Negotiating racism in apologia during the pandemic: Critical Discourse Analysis of comments on Al Jazeera's 'Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown' (2020) Documentary

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The Malaysian government's perceived lack of empathy for the plight of migrant workers in Al-Jazeera's 'Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown' (2020) documentary was taken as a violation of normative values. Many opine that the discrimination, racism, xenophobia portrayed in the video were uncalled for – especially during the pandemic. Since its broadcast, it had not only received a strong reaction from the Malaysian government who dismissed the report on the treatment of migrant workers during the movement control order (MCO) as an ~inaccurate, misleading, and unfair" (The Star, 7 July 2020), it had also elicited numerous repudiations from Malaysian citizens. This paper is concerned with the counter narratives occurred in the discourse of defense (i.e. apologia) in the comments on the documentary. It focuses on the discursive micro-level of online defense strategies against the construction of negative self- or in-group impressions (see also van Dijk, 1992, p.92). In this paper, I approached apologia as argumentation, i.e. persuasive narrative that attempts to alter, mitigate and situate the interpretation of the alleged act. This study answers the following questions: What were the defining characteristics, the range and severity of such counter narratives? On what grounds were the migrant workers and Malaysians categorized, and how were they related to each other?

A total of 5,000 most relevant comments posted by users on the 101 East - Al Jazeera Facebook page published on 3 July 2020 were collected. The data were scraped using Exportcomments.com, an automated data extraction tool which enables comments from social media posts to be exported to Excel files. By "relevant comments", I was referring to comments that are automatically ranked by Facebook, most likely high-quality comments relevant to the researchers which include comments from verified profiles and Pages, and comments with the most likes and replies. The analysis of the collected data was divided into two phases: quantitative content analysis (Phase 1) and critical textual analysis (Phase 2). The aim of Phase 1 was to get a 'map' of suggestive themes that marked the patterns and absences in the comments. This was done based on the apologia strategies I expanded from Ware & Linkuge's (1973) seminal work on apologia categories as well as van Dijk's (1992) work on 'denial of racism'. These strategies include: (1) DENIAL, with its sub-strategies (act-denial, control-denial, intention-denial, goal-denial, denial of responsibility, mitigations, justification, excuse and reversal; (2) BOLSTERING; (3) DIFFERENTIATION; and (4) TRANSCENDENCE. To understand how Self and Others were positioned in the apologia offered to Al-Jazeera's 2020 documentary, I first analysed the topoi occurred in the strategies

before these comments were further dissected qualitatively using nomination and argumentation discursive strategies in Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). When analysing the topoi, I used both Boukala (2016) and Aristotleian's (2004) topoi in Rhetoric to guide my own list in context of the arguments occurred in my own data.The findings suggest that while Malaysia reposition themselves and Other in order to defend their reputation and clean their name; it is hard not to notice how racism/discrimination is also negotiated at the same time. Justifying racism/discrimination/xenophobia only widen the gap between the Us group and the Other group in Malaysia's apologia during the pandemic.

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