



## Us vs. Them: Representation of social actors in women's March MY protest signs

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### Abstract

Language plays a pivotal role in social movements, and the influence of slogans in embedding social and political ideologies as well as initiating change in particular contexts have been duly acknowledged. Political slogans often bear narratives, and narratives hold roles played by social actors. The present study analyses textual resources used by protesters in expressing and negotiating feminist ideology through slogans at the 2019 Women's March MY in Kuala Lumpur, specifically through social actor representation. Following Social Actor Network by van Leeuwen (2008), 270 protest signs were examined. The findings of the study revealed activation, classification, nominalisation, and agent deletion as the most prominent categories of social actor representation in the advocacy of women's rights through three main narratives of solidarity and incrimination, generalisation of harmful actions, as well as resistance and reclamation of power by women. Additionally, protest signs also co-opted intertexts mainly sourced from politics, feminist leaders, corporate social activism, and popular culture. Contributing an insight into the polyvocal and intertextual nature of the discourse of protest, a clear implication of the study is the established potential of the representational process in raising social awareness and conveying feminist messages to not only protest violence against women, but also the continuous discrimination against women in the family, workplace, and society.

**Keywords:** Social Actor Representation; Ideology; Social Movement; Feminism; Protest Sign

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## 1. Introduction

In conjunction with International Women's Day, an estimated 1000 people took to the streets to join the Women's March Malaysia on 9th March 2019 at SOGO, Kuala Lumpur, joined by its sister march in Jesselton, Kota Kinabalu on the same day. Women's March has existed as a platform to put forth issues related to women that need addressing and engagement from the public and authorities in many countries. Organised by a coalition of several women's groups such as Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), Sisters in Islam (SIS), All Women's Action Society (AWAM) and more, the march was joined by a wide array of Malaysian citizens, mostly activists, members of the public and students. The march collectively brought forward five demands: (1) to end violence based on gender and sexual orientation, (2) to abolish child marriage, (3) to ensure the rights of women to make choices over their bodies and lives, (4) to ensure a dignified minimum wage of RM 1800, and (5) to destroy

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patriarchy and build a genuine democracy at all levels of society. Protesters held colourful placards with slogans that championed various issues revolving around the demands of the march, some of which may have come off as more sensational than others, sparking a public debate and backlash from authorities and netizens alike.

Social, political, and ideological issues, and the use of slogans in the public discourse mutually shape each other (Condit & Lucaites, 1993) and researchers assert that the analysis of such slogans would allow more in-depth insights into how social and political issues are constructed and negotiated through political discourse. Language choices may have its own political implications, especially with English being widely visible in social movements like Women March MY. The languages, patterns, and even choice of words employed by protesters in their protest signs may signify how successful it is in expressing its message of dissent and dissatisfaction on issues to the extent of provoking the attention of the public. The use of English has been claimed as a pure “linguistic imperialism and practice of power” by scholars like Phillipson (1997). Contrary to such claim, however, recent analysis of street protest rhetorics contested that English is also used for practicing the balance of power, which can only be seen in protests (Beġar, 2015; Suhana, 2011).

The same could be said for feminist-borne social movements surrounding women’s issues in Malaysia. In the Malaysian setting, with the English language established as the nation’s official second language next to Bahasa Malaysia, and the language of feminism being generally alien to the discursive landscape of the mother tongue (Alicia, 2013), it is reasonable for English to be the code of choice for feminist discourse and the women’s movement in Malaysia. Hence, it is worthy to examine how English language is used in Malaysian feminist discourse alongside its multilingual counterparts, as well as how different roles are framed through the representation of social actors in feminist messages.

Within the context of Malaysia, feminism itself is still very much an alien and misunderstood concept, mainly rooted in the common misconception that feminism is a western-borne ideology. It is reasonable to presume the discourse of women’s rights in Malaysia – considered taboo by some – as a form of negotiation to compromise the negative attitude towards feminism, as well as to enact social change with regards to women’s issues. Therefore, building on the attitude towards women’s rights in the Malaysian context and the lack of study on feminist discourse in the local literature, this study examined how textual resources are mediated by those who engage in the advocacy of women’s rights via protests. Building on the potential of slogans in embedding social, cultural, and political ideologies as well as its influence on challenging or exerting change in particular contexts, the present study approaches the discourse of protest by analysing textual strategies of representation to express and negotiate ideology through slogans. Hence, this study aims to answer the following question: How are social actors represented by the protesters in their signs at the 2019 Women’s March MY?

