

Who's to blame for the rohingya refugee crisis? Analyzing 'Scapegoating' narratives in youtube news channel commentaries from Indonesia and Malaysia



Anam Miftakhul Huda^a ✉ | Aditya Fahmi Nurwahid^a | Ade Firmannandya^a | Tsurouyya^a |
Adibah Ismail^b

^aDepartment of Communication Science, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia.

^bCollege of Arts and Science, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Abstract This study examines scapegoating narratives in YouTube commentaries on the Rohingya refugee crisis, specifically how Indonesian and Malaysian netizens assign blame to various actors. Using semantic network analysis and topic modeling, the research identifies distinct patterns of blame attribution. Findings reveal that in Indonesia, criticism is directed towards the President, Indonesian Government, and the Indonesian National Army (TNI), often focusing on perceived weaknesses in border enforcement and a lack of decisive action. This scapegoating tendency may be exacerbated by existing public skepticism towards the performance of security forces. In Malaysia, the Prime Minister and '*Kerajaan*' face backlash related to perceived policy failures and leniency towards refugees, reflecting a demand for stronger governmental intervention. This demand is intertwined with broader concerns about governance and political support within the country, where government effectiveness is closely scrutinized. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how resistance to granting citizenship to Rohingya refugees and negative online portrayals are connected to digital discourses of nationalism and xenophobia, where exclusionary attitudes are amplified. Myanmar is consistently framed as the primary instigator of the crisis, often referred to in association with terms such as ethnic cleansing or genocide. Meanwhile, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is frequently criticized for enabling migration flows rather than effectively addressing the root causes of displacement. These perceptions often arise from public distrust, perceived institutional ineffectiveness, and the portrayal of humanitarian organizations in global media. The findings underscore how digital platforms serve as sites of political expression and polarization, where narratives of blame reflect deeper anxieties over sovereignty, national identity, and migration governance. This study also reveals how online nationalism is constructed and sustained through emotionally charged threat narratives, offering insight into the intersection between media discourse and refugee politics in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: rohingya refugee crisis, Indonesia, Malaysia, scapegoating, YouTube commentaries

1. Introduction

The plight of the Rohingya refugees in Myanmar represents one of the most crucial humanitarian crises in the Southeast Asia region (Ansar, 2020; Missbach & Stange, 2021; Shukri, 2021). Thousand of Rohingya forced to leave Myanmar due to organized persecution, violence, and facing statelessness. They have turned to neighboring countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, as both countries frequently become temporary havens for displaced people, although the countries are not signatories to the 1951 refugee convention (Gunawan et al., 2024; Yusoff et al., 2019). The influx of refugees has sparked controversy, leading to diverse reactions from the government, local communities, and the public in general. While some narratives focus on altruism and the spirit of solidarity (Berndsen et al., 2024; Sadjad, 2022), others pivot towards blaming various actors who are accountable for the crisis, promoting scapegoating tendencies in public discourse.

In the digital era, social media platforms such as YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook have become critical spaces in addressing the narrative of the Rohingya refugee crisis (Ahammad et al., 2024; Al-Rawi, 2019; Ansar & Maitra, 2024). These platforms enhance voices, facilitating a rapid dissemination of opinions, but also encouraging polarized debates among *netizens*. The debate surrounding the Rohingya situation often transcends beyond regional borders, revealing 'how blame is assigned.' Every stakeholder, such as governments, international organizations, and even the Rohingya refugees themselves, is often blamed in the online interaction, reflecting a broader tension in socio-political issues among Indonesians and Malaysians.



The role of media outlets cannot be overstated in framing the narratives of the Rohingya refugee crisis. As evidenced in analyses of News production related to Rohingya coverage, blame-shifting is a recurring theme (Abbas, 2024; Al-Zaman & Rashid, 2024; Irom, 2023). Media organizations, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, play a significant role in influencing public opinion by deciding how they present refugee-related topics, whether highlighting humanitarian efforts or emphasizing the strain on national resources (Fariadhi et al., 2024; Khairi et al., 2024). Netizen on the internet then discuss these perspectives, arguing about matters concerning accountability, patriotism, and ethics.

This research positions itself at the intersection of how media outlets frames narratives of the crisis and explores how the public opinion reacts to it. This investigation is relevant, as digital media plays a significant role in shaping the socio-political landscape of both nations. The study focuses on the scapegoating narrative. It investigates how media outlets frame the Rohingya refugee crisis and how the public reacts on digital platforms. By examining scapegoating stories in comment sections of YouTube news channels, the aim is to reveal how these discussions reflect societal conflicts in Indonesia and Malaysia related to refugee issues.

2. Scapegoating in Media Agenda and Public Conversation

Scapegoating is a longstanding sociological phenomenon in which blame is assigned to an individual or group for societal or systemic failures, usually to avoid responsibility and uphold social unity. This practice transcends historical and cultural contexts, serving as a method of dealing with crises by transferring collective guilt or responsibility onto a specific entity. The idea remains relevant in today's society, changing its shape and goals to adapt to current political and social dynamics.

In modern contexts, scapegoating has shifted from being a communal mechanism to a more opportunistic practice, often benefiting individuals or smaller groups instead of whole communities. The dynamics of scapegoating have been greatly increased with the introduction of social media. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter facilitate the quick spread of stories, cultivating divided conversations and amplifying public responses. These platforms offer leaders, influencers, and media outlets unique chances to mobilize communities, often by directing collective frustration toward specific targets. In digital environments, scapegoating is not as intentional and more automatic, driven by the speed and widespread use of these tools.

