's affiliative function is viewed as a means of investigating the 'imagined audience' [71][73] of users spreading racist denial expressions.

While we acknowledge the real impact that digital counterpublics and hashtag activism have had on progressive movement building and culture creation, we also recognise the serious limitations of the technological platforms and corporate logics that racial justice narratives evolve within. Furthermore, despite the inclusion of the term "online," we believe it is important to recognise that "othering" does not occur in a "virtual vacuum"—it is a part of everyday life and has real consequences in what some have chosen to call the "real" (versus the "virtual") world. As a result, the 'other' discourse is the subject's unconscious mind.

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