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Social Movements and Protests*

Social movements emerge as a result of the collective and united desire of many people for some change, given that an organisational structure is in place to channel the desires of the people (Blumer, 1969; Mauss, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978; Raihanah et al., 2013; Hazaea et al., 2014). In relation to protests, the two terms have been used interchangeably in the literature. Tratschin (2016) affirms the relative distinction between the former and the latter – where protest serves as the main form of communication of social movements with their intended audience (p.38). In a broader perspective, Keren (2006) regards protests as a specific set of political actions which comprise strikes, petitions, sit-ins, demonstrations, and more.

Jasper (2009) defined social movements as “sustained and intentional efforts to foster or retard social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels encouraged by authorities” (p. 4451) – a definition among many that settle onto a form of power struggle. Understanding the connection between language and ideology from the lens of power dynamics further narrowed through the act of disruptive protests, Beċar (2015) in her analysis of street protest rhetorics suggests that English is used for practicing the balance of power. The oppressed or the less powerful group tries to exercise or obtain the power to further their ideologies through an act that purposely disrupts and inconveniences the system as well as the people who are granted more power by said system – the authorities.

The impact of social movements and protests exists on a continuum – where revolution and the overthrow of the existing system would be the most extreme implication, the minimal expectation that follows an act of protest is to enact social change within it. From rallies to sit-ins and protests – whether static or mobilised – social movements require visibility to be considered successful. In that sense, not only does it ensure attention to its message or key demands, but it also encourages the masses to join the cause. Following visibility as a requirement for a protest to succeed, the language of dissent by protesters – be it verbal or visual, whether to enact social change or overthrowing a system – holds a certain weight of power in communicating key demands. On the subject of protest discourse, the focal point in most studies has been on the impact of languages on the audiences (e.g., Sonntag, 2003; Frekko, 2009; Bassiouney, 2012; Lahlali, 2014; Al-Aghberi, 2015). Fine tuning the focus onto the expressions of dissent among the protesters within the context of the women’s rights movement, the present study aims to provide analytical insight on the verbal resources used in protest signs, included as conscious choices to express their dissent to contest or negotiate the ideology of feminism in the local sphere.

## *2.2 Slogans in Political Discourse*

A number of scholars have investigated the use of slogans in political discourse (Sharp 1984; Urdang and Robbins, 1984; Denton, 1980); hence the study of slogans is not exactly a new phenomenon in the literature. Recent scholars have also looked at the way social, cultural, and political ideologies are embedded in slogans, as Kaul (2010) suggest slogans to be part of ‘human dialogue’, personalised to reflect the aims and aspirations of certain groups. Aside from the embedding of political ideologies into slogans, research has also emphasised the political nature of slogans being persuasive and their impact on the reader, as well as slogans’ influence on challenging or forcing change in particular contexts. Denton (1980) and McGee (1989) have thus pointed out political slogans as effective tools of persuasion, expression of political goals, as well as means to raise political consciousness and organise a set of cultural attitudes. Understanding the persuasive nature of slogans also suggests slogans as being a form of ‘controlling consciousness’ (McGee, 1989).

Acknowledging the functional role of slogans in informing the social and ideological realities of the authors, as well as its persuasive nature in influencing behaviour and political beliefs of the recipients, Sharp (1984) also noted the capability of slogans to inspire and motivate people to take action as a means to protect their existence in the society or their interests. Presently, on a global scale, slogans are used as a way for ‘popular persuasion in advertisements and political campaigns’ (Lu, 1999). Highly purposive as a means of marketing, slogans are also useful tools to elevate awareness of political, social, and cultural issues which call for collective action in society. Slogans can mainly prompt emotional responses and execute persuasive functions that highly grants to the mobilisation of the public masses. According to Sharp (1984), such emotional and persuasive acts mostly perform as a rallying point for people to act on issues that are of interest to them.

Barton (1999) analysed signs in the context of support groups for disability education in the US and deduced, that repetition of slogans and sayings can be generalised as a common feature of support groups. Her study found that slogans serve informational and interactional functions in the support group, whereby it is informational in the sense of distribution and publication of materials, and interactional in the sense that it creates and establish a feeling of solidarity among participants to execute the interests of the group (Barton, 1999). Repetition of slogans is also an evident feature in the analysis of protest sign messages at the 2017 Women’s March on Washington by Weber, Dejmanee & Rhode (2018). The study analysing Women’s March protest signs were found to bear feminist messages originating from popular culture and the corporate sphere, all of which were repeated as activist slogans. The researchers also noted that although popular feminism has been highly criticised as a trivial fad, the protest signs messages offered a model to develop a coalition as they collectively interlace messages of personal, political, and commercial feminism, demonstrating a mark of visible unity which allowed a space for productive dissatisfaction and criticism within the movement regardless.