The framing of narratives by media outlets plays a pivotal role in shaping how scapegoating is manifested and propagated. Through selective emphasis on specific aspects of issues or events, the media can implicitly or explicitly attribute blame, directing public attention toward particular actors. Research found that media outlets play a critical role in shaping scapegoating narratives through selective framing that directs public blame toward specific groups or entities. During the H1N1 epidemic, French media platforms facilitated a "geography of blame," reviving conspiracies against traditional scapegoats like Freemasons and Jews, despite such narratives being absent in mainstream coverage (Atlani-Duault et al., 2015). Similarly, Western media constructed Russia as a global menace, fostering moral panic through emotionally charged narratives that served hegemonic political agendas rather than objective reporting (Simons, 2019). In the UK, media coverage of South Asian grooming gangs disproportionately racialized the issue, framing these men as unique threats while marginalizing broader systemic violence against women, particularly in minority communities (Gill & Day, 2020). These examples demonstrate how media framing amplifies societal biases and redirects public anxieties, perpetuating scapegoating in ways that deepen societal divisions and obscure structural issues.

3. Rohingya Refugee Crisis on the Youtube Platform

YouTube has risen as a dominant digital space for news consumption and public discourse in Indonesia and Malaysia. As one of the most used platforms in both countries, it is a crucial site where narratives about the Rohingya refugee crisis are shaped, debated, and disseminated. YouTube offers an interactive nature, particularly its comment sections, which allow users to engage in discussions, express opinions, and respond to media framing of the issue. In Indonesia, YouTube has an extensive reach, with over 93 million users aged 18 and above, accounting for 91% of the adult online population, making it the most influential social media platform in the country. Furthermore, 75% of Indonesia's total internet user base engages with YouTube, with an average viewing time of 31 hours and 28 minutes per month (We Are Social, 2024). Similarly, in Malaysia, YouTube remains a primary digital platform for news engagement, reaching 24.10 million users in early 2024—69.9% of the country's total population (DataReportal, 2024).

During the peak period of Rohingya-related discussions on digital platforms, more than 13,500 videos related to the crisis were uploaded to YouTube between November and December 2023. This period coincided with the highest search interest recorded on Google Trends for Rohingya-related topics in both Indonesia and Malaysia, indicating heightened public engagement and media coverage. To understand this public discourse, we analyzed Google conversation trends, as illustrated in Figure 1. Among the most widely viewed news reports were those from Malaysia's TV3 and TV9 and Indonesia's TV One, Kompas.com, and Metro TV, highlighting the role of mainstream media in driving public discourse on the issue. To analyze public reactions and blame attribution patterns, this study examines 7,428 comments from 7,012 unique user accounts collected from YouTube news videos published during this peak discussion period.

This research focuses on exploring scapegoating narratives, systematically coding instances where netizens explicitly attribute blame for the crisis to specific actors. These narratives often emerge in response to media framing and reflect broader societal anxieties, shifting responsibility onto governments, international organizations, local authorities, or even the refugees themselves. By identifying patterns in these accusations, this study aims to uncover the underlying structures of digital blame discourse and the factors influencing its propagation across online communities in Indonesia and Malaysia.

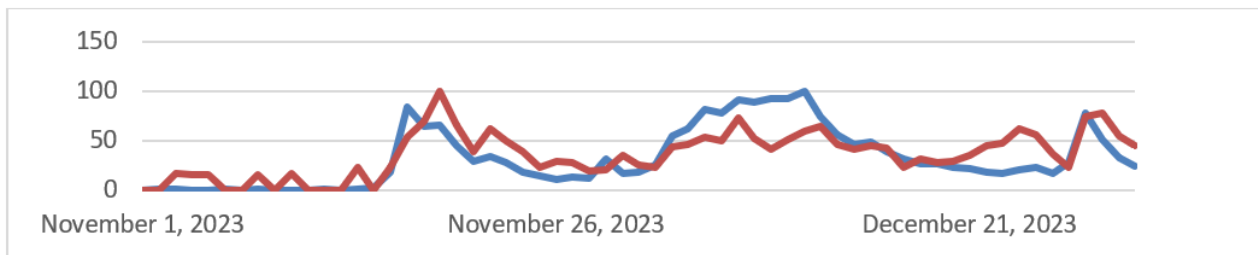


Figure 1 Google conversation trends with the keyword 'Rohingya' in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Source: Google Trends (2023).

4. Materials and Methods

To examine the scapegoating narrative, this study uses semantic network analysis to map the discussion of the Rohingya refugee crisis. Semantic network analysis is a meaning-centered network technique that enables the identification of shared meanings and interpretations (Doerfel & Barnett, 1999; Drieger, 2013; Kinariwala & Deshmukh, 2023). The result mapped word associations within textual data. This approach is particularly useful for understanding how blame is attributed, which actors are most frequently targeted, and how different narratives emerge and evolve in online discussions. To facilitate this analysis, NodeXL was used to generate co-occurrence matrices and visualize the relationships between key terms and entities in user comments.

This study employs topic modeling to systematically analyze the discourse surrounding the Rohingya refugee crisis as reflected in YouTube comments. Given the vast volume of user-generated content on digital platforms, traditional qualitative methods such as manual coding may not be feasible for capturing nuanced patterns across large datasets. Following data preprocessing, this research runs Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a probabilistic model that identifies hidden thematic structures within textual data by clustering words into topics based on their co-occurrence patterns (La Rosa et al., 2015; Ó Séaghdha & Korhonen, 2014). By leveraging this computational approach, the analysis uncovers dominant narratives and shifts in public sentiment towards Rohingya refugees across different media environments.

