

# The Psychosemantic Realm of Social Media Warfare Affecting Public Diplomacy †

Rus Shafinas Shafie 

Centre of Media and Information Warfare Studies, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam 40450, Malaysia; russhafinas@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** The psychosemantic realm of social media warfare is an emerging field that relates to psycholinguistics in warfare. The paucity of literature relating to the subject paved the interest of this study. Moreover, it aims to address fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, with the essence of understanding meaning-making used as a tactic to influence both digital society and public diplomacy. Therefore, the present study intends to explore the realm of psycholinguistics in social media warfare, focusing on how meaning is inferred and how it influences public diplomacy. The study amalgamates behaviorism and constructivism in understanding the essence of meaning-making. A sample is taken from a Facebook wall post of state actors representing the Malaysian government and the Malaysian opposition. The data are analyzed by applying the critical discourse analysis method. The analysis reveals that meaning inferences embedded in social media narratives are significantly determined by hard power and soft power, and the reproduction of ideology through discourse. The concept of power and discourse is consequential in influencing and affecting public diplomacy. Undoubtedly, it proves that by carefully using meaningful words, creating effective psychosemantics can influence perception and public diplomacy.

**Keywords:** psychosemantics; psycholinguistics in social media warfare; public diplomacy; digital diplomacy; semantic macrostructure theory; theory of ideological square; cyber warfare



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## 1. Introduction

Social media is a phenomenon that is able to become the main platform of communication in the digital age [1]. Statista 2021 reported that the number of social media users worldwide is expected to gradually grow from 3.78 billion users in 2021 to 3.96 billion in 2022, with the yearly increase from 2022 to 2025 at a rate of 3.2–4.5% [2]. Social media has become an enabler for internet users to communicate in a borderless environment beyond geographical restrictions [3–5]. The borderless environment opens an opportunity in public diplomacy, where state actors utilize social media to enhance public diplomacy efforts to the extent of digital diplomacy [6–12]. Malaysian social media users have reflected the global phenomenon locally and use social media as a platform to comprehend, construct ideology and perception, construct social cognition, and share the gathered information with other users [13]. A significant number of countries have adopted social media in enhancing their public diplomacy while dispersing ideology and agendas [14–17] as a result of extensive social media usage [18].

As an integral part of communication, language and narratives play an important role in the effort of information dispersion as well as being a tool to persuade and form perception [19]. Language carries significant meaning-making elements known as the semantic macrostructure, which forms comprehension among social media users on a certain discourse [20,21]. As opposed to informal language, state actors often use formal language in online narratives that transmit semantic values constructing psychosemantics, which contributes to social cognition [15,20,21]. Digital diplomacy relies on the effectiveness

of online narratives and psychosemantic knowledge to carefully deploy power, either hard power or soft power [7,22,23].

### *1.1. Background*

Social media has evolved from being a social networking platform into a tool for psychological warfare where cyber warfare is deployed. Social media poses invisible threats to any state by offering alternative realities that propel emotional and psychological targeting. Such threats are seen as overwhelming and severely harmful to any state where cultures, social cognition, and unity are at stake [24–27]. These threats are carefully detailed through meaningful narratives, allowing social media users to interpret based on their psychosemantic knowledge [11,28–30]. As these threats pose divisiveness in society, the impact is also seen in international relations where the state's image is tainted with negativity [31]. However, social media itself has the ability to improve a state's performance in digital diplomacy by allowing state actor and non-state actor collaboration to promote the state and enhance the state's image with positive narratives [7,32]. Therefore, social media as an information operation tool is a pronged approach that could either elevate or deteriorate the state's image.