Recent scholarly analysis of protest signs has recently put emphasis on the role of language, especially English, as a language of protest. In a study examining protest banners which looked into the function of English as a language of dissent and the role the street plays in the socialisation process through democratic participation of the public, Beċar (2015) suggests that the use of English as the common language of protests helps people demonstrate a sense of belonging to the global world amidst the existence of social and political injustice. Acknowledging the dissonance between the language of feminism with the discursive landscape of the mother tongue (Alicia, 2013), the present study contextualises Beċar’s (2015) suggestion of English as the lingua franca of protests into the local women’s rights movement in Malaysia.

### *2.3 Feminism in Malaysia*

Feminism and the women’s rights movement in Malaysia is not particularly new, however acceptance of the concept representing women’s struggles varies among Malaysians in history. In the context of Malaysia, according to Rohana (1999), the concept of feminism is viewed as a western ideal and is unfitting to the locals as women’s demands in Malaysia need to be conveyed with respect towards the state, family, and religion. Despite the recognition that Malaysian feminist activism has gained over the years, it is often absorbed and branded under the banner of women’s struggles against discrimination and injustice. Simply put, many struggles in Malaysia are feminist, but are not labelled and recognised as such. This can be understood by the stigmatization surrounding the term ‘feminism’ and other words associated with it among locals. Many Malaysian women do not prefer to be identified as feminists because feminism has been misinterpreted by most as a western ideal that is irrelevant to the local context, and the success of any attempt by both individuals and women groups to raise the status of women in Malaysia is compromised due to the reluctance to embrace feminism (Rohana, 1999). Given the multiracial nature of the Malaysian demographic, too, the diverse mixture of ethnicity in Malaysia serves to weaken the prospects for collaboration and alliance among women’s groups (Mohamed, 2000).

Enmeshed in the discourse of academia, local women academicians have also tried to define just what ‘Malaysian feminism’ means, but have been unsuccessful, hence the question of what makes a feminist movement ‘Malaysian’ is still being negotiated and contested (Kaijian Malaysia, 1994 as cited in Rohana, 1999). However, Malaysian scholars like Ng, Maznah, and Tan (2006) in their paper assert that various manifestations of feminism exist in Malaysia, dismissing a singular, unitary identity, but acknowledges and accepting the differences along sub-ideological lines. According to Shymala (1995), gradual acceptance of feminism in Malaysia shows that most Malaysian women (and

maybe a number of men) do embrace a moderate or liberal form of feminism (cited by Rohana, 1999). Dating back to Malaysia's pre-independence, the constant goal of the women's and feminist movement in Malaysia had always been to liberate and uphold women above oppression. However, across time, its goals within politics, ending gender-based violence, as well as inequality oriented towards personal faith have shifted in its emphasis.

With regards to Malaysian feminist movement, Alicia (2013) argues that the linguistic shape of feminist discourse is also shaped and governed by these historical and political circumstances. Ng, Maznah & Tan (2006: 34) marked the trajectory of feminism in Malaysia within four phases of varieties: nationalist feminism, social feminism, political feminism, and market-driven feminism. Although the development of the Malaysian feminist movement is fairly accessible in the literature, attention by scholars on the language used in Malaysian feminist discourse has been scarce (Alicia, 2013; Aziz, 2019). Stringing together language and ideology in the context of Malaysian feminism in Malaysia, the present study aims to examine how participants of the 2019 Women's March MY expressed and contested their ideology of women's rights through social actor representation.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Data Collection*

The data for this research is a collection of protest signs at the 2019 Women's March MY at Kuala Lumpur on 8th May 2019, mobilised by the protesters during the march. Initially, 327 signs were captured during the event. After the elimination of repetitive and indecipherable signs, a final sum of 270 protest signs was selected and used for this study. With regards to the sampling, the selection of data was purposeful in the way that signs with textual messages were chosen to examine the language choice of protesters and the occurring frames used by them in making shared meanings. Purposeful selection of signs was also done regardless of (1) language choices (English, Malay, Tamil, Mandarin), (2) modes (written text and visuals), and (3) mediums (cardboard, printed posters, banners, balloons, flags, fabric signs, etc.) of protest signs, given that they were all mobilised during the march. The reason for such sampling is consistent with Scollon's (2001) view that signs or anything else that opens room for interpretation that may mean something other than itself, are influential "mediational means" that convey important messages in the act of protest (Kasanga, 2014).