To enhance the interpretability of LDA results, this studies employ LDAvis to explore the spatial distribution of topics, assess the coherence of word groupings, and examine the relationships between topics within a multidimensional space (Li & Tsui, 2021). Unlike traditional word frequency analysis, which merely highlights frequently occurring terms, LDAvis provides a structured representation of topic proximities, revealing how different themes interconnect and evolve within public discussions. This approach is particularly valuable for detecting underlying biases, recurring arguments, and polarizing viewpoints within digital discourse.

The determination of the optimal number of topics is a crucial step in LDA modeling, as it significantly influences the interpretability and validity of the findings. This research implements topic coherence as a metric to assess the semantic consistency of words within each topic (Mimno et al., 2011). Higher coherence scores indicate that words grouped in a topic are meaningfully related, improving the reliability of the thematic classification. The analysis also utilizes multidimensional scaling (MDS), a technique that maps topic distances within a two-dimensional space, helping to visualize how closely related or distinct different topics are within the dataset (Cambria et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2020). This step is essential for identifying clusters of highly relevant themes and distinguishing overarching patterns in public discourse.

The dataset for this study comprises 7,428 comments from 7,012 unique user accounts, collected from YouTube news videos of Indonesia's TV One, Kompas.com, and Metro TV, as well as Malaysia's TV3 and TV9, which uploaded between November and December 2023. This period has been chosen because it heightened public interest in Rohingya-related discussions, as indicated by 13,500 uploaded videos and peak Google Trends activity. Given the linguistic diversity of the region, only comments in Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, and English were included, while those in other languages were excluded. This selection ensures a focused analysis of public discourse in Indonesia and Malaysia, where media narratives play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the refugee crisis.

To construct the semantic network, this study defines nodes as actors mentioned in the comments, including individuals, organizations, governments, and general categories such as "governor" or "refugees." Edges were created based on co-mentions, meaning that if two actors appeared in the same comment, a connection was established between them. The frequency of these co-mentions was used to weight the edges, allowing for the identification of the most central figures in the

blame discourse. This method provides insights into which actors are frequently discussed together and how different narratives interact within the broader online discussion.

Further analysis was conducted using semantic clustering to explore the patterns of blame attribution. By examining frequently co-occurring words and concepts, this study identifies key antecedents and consequences of scapegoating narratives. Monte Carlo bootstrapping (Christensen & Golino, 2021) was applied to determine the statistical significance of certain accusations over time, allowing for an assessment of how blame narratives shifted in response to major events or media framing. Through comparative semantic network analysis, this study highlights the variations in scapegoating narratives between Indonesian and Malaysian YouTube audiences, offering a deeper understanding of how digital discourse influences public perception of the Rohingya refugee crisis.

5. Results

This study analyzes public discourse on the Rohingya refugee crisis by examining YouTube comments from three major news platforms: TV3 Malaysia, Kompas.com, and CNN Indonesia. These platforms were selected for their wide audience reach and influence in shaping public opinion. To identify dominant themes and narratives, we employ Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a topic modeling technique that clusters words into topics based on their co-occurrence patterns. To enhance interpretation, we use LDAvis, a visualization tool that maps topic relationships, and multidimensional scaling (MDS) to examine the spatial distribution of topics. The topic coherence metric is applied to determine the optimal number of topics for analysis.

5.1. TV3 Malaysia

TV3 Malaysia, the country’s first private television network, was launched in June 1984, challenging the state-owned Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM)’s monopoly over national broadcasting (Basri et al., 2011; Jerome et al., 2023). Since then, TV3 has grown into one of Malaysia’s most influential media outlets and is now a subsidiary of Media Prima, the largest media conglomerate in the country. With a strong reputation for delivering news, TV3 is widely recognized for its flagship news program, Buletin Utama, which has become a key source of information for Malaysian audiences.

In the digital landscape, TV3 has successfully extended its reach through its BuletinTV3 YouTube channel, which boasts 2.09 million subscribers. The platform serves as an extension of its traditional broadcast, engaging audiences through online content and fostering discussions in its comment sections. This study analyzed audience interactions on eight news videos related to the Rohingya refugee issue, published between November and December 2023. This time frame was selected due to heightened media attention on Rohingya refugees, particularly in relation to migration policies, government responses, and public sentiment in Malaysia. The sentiment and key themes from the YouTube comments on the Buletin TV3 Channel were meticulously analyzed, and the findings are summarized in Figure 2.

| Topic | Topic keywords |
|-------|--|
| 1 | indonesia, malaysia, rohingya, negara, rakyat, aceh, orang, warga, tanah, usir |
| 2 | rohingya, anak, indonesia, israel, kasihan, aceh, malaysia, bangsa, kerajaan, manusia |
| 3 | orang, islam, tanah, rohingnya, myanmar, pengungsi, makan, pelarian, indonesia, lari |
| 4 | malaysia, negara, rohingya, rakyat, kena, bangsa, halau, kepala, kerajaan, dorang |
| 5 | allah, rohingya, islam, orang, aceh, saudara, negara, selamat, muslim, bumi |
| 6 | malaysia, indonesia, terbaik, rohingya, rakyat, bagus, kepala, kesian, halau, jugak |
| 7 | indo, aceh, menangis, orang, berlakon, sedih, people, mu, kuat, rakyatnya |
| 8 | pemerintah, myanmar, nangis, setuju, rohingya, terlambat, airmata, ramai2, anak, makan |



Figure 2 The Analysis of YouTube Comment in Buletin TV3 Channel.

In the dataset of YouTube comments from TV3 Malaysia’s coverage of Rohingya refugees, LDA modeling identifies eight distinct topics. The analysis focuses on Topic 1, which highlights Malaysian public discourse regarding Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, and Topic 4, which reflects calls for the Malaysian government to reject Rohingya asylum seekers. Based on Marginal Topic Probability, Topic 2 emerges as the most discussed, comprising approximately 53.46% of the dataset, followed by Topic 1 at 46.52%.