Psychosemantics is a term which denotes how meaning is formed and inferred psychologically [11]. Although the term is used mainly in political psychology, psycholinguistic and semantic elements are the essence for establishing psychosemantics [21]. In this study, psychosemantics is analyzed in terms of its capability to influence perception and public diplomacy. Scholars who have extensively expedited research in psychosemantics are Petrenko [10] and Mitina [11]. Both scholars have explored psychosemantics in the political realm, which includes political psychology, perception and public consciousness, gender issues, political mentality, foreign and national politics, and power in the Russian context. The emergence of this field was explored mainly in the Russian context as opposed to other countries such as China. China is more interested in analyzing soft power and Chinese influence globally [7]. However, psychosemantics in social media is an untapped knowledge that allows the subject to be further explored. The essence of understanding the social media warfare phenomenon lies within the ability to encapsulate the fundamentals of psychosemantic knowledge to disperse power.

Therefore, the study analyzes the Facebook posts of the eighth Malaysian prime minister, YAB Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Haji Md Yassin, and the Malaysian opposition Facebook page, Pakatan Harapan. Facebook posts from these pages are analyzed in terms of the types of discourse used and types of power used in gaining support or positive perception in the international arena. The sample was taken in March 2020 during the transition period after Tun Mahathir Mohamed, the seventh prime minister, who abated his premiership in late February 2020. The data are analyzed using two of Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis methods, namely the semantic macrostructure theory and the theory of ideological square [21]. The analysis enables an understanding of how meaning dispersed in social media narratives influences public diplomacy.

### *1.2. Aims and Objectives*

The research intends to interpret and comprehend the phenomenon of meaning in the formation of cognition and perception upon meaning interpretation. The diversity of meaning interpretation generated from understanding the semantic macrostructure in social media narratives, as well as its implications for public diplomacy and the use of power and discourse to establish meaning, are investigated. Several objectives that drive the research are to determine psychosemantic knowledge based on discourse and power concepts embedded in online narratives that influence public diplomacy efforts in pandemic situations, and to explore the responses of the WHO on their Facebook page towards online narratives of the eighth Malaysian prime minister, YAB Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Haji Md Yassin, and the Malaysian opposition Facebook page, Pakatan Harapan. These objectives are able to pave and establish the understanding of how psychosemantics in

social media warfare influences public diplomacy. These objectives allow the research to solve the main research question of whether power deployed in online narratives could either enhance or weaken public diplomacy.

### 1.3. Problem Statement

Effective political communication is integral in ensuring effortless public diplomacy that is established through strategic online narratives [33]. Social media has been the medium of choice for the sole purpose of engagement by political leaders [34] in weaving their ideology, influence, and power through discourse [35] by either spreading fake news, misinformation, or disinformation in influencing and altering public perception [36]. Thus, it has been studied in various disciplines such as communication, applied linguistics, psychology, and functional stylistics [10,11,36,37]. This entails the belief that political leaders are able to shape public perception using social media as a warfare tool.

Hence, exploring online narratives of its psychosemantic elements in the Facebook posts of political leaders is intriguing. Similar studies are scarce globally, suggesting that the subject has not been extensively explored. However, several studies relate to the subject through different angles, including cognitive sciences and political psychology [10,20,38] as well as macro- and micro-psycholinguistic analysis of language and gender [39,40]. Unfortunately, these studies do not explore the knowledge relating to psychosemantics in language and media, which leaves a research gap that needs to be addressed. The analysis will pave a better comprehension of how using psychosemantics in social media warfare influences perception, which will be beneficial to academia as well as the state and state actors.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

As a multidisciplinary study and in order to ground the research, several theories are applied, respectively. The grand theory of the research is based on a blended theory approach of the behaviorist paradigm and the constructivist paradigm. Both paradigms are seen as significant towards understanding the phenomenon. The social cognitive theory by Bandura [41], representing the behaviorist paradigm, and the social constructivist theory by Vygotsky [42] are predicted to be able to dissect the phenomena accordingly. The theoretical framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