#### *3.2. Method of Analysis*

This research utilises Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network (2008) – a socio-semantic inventory for classifying the ways participants of social practices can be represented – to look at how protesters frame social actors in their language of dissent. Among the main purposes of CDA is to understand, demonstrate, and resist social inequality, as Van Dijk (2008: 85) suggests – "the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." Hence, social actor representation is one of the ways to reveal power dynamics in discourse. By understanding the exclusion and inclusion of social actors in discourse, power relations, hidden values, and ideology (Syuhada et al., 2021) in the construction of protest sign messages can be revealed, shedding light on speakers' and writers' employed strategies in their reinforcement and reconstruction of ideas and beliefs.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Representation of Social Actors

According to Van Leeuwen (2008), representations can be used to allocate the roles of social actors (e.g. as passive vs active), as well as to establish social relations between the protesters and the viewers. Categories of representation have been selected and applied from Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network (2008). Each category of the social actor network is briefly described, and the findings of the study are tabulated. Table 1 break down the instances, percentage, and examples of each social actor representation identified in the data.

**Table 1.** Social Actor Categories: Frequencies and Examples

Representation	Social Actor Network	Instances	Percentage (%)	Examples
Inclusion	Activation	63	18.16	<i>I MAKE MY OWN DECISIONS I WEAR WHAT I WANT! you got a problem with that? WE ARE NOT OVARY-ACTING</i>
	Association	12	3.46	<i>I'M WITH HER MY FRIENDS AND I ARE NOT WIFE MATERIAL I'M WITH MY SISTERS</i>
Appraisalment	Appraisalment	15	4.32	<i>GETTING CALLED OUT ON THEIR BULLSHIT RACISTS, SEXISTS, AND BIGOTS: IS THIS OPRESSION? EMPOWERED WOMEN EMPOWER WOMEN MEN OF QUALITY DO NOT FEAR EQUALITY</i>
	Objectivation	1	0.29	<i>SCHOOLS not SPOUSES</i>
Somatization	Somatization	15	4.32	<i>MY BODY MY CHOICE MY UTERUS MY BUSINESS LET MY NIPS BE FREE</i>
	Classification	66	19.02	<i>WOMEN DON'T OWE YOU SHIT GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN-DAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS GIRLS NOT BRIDES</i>
Collectivisation	Collectivisation	24	6.92	<i>NO ONE IS FREE UNTIL ALL ♀ F US ARE" 'On behalf of all men, I'm sorry' don't be sorry, be better FEMINIST ALLIES</i>

			<b>THE NATION ACHES, WOMEN RISE</b>	
	Functionalisation	9	2.59	Dear <b>justice enforcer</b> , THE DECISION IS IN YOUR HANDS #EndMarriagesUnder18 #STUDENTSRISE WE HAVE NO PLACE FOR <b>HARASSERS</b> IN CAMPUS I'm a <b>woman scientist</b> I want my voice to be heard to save our ocean
	Personalisation	1	0.29	<i>She needed a hero, So that's what <b>she</b> became.</i>
	Possessivation	20	5.76	<b>MY FAVOURITE SEASON IS THE FALL OF THE PATRIARCHY OUR RIGHTS! OUR VOICE! OUR BODIES! OUR MINDS! OUR POWER!</b>
	Relational Identification	5	1.44	SARAWAK TIMBER & OIL & GAS MONEY -OR- <i>our mothers' lives!!</i> <b>MY FRIENDS AND I ARE NOT WIFE MATERIAL MY NAME IS BROKEN AND I AM YOUR DAUGHTER</b>
Exclusion	Nomination	2	0.58	<b>THE STORY OF KAM AGONG</b>
	Nominalisation	42	12.10	<b>IGNORANCE AND BIGOTRY AIN'T SEXY CAT CALLING IS NOT A COMPLIMENT SeXISM Does noT sPaRK JOY</b>
	Agent Deletion	72	20.75	<b>FUCK SEXUAL HARASSMENT FIGHT MISOGYNY break up with your misogyny, I'm bored</b>
TOTAL		347	100	

#### 4.1.1 Activation

The use of active voice in the protest sign messages below is referred to as activation in Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Representation framework (2008). Activation occurs when social actors are depicted as the active, dynamic forces in a certain action or event. The analysis identified 63 instances (18.16%) of Activation, in which the subjects are depicted as active responsible agents. This is realised through active sentence structure, employing first-person and second person pronouns. Some examples

of protest sign messages in active forms with clear use of first-person pronouns “I” and “we are as follows.