5.2. Kompas.com

Kompas.com, the digital extension of Indonesia’s esteemed Kompas newspaper, was launched on September 14, 1995, positioning itself as a pioneer in the country’s online media landscape. As of recent metrics, it ranks third among News & Media Publishers in Indonesia and has garnered a substantial digital presence, having 5.1 million subscribers on its YouTube channel. This significant online following underscores Kompas.com’s influential role in shaping public discourse and delivering news to a broad audience (Haryanto, 2010).

This study analyzed audience interactions on 18 news videos related to the Rohingya refugee issue, published between November and December 2023, on Kompas.com’s YouTube channel. This period was selected due to heightened media



attention on the Rohingya crisis, particularly concerning migration policies, government responses, and public sentiment in Indonesia. By examining the comments on these videos, this research aims to uncover prevailing narratives, public opinions, and patterns of discourse within the Indonesian digital landscape regarding the Rohingya refugee situation.

In the dataset of YouTube comments from Kompas.com's coverage of Rohingya refugees, LDA modeling identifies two optimal topics. Topic 1, accounting for 58.18% of the discourse, portrays Rohingya refugees arriving in Aceh as illegal immigrants and advocates for their expulsion. Similarly, a detailed examination of YouTube comments on the Kompas.com Channel revealed distinct patterns, which are visually represented in Figure 3. This topic also criticizes the Indonesian Navy's role in managing the arrival of refugees. Topic 2 (41.81%) shifts focus to the facilities provided by the Indonesian government, which some commenters argue are disproportionately generous compared to support for local citizens.

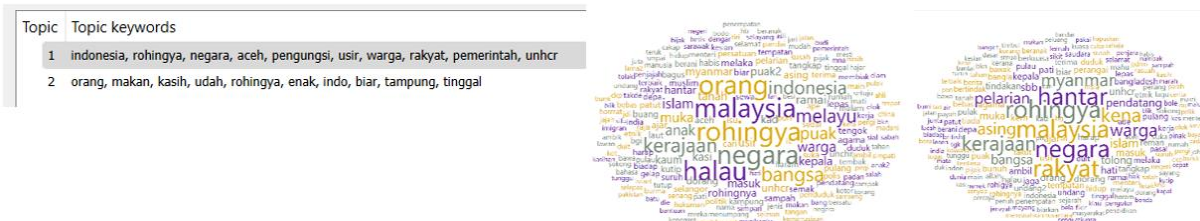


Figure 3 The Analysis of Youtube Comment in Kompas.com Channel.

5.3. CNN Indonesia

CNN Indonesia has established a significant presence through its YouTube channel, which, as of August 2024, boasts over 11.3 million subscribers and has accumulated more than 6.1 billion video views. This number underscores CNN Indonesia's influential role in shaping public discourse and delivering news to a broad audience (Hakim & Hidayati, 2023). Topic modeling on the collected YouTube comments from CNN Indonesia's coverage of Rohingya refugees yielded two optimal LDA topics, as indicated by the optimal topic coherence value at two topics. The analysis extended to the CNN Indonesia Channel's YouTube comments, providing further insights into public sentiment, as depicted in Figure 4. Based on Marginal Topic Probability visualized through Multi-Dimensional Scaling (MDS), Topic 1 emerged as the most discussed, comprising approximately 57.18% of the dataset, followed by Topic 2 at 42.82%.

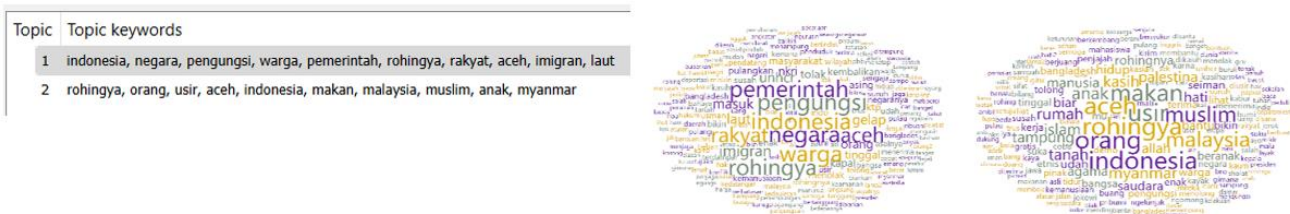


Figure 4 The analysis of Youtube comment in CNN Indonesia Channel.

Visualization using LDAvis reveals that in the dataset of YouTube comments on CNN Indonesia's coverage of Rohingya refugees, Topic 1 highlights Indonesian citizens' expressions towards Rohingya illegal immigrants, with calls for their expulsion and questioning the role of the Indonesian Navy in safeguarding the seas. In contrast, Topic 2 reflects two differing opinions regarding Rohingya refugees, stemming from specific religious and ethnic stigmas.

6. Top Words Mentioned by Netizens

Identifying the most frequently mentioned words in user commentary is essential for understanding dominant themes and sentiment within a dataset. In topic modeling, these words serve as key indicators that encapsulate the core discourse surrounding a given issue (Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019; Nikolenko et al., 2017). This research uncovers recurring patterns, ideological positions, and shifts in public opinion based on the distribution and contextual relevance (Table 1).