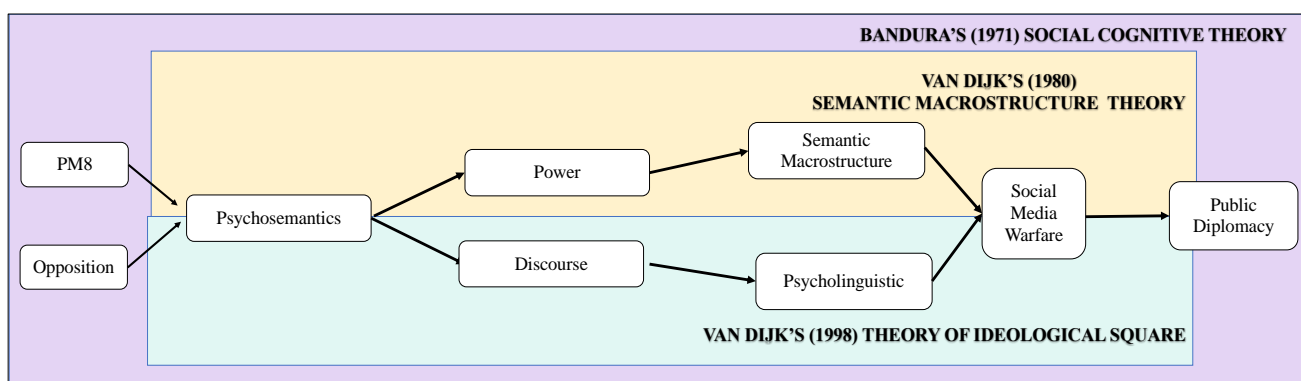


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

### 2.1. Psycholinguistics and Semantics (Psychosemantics) in Psychological Warfare

Every language has its own grammatical structure that generates meaning, and every language interprets meaning differently according to its culture [43–51]. For instance, the English language experiences what is called “World Englishes”, a term that describes the emergence of localized, indigenized varieties of English that are influenced by their sociolinguistic context, including history and multicultural settings in various parts and

regions of the world [52–55]. This explains why meaning-making or semantics used in other regions might differ from the meaning inferred by native speakers of English [55,56].

Psychological warfare revolves around the use of all levers of state power to influence traditional and non-traditional conflicts of the state [56], which includes nonmilitary strategies involving diplomacy and information in cyberspace. In relation to this, the combination of nonmilitary strategies forms unprecedented forces that lead to effective psychological warfare. Among others, language is core to forming meaning, and the construction of meaning contributes to the comprehension of intended meaning. However, meaning itself can be interpreted differently. It is evident that even command narratives also carry different semantic values to different individuals and different social groups [57]. Psychological warfare using gray zone tactics, including public opinion management, information operations, narrative shaping, and disinformation campaigns, are deployed during peacetime as a form of information or disinformation campaign either for or against the state [58].

### *2.2. Social Media as a Tool for Psychological Warfare*

Cyberspace has become the battleground for contemporary conflicts that range from transnational terror campaigns to state confrontations with other states or nonstate actors, as well as regional insurgencies using online narratives in social media [59]. Social media has evoked and waged emergencies by sparking racism, anarchism, and radicalism globally through its narratives since its emergence in 2001 [6,20,42,43]. It entails the colossal impact of social media warfare that has been used to alter, challenge, and weave ideologies benefitting various parties. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was one of the wars that was covered by the global media, and details of the war were circulated in social media, with numerous reactions from celebrities, politicians, influencers, and even comedians. Mainstream Western media narrated the war to be “an atrocious move”, “denying human rights”, and claimed that “Ukrainians do not deserve to be refugees as they are Europeans”. These narratives created a wave of criticism among social media users, as many feel that these narratives impose white supremacy, racism, and injustice to other war-torn countries, as well as being condescending toward the lives and livelihood of non-Europeans.