***I WANT SEXUAL ORGASM NOT SEXUAL HARASSMENT!  
WE HAVE NO PLACE FOR HARASSERS ON CAMPUS!  
WE ARE NOT OVARY-ACTING***

Protest signs also employed the use of second person pronoun “you” and its variations when referring to the one in power, to incriminate the agent of responsibility. This can be seen in the examples below:

***IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHY WE MARCH YOU'RE THE PROBLEM  
YOU'RE COOL WITH LEGAL PEDOPHILIA BUT EQUAL RIGHTS SCARE YOU?  
HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO THE WOMEN OF SARAWAK?***

These protest messages emphasized on the agent of responsibility, through active sentence construction when referring to the protesters.

#### *4.1.2 Association*

The representation of social actors as a group in protest signs also occurred through association. 12 instances (3.46%) were identified in the data. Different social groups may not necessarily be seen as one collective unit, but rather associated with one another through a common characteristic. For example, teachers and students are associated with one another through their relation to the educational institution, racists and sexists are associated with one another through their display of prejudice on different groups of people. One of the ways that association can be realised is through parataxis, a common literary technique, where words, phrases, or clauses are placed one after another without conjunctions (e.g., “we came, we saw, we conquered”) or with the use of coordinating conjunctions. The following examples refer to groups formed by social actors and/or groups of social actors through a parataxis:

***SOME OF Y'ALL ARE RACIST, SEXIST & RAPE APOLOGISTS  
GETTING CALLED OUT ON THEIR BULLSHIT  
RACISTS, SEXISTS, AND BIGOTS: IS THIS OPRESSION?***

In the examples above, “racist”, “sexist”, and “rape apologists” are distinct attributes of people forming a group of negative qualities in opposition to the interests of women’s rights movement. Instead of being represented as one, the different groups “racist” “sexist” “rape apologists” are represented as an alliance. Similarly, in the second example, “racists”, “sexists”, and “bigots” are associated through parataxis to indicate their alliance, who collectively reacted to being called out as an act of oppression towards women. The purpose of association through parataxis suggests a negative connotation of these different labels, generalising their opposition and prejudice towards the women’s rights movement and its allies.

Association may also be realized through “circumstances of accompaniment” (Halliday, 1985: 141), which, in the examples below, is realised through prepositional phrases *with* or *without*.

***I'M WITH HER  
I'M WITH MY SISTERS  
NO SEXISM WITHOUT CAPITALISM  
You can be masculine **without** being toxic***

The above examples of representation relate the subjects to the object in a show of solidarity through “*I’m with her*”. “*no sexism without capitalism*” highlights the relational existence of things or attributes which associates both sexism and capitalism as being mutually inclusive. Finally, “*You can be masculine without being toxic*”, disassociates the attributes masculine and toxic as being mutually exclusive.

#### 4.1.3 Appraisal

Social actor representation via appraisal is identified in 15 instances (4.32%). Social actors are referred to in evaluative terms: whether good or bad, loved, or despised, and others. In the context of Women’s March MY, some positive appraisements were seen in the post modification of *women* and *men* as follows:

***EMPOWERED WOMEN EMPOWER WOMEN  
MEN OF QUALITY DO NOT FEAR EQUALITY***

Negative appraisements are evident in the sample protest sign message below:

***GETTING CALLED OUT ON THEIR BULLSHIT  
RACISTS, SEXISTS, AND BIGOTS: IS THIS OPRESSION?***

The purpose of appraisal is to ascribe positive or negative evaluation onto social actors. Positive evaluation (e.g. – *empowered women, men of quality*) uplifts certain social actors, whereas negative evaluation (e.g. – *racists, sexists, bigots*) incriminates. Whether to praise or to ridicule certain groups, the effect of appraisal of said social actors amplifies the connotative tone of the message.

#### 4.1.4 Classification

Classification refers to major categories such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on. Protest sign messages in the march recorded a prominent number of social actor representation via classification, with as many as 66 instances (19.02%), wherein a majority of these representations are gender-based.