Table 1 The Top 6 Words Mentioned in Every Media Channel.

| Position | Buletin TV 3 | Kompas.com | CNN Indonesia |
|----------|--------------|------------|---------------|
| 1. | Rohingya | Indonesia | Indonesia |
| 2. | Negara | Rohingya | Rohingya |
| 3. | Bangsa | Negara | Orang |
| 4. | Kepala | Pengungsi | Negara |
| 5. | Kerajaan | Pemerintah | Pemerintah |
| 6. | Dorang | UNHCR | Imigran |



The most frequently mentioned words across Buletin TV3, Kompas.com, and CNN Indonesia reflect recurring themes in discussions about the Rohingya refugee issue. "Rohingya" appears prominently in all three media platforms, while "Indonesia" dominates discussions on Kompas.com and CNN Indonesia. The word "Negara" (country, government) is consistently present, appearing in different positions across the datasets. "Pemerintah" (government) is frequently mentioned in Kompas.com and CNN Indonesia, while "Kerajaan" (kingdom) and "UNHCR" appear in Buletin TV3 and Kompas.com, respectively. Some words are unique to specific platforms, such as "Dorang (Them)" in Buletin TV3, "UNHCR" in Kompas.com, and "Imigran (immigrant)" in CNN Indonesia, highlighting variations in the terminology used across different media sources.

7. Rohingya

The term 'Rohingya' appears as the most frequent actor across the analyzed YouTube comments, forming strong collocations. The wordlist reflects sentiment on how netizens respond to the refugee issue. The word "Rohingya" frequently co-occurs with terms such as "asing (foreign)", "migran (migrant)", and "imigran (immigrant)". They are indicating discourses that situate the Rohingya within broader narratives of migration and cross-border movement, but with a negative sentiment. These discussions frequently emphasize Rohingya identity in ways that highlight exclusionary perspectives. It also appears in the discourse of Rohingya collocates with "etnis (ethnic)". This reflects the topos of separation, reinforcing divisions between host communities and the Rohingya.

This study also found another notable pattern, which is the frequent association between "Rohingya" and terms like "pengungsi (refugee)" and "pencari suaka (asylum seeker)", reflecting legal categorizations related to forced displacement. However, alongside these neutral legal descriptors, the word "ilegal (illegal)" frequently co-occurs, particularly in discussions that portray the Rohingya as unlawful entrants rather than protected asylum seekers. This framing aligns with the topos of threat, where their presence is debated in terms of legality and security, reflecting their position against the local community in Indonesia and Malaysia.

There is also a more extreme negative collocation, by using the term 'sampah masyarakat', a derogatory term that can be translated as 'undesirable population.' The use of this phrase in the dataset signals highly charged rhetoric that dehumanizes the Rohingya and frames them as an unwanted or disruptive presence. Such terminology is indicative of discursive strategies that align with the topos of exclusion and marginalization. Conversely, in smaller clusters of discussion, the term 'Rohingya' also collocates with 'yang selamat (survivor)' in narratives that emphasize resilience and humanitarian concerns. These instances appear in comments that acknowledge the persecution and struggles faced by the Rohingya, situating them within the topos of victimhood and humanitarian urgency. A deeper linguistic analysis reveals how the term 'Rohingya' is commonly attributed, with the concordance patterns presented in Figure 5.

| Negative Sentiment | | Word: Rohingya | Negative-to-Neutral Sentiment | |
|---|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Acknowledges their forced displacement due to persecution. This collocation appears in humanitarian narratives but is sometimes contested in political debates. | <i>Pengungsi</i> (Refugee) | | <i>Asing</i> (Foreign) | Reinforcing their status as outsiders in host countries. |
| highlights their legal struggle for international protection. However, some narratives suggest skepticism about their eligibility. | <i>Pencari Suaka</i> (Asylum Seeker) | | <i>Migran</i> (Migrant) | Migrant/Immigrant appears in debates about border security, demographic shifts, and economic impact, framing Rohingya as part of broader immigration concerns |
| This collocation criminalizes their migration and can justify restrictive policies or pushbacks. | <i>Illegal</i> (Illegal) | | <i>Imigran</i> (Immigrant) | |
| A derogatory term used in extreme xenophobic narratives; a threat to local communities. This contributes to social rejection. | <i>Sampah Masyarakat</i> (Undesirable Population) | | <i>Yang Selamat</i> (Survivor) | Depicting Rohingya as victims of violence and persecution who have endured significant suffering in their escape. |
| | | Positive Sentiment | | |

Figure 5 Concordance for attribution of 'Rohingya' words.



8. Negara

The term 'Negara' (state government) frequently appears in discussions about the Rohingya crisis, often framing the state as a primary actor in migration governance. It commonly collocates with words such as "pemerintah (government)" and "kepala (head)," indicating a focus on state leadership and decision-making. The presence of "Indonesia" as a frequent co-occurrence further highlights the nation's role in regional responses to the crisis. While some comments adopt a neutral stance, discussing "Negara" in terms of authority and policymaking, others use it to question the state's accountability in handling the issue.

'Negara pengungsi' is also used to label Myanmar, it reflects a discourse that attributes responsibility for the Rohingya crisis to the Myanmar state. This collocation suggests that Myanmar is not just the place of origin for the displaced Rohingya but is actively driving their forced migration. The term is often used in discussions criticizing Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya population, reinforcing narratives of state-led persecution, ethnic cleansing, or genocide. This framing aligns with the topos of blame, where Myanmar is positioned as the primary cause of displacement rather than merely a country experiencing internal conflict.

In more negative contexts, 'Negara' often collocates with terms such as 'gagal (failed)' and 'abaikan (ignore),' reinforcing narratives that depict the state as ineffective or neglectful. A particularly strong negative association is with 'tidak adil (unfair),' signaling frustrations over perceived injustice in the government's response to the Rohingya crisis. The discourse reflects sentiments that the state is either favoring certain groups over others or failing to implement policies that ensure fairness and equity. Additionally, collocations with 'masalah (problem)' and 'korup (corrupt)' further suggest that criticisms extend beyond refugee management, touching on broader concerns about governance and systemic inefficiencies. The various contexts in which the word 'Negara' appears, highlighting both positive and negative connotations, are detailed in Figure 6.