These responses revealed a negative impression and perception of social media users towards the crisis. Russia is highly criticized for the unprecedented act that was perceived as an act of violence, and this could tarnish and impact international relations. The severity of the invasion became content for social media users either supporting Russia or against Russia, as well as those either supporting or against Western media narratives. Since the global media is dominated by the Western world [60], the Western-centric media discourse enables Western propaganda to be dispersed through social media, and its narrative opposes the Russian invasion with the intention of establishing a pro-Western psychosemantic knowledge. Hence, it is undeniable that social media is used as a psychological warfare tool to extensively shape the global cognition of the crisis.

### *2.3. Power and Ideology in Media Discourse*

Media discourse is evidently and extensively used in the effort to engage the global public on issues relating to power domination and ideological conflict between different parties. Power and ideology have been at the center of conflicts and wars [58–60], and the media discourse is used extensively to establish power and disperse ideology. The use of power to its extreme extent of either hard or soft power is crucial for establishing a positive or negative perception. This is evident in Russian narratives of the Ukrainian war in which hard power is used, whereas narratives embedded with soft power are often used by China for Chinese diplomacy, referring either to panda diplomacy or the One Belt, One Road diplomacy [7].

#### 2.4. *The Social Cognitive Theory as Social Constructivism*

The main underlying theory in this research is the social cognitive theory founded by Albert Bandura [41]. However, it is significant that the social cognitive theory is amalgamated with social constructivism. This blended approach combining both social cognitive theory and social constructivism enables the research to look at how society and individual interactions construct psychosemantic knowledge by applying behavioral modeling. In this case, online society is the base of networked learning, in which meaning is learnt and comprehended from discourse. Although meaning interpretation may differ across regions, the basic psychosemantic value is manifested in the discourse, allowing an essential understanding of what is narrated through the social interactions that occur in the communication process. In relation to this, social interactions that are observed during the communication process entail behavioral modeling among target audiences. It is imperative that the research applies a blended approach as it is a progressive form of cognitive learning.

#### 2.5. *Van Dijk's Semantic Macrostructure Theory and Theory of Ideological Square*

The research also applied two types of linguistic theories in order to understand the psychosemantics embedded in online narratives. These theories are Van Dijk's semantic macrostructure theory [21] and Van Dijk's theory of ideological square [44]. The semantic macrostructure theory is a theory that investigates themes in the form of macropropositions and higher macropropositions in the effort to understand contextual meanings. The theory of ideological square is a theory that examines ideology in discourse that posits positive and negative self-representation as well as positive and negative representation of others, which includes the emphasis on positive representation of "us" and negative representation of "them", as well as de-emphasis on the negative representation of "us" and positive representation of "them".

### 3. Methodology

The study is a phenomenological research that applies a qualitative method to analyze data. Data are taken from the Facebook posts of the eighth Malaysian prime minister, YAB Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Haji Md Yassin, and the Malaysian opposition Facebook page, Pakatan Harapan. The sample selected must carry significant semantic value. The research applied two types of critical discourse analysis methods in order to understand the psychosemantics embedded in online narratives, namely Van Dijk's semantic macrostructure theory and Van Dijk's theory of ideological square.

### 4. Analysis

The analysis involves two data samples from the Facebook posts of the eighth Malaysian Prime Minister, YAB Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Haji Md Yassin, and the Malaysian opposition Facebook page, Pakatan Harapan. The data are analyzed using the overall meaning of the discourse with reference to the reality at the time the post was made. The data are analyzed and illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, respectively.

Figure 2 is a sample from the Facebook page of YAB Tan Sri Muhyiddin bin Haji Md Yassin. The sample was posted on 25 March 2020. The social cognition at the time of the post was that he was a newly elected PM and was having issues of distrust among MPs, as his cabinet was slandered as a "backdoor government", since he was elected by the Yang diPertuan Agong Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Al-Musta'in Billah. Therefore, he was seen as a PM that did not have the people's vote, and this created issues in his administration. However, he was trying to apply soft power in his narratives by engaging all walks of life. The government was also reproducing an ideology that was ready and capable of providing assistance to all Malaysians equally. This was done by means of emphasizing positivity in its self-representation.