Conversely, within a smaller set of discussions, "Negara" is also linked to positive sentiments, particularly through its collocation with "hadir (presence)." This suggests that, in some narratives, the state is perceived as taking an active role in addressing the crisis, whether through humanitarian aid or policy initiatives. While these instances are less frequent, they reflect an acknowledgment of state intervention, contrasting the dominant discourse of failure and negligence. The competing collocations of "Negara" illustrate the complex and often polarized perceptions of governmental involvement in the Rohingya issue, oscillating between critique and cautious recognition of its role.

| Negative Sentiment | | Word: Negara | Negative-to-Neutral Sentiment | |
|---|--|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Acknowledges their forced displacement due to persecution. This collocation appears in humanitarian narratives but is sometimes contested in political debates. | <i>Gagal</i> (Failed) | | <i>Pemerintah</i> (Government) | The collocation frequently appears in contexts evaluating the government's role in handling the Rohingya crisis, either as a decision-maker or as an institution responsible for refugee management. |
| highlights their legal struggle for international protection. However, some narratives suggest skepticism about their eligibility. | <i>Abaikan / Tidak Peduli</i> (Ignored/ absence) | | <i>Kepala</i> (Head) | The presence of this term suggests a focus on state decision-making at the highest level, sometimes portraying leaders as accountable for successes or failures in handling the crisis. |
| This collocation criminalizes their migration and can justify restrictive policies or pushbacks. | <i>Penyebab masalah</i> (Cause of the problem) | | <i>Pengungsi</i> (refugee) | The collocation ' <i>negara pengungsi</i> ' suggests that Myanmar is not just the place of origin for the displaced Rohingya but is actively driving their forced migration. |
| A derogatory term used in extreme xenophobic narratives; a threat to local communities. This contributes to social rejection. | <i>Tidak adil/Korup</i> (Unfair/ Corrupt) | | <i>Hadir</i> (Presence) | Depicting Rohingya as victims of violence and persecution who have endured significant suffering in their escape. |
| | | Positive Sentiment | | |

Figure 6 Concordance for attribution of 'Negara' words.



9. Discussion

9.1. Actor in ‘Kerajaan’ and ‘Pemerintah’ Accusation

The TNI (Indonesian National Army) also emerges as a focal point of criticism, especially regarding its role in maritime security. Collocations such as "TNI AL (Navy)", or "kapal (battleship)", and "kemana (where is it?, gone)" suggest concerns over border enforcement and naval patrols. Many comments by netizens questioned the absence or inefficiency of the Indonesian military in preventing Rohingya arrivals, reinforcing the perception that the government is failing to protect national sovereignty. The presence of "Polri (Indonesia Police Bureau)" in these discussions also implies dissatisfaction with broader law enforcement efforts. These criticisms can be interpreted through the lens of scapegoating (Muller, 2021), where the military and police become the targets of public frustration due to their visible role in border control. The dynamics of scapegoating, traditionally observed in offline contexts, are amplified and accelerated in online spaces such as YouTube, where anonymity and rapid information dissemination can intensify blame attribution (Orosz et al., 2024; Sakki & Castrén, 2022). Within this paradigm, the army (TNI) and police (Polri) become the objects of public ire, particularly when there is a perceived threat to national security or a failure in governance. The perceived inability of the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI) and *Kepolisian Republik Indonesia* (Polri) to secure Indonesia's borders has led to these institutions being held responsible for the public's anxieties surrounding the influx of refugees (Siregar et al., 2022; Azhar, 2025). This tendency may be further exacerbated by instances of public scepticism regarding police performance (Siregar et al., 2022) or specific security failures (Muhtadi, 2022).

The Malaysian government (Kerajaan) faces similar criticism, particularly regarding its immigration policies and response to Rohingya refugees. The term 'PM' (Prime Minister) appears frequently with 'Anwar,' 'Rohingya,' 'menteri' (minister), 'jadi' (become), and 'jgn' (don't), reflecting dissatisfaction with Malaysia's perceived inaction or weak policies. The phrase 'PM jadi apa? (What is the Prime Minister doing?)' suggests public frustration over leadership that is viewed as passive or ineffective. Further examination specifically highlights the negative sentiments associated with 'Negara' attributions, as clearly demonstrated in Figure 7. This perspective resonates with the discourse surrounding threat, as articulated by Stenger (2023), wherein the presence of refugees is portrayed as a menacing factor to national stability, inciting demands for resolute government intervention. Media outlets frequently assume a pivotal function in the construction and propagation of threat narratives, selectively accentuating aspects of the refugee crisis that evoke feelings of fear and insecurity among the host population (Abbas, 2024; Al-Zaman & Rashid, 2024; Irom, 2023). This demand for decisive action resonates with broader concerns regarding governance and political support in Malaysia, where perceptions of government effectiveness can exert a substantial influence on public opinion (Jou & Ooi, 2022; Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020). When the government is perceived as failing to meet these expectations, particularly in relation to sensitive issues such as refugee management, it becomes the focus of criticism. The present study supports Miller and Reeves' (2022) argument that political scapegoating often occurs during times of crisis to deflect public anger from systemic issues onto specific, visible entities. Indeed, the negative responses of state institutions align with this theory.

| | | Negative Sentiment |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Words: Kerajaan, <u>Pemerintah</u> | <u>Presiden, TNI</u> | The Indonesian government, particularly <u>Presiden</u> (President) and TNI, is criticized for inaction and weak enforcement in handling Rohingya refugees. Reflecting public frustration over border security failures. |
| | PM (<i>Prime Minister</i>) | The Malaysian PM and Kerajaan are frequently associated with policy indecisiveness. Mostly, highlighting debates on citizenship and exclusionary policies toward Rohingya refugees. |
| | Myanmar, Bangladesh | Myanmar is framed as the main antagonist in the crisis, reinforcing its role in ethnic persecution. Bangladesh appears in debates over temporary refuge and repatriation. |

Figure 7 The negative sentiment of ‘Negara’ attributions.

Beyond specific leaders, the broader Malaysian government is criticized through the term "Kerajaan," which collocates with "Malaysia," "buat" (do/make), "tidak" (not), and "minta" (ask/request). These words suggest concerns that Malaysia is not doing enough to prevent or manage Rohingya immigration. The inclusion of "minta" and "kewarganegaraan" (citizenship) reflects public opposition to granting Rohingya refugees legal status, reinforcing exclusionary attitudes. This reluctance to grant

citizenship, coupled with the pervasive negative portrayal of Rohingya refugees in online discourses, finds congruence with the prevailing themes of online-nationalism and xenophobia (Jamil, 2023; Zalatnai, 2023). The potential of online platforms to amplify nationalistic sentiments has been demonstrated, with the consequence of this being the rejection of out-groups and the reinforcement of 'us vs. them' narratives in discussions about migration (Wu et al., 2024).

Unlike discussions about Indonesia and Malaysia, where governments are criticized for inaction, Myanmar is overwhelmingly framed as the primary actor responsible for the crisis. The term "Myanmar" frequently collocates with "Bangladesh," "negara," "Rohingya," "itu" (that), and "ke" (to), reinforcing narratives that Myanmar is directly to blame for Rohingya displacement. The presence of "Bangladesh" alongside "Myanmar" reflects discussions on where responsibility lies—whether Myanmar should repatriate the Rohingya or whether Bangladesh, as a temporary host country, should continue providing refuge. The use of "negara" (country) and "itu" (that) suggests a strong externalization of blame, where Myanmar is seen as an aggressor or negligent state, with comments focusing on its failure to protect the Rohingya minority.

9.2. UNHCR

The term UNHCR frequently appears in discussions with strong negative sentiment, often associated with failure, distrust, and rejection in handling the Rohingya crisis. Across all datasets, UNHCR collocates with "usir" (expel) and "bubarkan" (disband), indicating calls for its removal or dissolution, as many view the organization as ineffective in managing refugee resettlement. These discussions suggest a perception that UNHCR's presence exacerbates rather than resolves the crisis, leading to demands for stricter immigration control and the expulsion of Rohingya refugees from host countries.

The association between UNHCR and "Rohingya" further reinforces public skepticism, with many comments suggesting that the organization is responsible for facilitating refugee arrivals rather than addressing root causes. The repeated mention of "Indonesia" in these discussions highlights frustration over the country being burdened with asylum seekers, with some blaming UNHCR for placing excessive responsibility on host nations rather than pressuring Myanmar for repatriation.

Moreover, the prevailing public distrust of the UNHCR, as evidenced in other contexts of the Rohingya crisis, has the potential to exacerbate this adverse response within the online commentary. In their 2021 study, Ozkul and Jarrous explore how refugees themselves, at times, navigate the bureaucracy of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with a degree of suspicion. This is evidenced by their reliance on rumours, suggesting a potential absence of transparency or perceived ineffectiveness on the part of the UNHCR. This phenomenon has the potential to influence the broader public perception of the UNHCR. As Tesfai et al. (2022) emphasise, 'social trust' is of paramount importance in the context of refugee experiences. The study suggests that a dearth of trust in humanitarian organisations can impede effective responses and give rise to negative perceptions among both refugees and host communities. The research also touches upon social trust among refugees, which implicitly suggests areas where trust in international organisations might be fragile. Moreover, the manner in which the news media portrays the UNHCR's role has the potential to influence public opinion. Suppose news outlets were to focus more on the influx of refugees and UNHCR's assistance to them within host countries, rather than their efforts to find long-term solutions or advocate for the Rohingya in Myanmar. In that case, it might inadvertently contribute to the perception that they are primarily 'enabling migration.' As Abdelaaty (2023) emphasises, the challenges encountered in refugee and UNHCR correspondence, if reflected in media narratives, have the potential to erode public trust further.

The sentiment for UNHCR that mentioned 'bantu sini datang' (come here and help them) reflects a concern about the perceived consequences of international aid on national borders and demographics. Further research could explore the extent to which these negative framings of UNHCR are linked to broader anti-refugee sentiments, nationalistic discourses, and the way UNHCR's actions are portrayed in news media within Indonesia and Malaysia. The attribution reveals a dominant discourse of hostility, where UNHCR is framed not as a humanitarian actor but as a problematic entity that enables migration rather than resolving displacement. Public frustration is directed at its perceived inaction, inefficiency, or even complicity in worsening the crisis, reinforcing exclusionary and anti-refugee narratives.

9.3. The Scapegoating in the Rohingya Crisis

The phenomenon of social media has intensified the ways in which netizens engage with complex humanitarian crises, often shaping discourse through narratives of blame and exclusion. Surrounding the Rohingya refugee issue, Indonesian and Malaysian netizens on YouTube frequently engage in scapegoating, shifting responsibility onto various actors. They accuse their governments, Myanmar, UNHCR, and the refugees themselves. These patterns of scapegoating reflect broader anxieties about national stability, economic burden, and sovereignty, reinforcing a digital space where exclusionary rhetoric thrives.