Figure 3 is a sample from the Malaysian opposition Facebook page, Pakatan Harapan, posted on 28 March 2020. This post was a reactive post towards the post made by the PM on 25 March 2020 regarding the Economic Stimulus Package that was launched in order to assist the people. The social cognition that they were trying to impose is that Pakatan Harapan will always be inclusive in their policies and will not allow any discrepancies, as opposed to the eighth PM’s government. In addition to that, they were forming a cognition that they care for the well-being of the people. Hence, they applied soft power by using a passive-aggressive manner when they praised the government for such an initiative, while pointing out that the government did not acknowledge and appreciate the Welfare Department’s workforce that was also involved directly in enforcing the MCO. Indirectly, they insinuated that the government was careless, while spreading anti-government ideology by applying a negative representation of the government and emphasizing this negativity.

Through the lens of the blended theory, the interaction between individuals online is seen in three different categories. The first is comprised of individuals that wrote the source text, the second involves netizens of the online society, and the third revolves around the individuals or groups that counter-narrate the source text through their posts. In this case, the source text is from the eighth PM, who understood and learned that the nation was at risk from his interactions with the people as well as international organizations such as the WHO. At the same time, the eighth PM modeled behavior according to the response of other nations to battle the pandemic but tailored it to the Malaysian context. On the other hand, the second category involves individuals in the online society interacting and modeling behavior through the Facebook comments section that enables them to interact, learn, and comprehend narratives as well as their intended meanings. In relation to this, the third category consists of individuals and groups that responded and counter-narrated on the source text through new posts and refers directly to the source text, such as the sample taken from Pakatan Harapan’s Facebook post. Based on this, it is undeniable that the learning trait in social constructivism, where interactions in society contribute to comprehension, and the behavioral trait in social cognitive theory, where behaviors are modeled and reproduced, are evident and used continuously in meaning comprehension and the formation of psychosemantic knowledge.

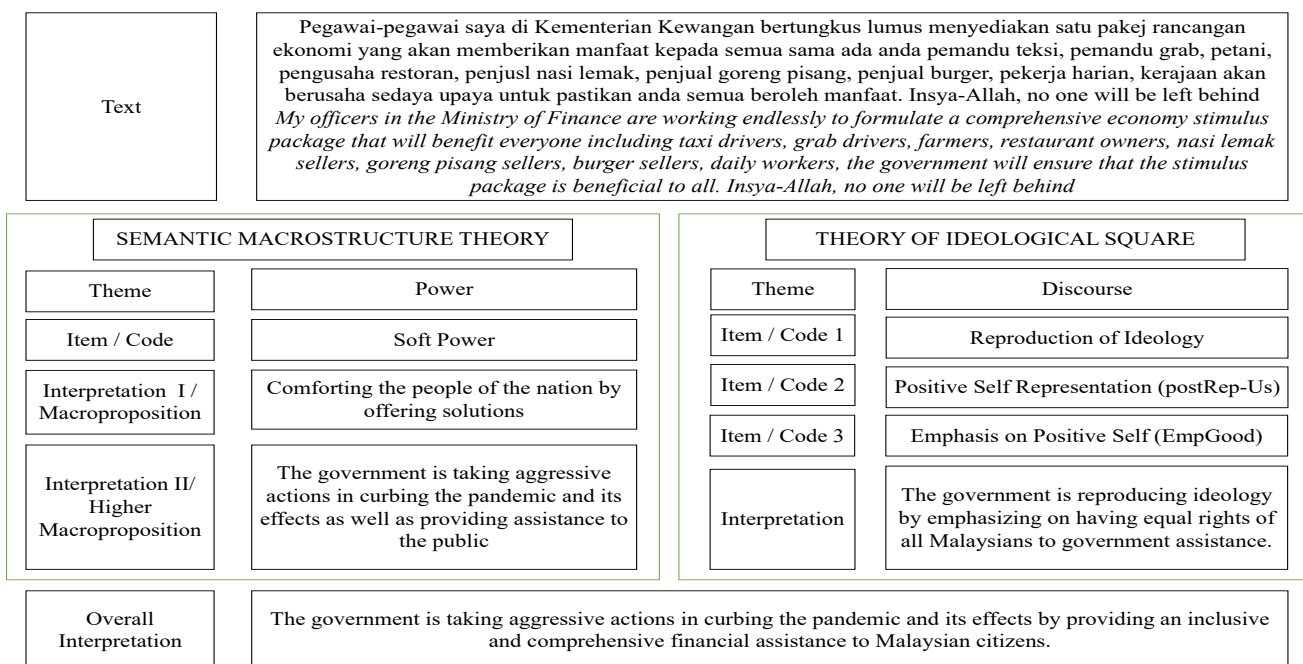


Figure 2. Data analysis—Facebook post of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Text	<p>Kenyataan Media Bersama Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail (Ahli Parlimen Pandan) dan Hannah Yeoh (Ahli Parlimen Segambut) bertarikh 28 Mac 2020.  <i>Press statement of Dato' Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Dr. Wan Ismail (Pandan MP) and Hannah Yeoh (Segambut MP)</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dalam Pakej Rangsangan Ekonomi Prihatin Rakyat (Prihatin) yang diumumkan YAB Perdana Menteri petang semalam, kami mengalu-alukan peruntukan elaun khas sebanyak RM200 sebulan kepada anggota tentera, polis, kastam, imigresen, angkatan pertahanan awam serta RELA yang terlibat secara langsung dalam melaksanakan Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP).  <i>In the recent Economic Stimulus Package announced yesterday by the Prime Minister, we would welcome the allocation for special allowance of RM200 a month to frontliners like the army, police, customs, immigration, civil service defence, and RELA who are involved directly in the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO).</i></li> <li>Walau bagaimanapun, kami dapati warga kerja Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM) yang juga terlibat secara langsung dalam pelaksanaan PKP tiada dalam senarai yang diumumkan itu. Mungkin Kerajaan terlepas pandang akan peranan JKM.  <i>However, we found that the Welfare Department's workforce who are also involved directly in enforcing the MCO is not included in the announced list and might have been overlooked by the government.</i></li> <li>Kami berharap warga kerja JKM yang terlibat dalam pelaksanaan PKP ini juga akan menerima elaun khas ini.  <i>We hope that the Welfare Department's workforce involved in the enforcement of the MCO is listed as receivers of the special allowance.</i></li> <li>Warga kerja JKM yang menjalankan tugas-tugas penguatkuasaan PKP perlu diiktiraf sebagai petugas barisan hadapan dan dengan itu Kerajaan perlu menyediakan peralatan perlindungan yang sesuai untuk mereka demi melindungi mereka daripada Covid-19  <i>The Welfare Department's workforce has expedited their duty in enforcing the MCO and should be acknowledged as frontliners. Therefore, the government should provide suitable protective equipment accordingly in order to protect them from being infected by Covid-19</i></li> </ol>
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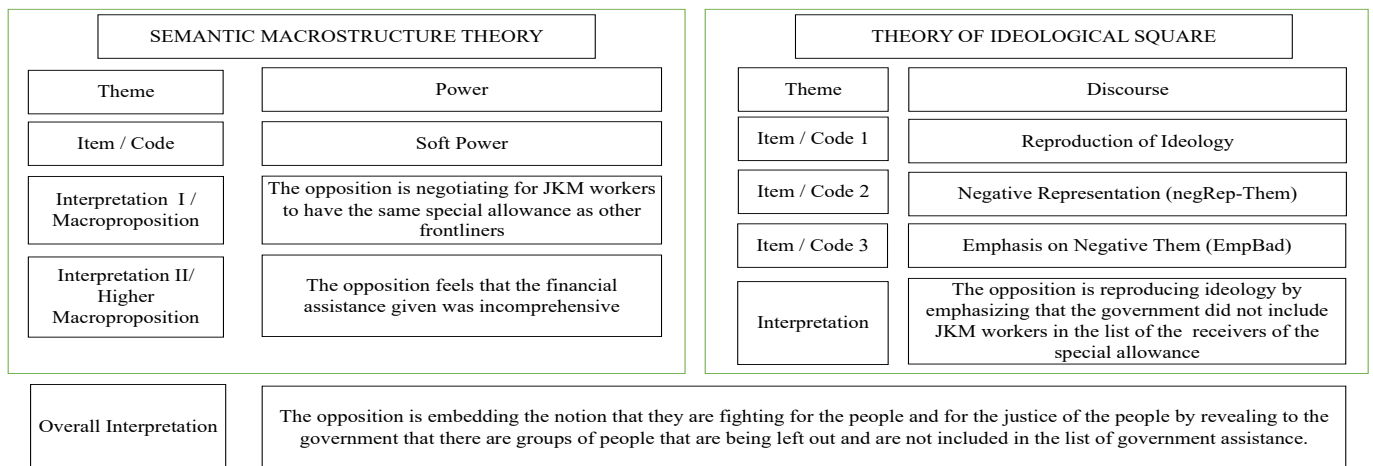