The dominant pattern observed is the framing of Rohingya refugees as an economic and security threat. In both Indonesia and Malaysia, netizens frequently express concerns that Rohingya asylum seekers place an undue burden on state resources, taking advantage of government aid while contributing little in return. This aligns with broader global trends where migrant communities are portrayed as a drain on national economies, particularly in times of social or political uncertainty (Castles, 2017; Hermele, 2021; Kwilinski et al., 2022). Such discourse often emerges during economic downturns, when host populations feel that scarce resources should be prioritized for citizens rather than for displaced populations. On YouTube,

these narratives are reinforced by Indonesian and Malaysian netizens through user-generated content that frames the Rohingya not as victims of persecution, but rather as illegal migrants seeking economic opportunity rather than protection.

Beside the economic concerns, the discourse of national sovereignty and security plays a central role in shaping anti-refugee sentiment. Netizens in both Indonesia and Malaysia often hold their governments accountable for their perceived lack of strict policies regarding Rohingya migration. Comments frequently criticize Indonesian President Joko Widodo and the Malaysian Prime Minister for being too lenient, demanding harsher immigration controls and even deportation policies. Several researchers also highlighted the similar phenomenon, portraying the activism of netizens in constructing narratives that position refugees as external threats to national identity and stability (Chmutina et al., 2023; Merry, 2022; Stenger, 2023). In particular, security actors such as TNI (Indonesian National Army), Polri (Indonesian Police Bureau) and the Malaysian security forces are often invoked in discussions questioning why governments have not taken stronger border enforcement measures.

A significant portion of the discussion also shifts blame onto international actors, particularly UNHCR. Many netizens accuse UNHCR of exacerbating the crisis rather than resolving it, arguing that the organization enables continued migration flows into Indonesia and Malaysia rather than holding Myanmar accountable. This reflects broader distrust toward international institutions, where global refugee policies are viewed as prioritizing humanitarian ideals at the expense of local stability. Abdelaaty (2021) stated that UNHCR and similar international organizations are often accused of ignoring the concerns of host populations while advocating for migrant rights. On YouTube platform, this sentiment manifests in calls for UNHCR to be removed from refugee management efforts, further reinforcing nationalist and exclusionary discourses. Digital discourse often substitutes long-term solution-seeking with blame-shifting, exclusionary narratives, and strict policy demands. These online interactions reflect a growing polarization in refugee discourse, where humanitarian concerns are overshadowed by nationalistic rhetoric and security-focused arguments.

9.4. Online Nationalism and the Threat Narrative

The term online nationalism has gained attention as an interesting research object. It transformed discussions about immigration and refugees, particularly in digital spaces. It affects the national identity discussion, assuming that it is increasingly shaped through virtual interactions and discourse (Heang, 2024; Wu et al., 2024). Unlike traditional nationalism, which relies on state-led narratives and physical boundaries, online nationalism thrives in decentralized, participatory platforms, allowing individuals to construct and amplify exclusionary ideas with unprecedented reach.

In several cases, online nationalism operates through threat narratives (Lehman-Ludwig et al., 2023; Thunø & Nielbo, 2024). The position of threat narrative in online nationalism is reinforcing collective identity through opposition to outsiders. As Huang (2023) and Schneider (2023) argues, immigration debates are often deeply polarized, with right-wing digital actors framing refugees as an existential challenge to national cohesion. Similarly, in the case of Indonesian and Malaysian netizens, the Rohingya crisis is framed as a threat to state sovereignty, with frequent accusations that governments are too lenient on refugee issues.

In this study, the discussions surrounding the Rohingya frequently invoke stereotypes of illegal migration, crime, and resource depletion, reinforcing the idea that refugees are not just outsiders, but a direct challenge to national well-being. Ozduzen et al (2020) describe this as "digital racism," where online platforms become spaces for unregulated xenophobic sentiment that normalizes hostility toward refugees. Based on the research, Malaysian netizens often link the presence of Rohingya refugees to fears of rising crime rates and social instability. While in Indonesia, the discourse frequently centers on government failure in securing borders, highlighting the role of military and law enforcement actors like TNI in refugee control. Online nationalism in Indonesia and Malaysia thrives on the threat narrative, using scapegoating strategies that reinforce exclusionary policies and heightened anti-refugee sentiments. By leveraging digital spaces as sites of nationalist mobilization, netizens construct a binary of "us" versus "them", shaping public discourse and influencing offline attitudes.

10. Conclusions

This study has examined how scapegoating narratives shape digital discourse on the Rohingya refugee crisis, revealing patterns of blame attribution across Indonesian and Malaysian YouTube commentaries. Through semantic network analysis and topic modeling, the findings highlight how netizens assign responsibility to multiple actors, including national governments, international organizations like UNHCR, and even the refugees themselves. The results demonstrate that online nationalism and threat narratives play a crucial role in fueling these blame discourses, reinforcing exclusionary attitudes and securitization rhetoric.

The observation portrayed a consistent framing of the Rohingya as an economic and security threat, with netizens in both countries criticizing their governments for perceived policy failures and weak enforcement. The Indonesian government, particularly President Joko Widodo and the TNI, is frequently accused of inaction in border control. At the same time, Malaysia's Prime Minister and government (*Kerajaan*) are blamed for being too lenient on asylum seekers. At the same time, Myanmar remains central to blame discourse, with discussions positioning it as the primary cause of Rohingya displacement, while UNHCR is framed as an enabler of continued migration rather than a humanitarian organization.

The findings suggest that scapegoating in digital spaces is not just a byproduct of online debates but a reflection of deeper societal anxieties regarding national sovereignty, economic instability, and migration governance. By shaping public sentiment, these digital narratives contribute to polarized refugee discourse, reinforcing anti-immigrant rhetoric and limiting discussions on long-term solutions. Given the influence of digital media in shaping public opinion, future research should explore the impact of these narratives on offline policymaking and societal attitudes toward displaced populations.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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