Figure 3. Data analysis—Facebook post of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

The blend between social cognitive theory and social constructivism in the construction of social cognition, including the social cognition of international societies, is apparent. It is evident in past literature that argue social constructs influence public diplomacy, and the study proves that soft power and the reproduction of ideology applied in the state's (PM8) online narratives form a positive international social cognition, prompting positive perception. The World Health Organization (WHO) responded positively to the actions taken by most countries, including Malaysia in trying, to sustain their economy by launching economic packages and aid. The WHO acknowledged the difficulties faced by nations, forming a positive perception towards efforts to cope with the pandemic. Therefore, it is apparent that psychosemantic knowledge constructed on the basis of social cognitive theory and social constructivism deployed using social media as a warfare tool succeeded in forming perception in public diplomacy efforts.

### 5. Conclusions

This research is able to pave and establish a new interdisciplinary study incorporating social media warfare, linguistics, and public diplomacy by exploring meaning-making and its inferences that form the psychosemantic knowledge contributing to perception building. The extent of the research explores new grounds, including the theoretical blended approach by amalgamating the social cognitive theory and social constructivism, in the effort to

understand how society and individual interactions construct psychosemantic knowledge by applying behavioral modeling.

The finding enables the study to relate macrostructures, ideology, and overall data interpretation with reality. The study found that macropropositions and higher macropropositions are established in understanding macrostructures leading to the overall interpretation of the text. In relation to that, the emphasis and de-emphasis on either the good or bad, as well as the negative and positive representation of us and them, are used extensively to portray intended meanings. Narratives in the form of passive sentences, as well as having a passive-aggressive style, also influence and connote meaning. However, it is also found that the perception of reality, as compared to the overall comprehension of current political issues and standings, is vital in understanding meanings beyond the media discourse.

Here, the theoretical blend between the social cognitive theory and social constructivism is found to be evident in the social media environment in both comprehending narratives and reproducing narratives. The obvious and continuous instances of comments responding to posts carrying ideologies came from the behavior modeling of the source of communication or opinion leaders that showed their behavior and opinions through their comments. This suggests the learning and comprehension of meaning through behavior by social interaction. It explains that social behavior and social interactions bring semantic value in social media discourse, forming psychosemantic knowledge. Hence, the study found that meaning-making and its inference-forming psychosemantic knowledge are key in deploying psychological warfare in the effort to influence perception and are key likewise in public diplomacy efforts.

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