***WOMEN DON’T OWE YOU SHIT  
GIRLS NOT BRIDES***

In the sample protest sign message below, classification is present in terms of gender and race:

*I am privileged because I am...*

- ✓ *A man*
- ✓ *A malay in Malaysia*

*So, I have the responsibility to give respect to...*

- ✓ *Women*
- ✓ *Minorities*
- ✓ *Basically Everyone*

The purpose of classification in the context of the protest, is to acknowledge differences in gender, race, as well as society and institution. With regards to the women’s rights movement, classification by gender works to elevate women into the spotlight as well as amplifying the dialogue of *us vs. them* in highlighting women’s issues.

#### 4.1.5 Relational Identification

Aside from classification, categorisation of social actors was also created via relational identification, by which social actors are represented in terms of their personal, kinship, or work relations to one another – usually preceded by a possessive pronoun. 5 instances (1.44%) of relational identification were found in the analysis. 3 examples as follows:

*SARAWAK TIMBER & OIL & GAS MONEY -OR- our mothers' lives!!*  
**MY FRIENDS AND I ARE NOT WIFE MATERIAL**  
**MY NAME IS BROKEN AND I AM YOUR DAUGHTER**

In the few protest signs that employ relational identification, the construction of the messages may hold an affective motive to create emotional impact on the viewers. Possessive relational identification such as *our mothers* and *your daughters* were used to imbue a sense of kinship when it comes to understanding women's struggles, instead of being a stranger removed from any relations. Although this reduced the agency of the social actor from being one's own individual to being someone's family members, it provided an affective leverage for viewers to relate to the messages from the lens of family relations (Radzi et al. 2021).

#### 4.1.6 Functionalisation

Social actors can also be categorised via functionalisation, where social actors are represented by nouns that denote their occupation or role. In the findings, 9 instances (2.59%) of functionalisation were identified.

*Dear justice enforcer, THE DECISION IS IN YOUR HANDS #EndMarriagesUnder18*  
**#STUDENTSRISE WE HAVE NO PLACE FOR HARASSERS IN CAMPUS**  
*I'm a woman scientist I want my voice to be heard to save our ocean*

Functionalisation in representing social actors, especially with labels of occupation, elevates the sense of credibility and importance one holds in a society (i.e. *justice enforcer, woman scientist*), which also helps correlate the social actor's identity to the message. Functionalisation of actions, especially harmful ones such as *harasser* serves to incriminate people who engage in said action – implying that harassment can be done by anyone regardless of their identity or background.

#### 4.1.7 Collectivisation

Social actor representation is also realised through collectivisation where a number of people or things are considered as one group or is denoted as a whole. As many as 24 instances (6.92%) were identified, where collectivisation is realised through the use of adjective *all* to signify the entirety of the nouns or pronouns;

**NO ONE IS FREE UNTIL ALL ♀F US ARE**  
*'On behalf of all men, I'm sorry' don't be sorry, be better FEMINIST ALLIES*

Realised through plural assimilation, a mass noun or a noun is used to denote a group of people as one whole;

**THE NATION ACHES, WOMEN RISE**  
**EQUAL ACCESS TO MATERNAL HEALTHCARE FOR THE MOTHERS OF SARAWAK!**  
**YOUTH DEMANDS ACTION!**

The use of the first-person plural *we*, collectively signified their active dissent to represent a group of people instead of a singular voice:

### **WE ARE NOT OVARY-ACTING**

***we must defy, WE MUST DISOBEY, AND WE MUST DISRUPT patriarchy at every turn. WE MUST MAKE PATRIARCHY FEAR WOMEN.*** – Mona Eltahawy

The presentation of social actors as groups through collectivisation works to amplify a mutual understanding and shared perspective of the protesters mobilising together. As opposed to aggregation where social actors are quantified and treated as statistics to appear objective, collectivisation offers a personalisation of social actors as human beings as well as giving them an active voice. In the context of mobilisation, collectivisation offers more value in grounding solidarity with the oppressed or with one another compared to individualisation. This is because the narrative of unanimous togetherness is more effectively and concisely delivered through collectivisation compared to individualisation – for example, although “we” and “my friends and I” are interchangeable, the individualisation in the latter nuances distinction to a certain extent compared to the former.

#### **4.1.8 Objectivation**

Social actors can also be represented by means that impersonalise them. In the collection of protest sign messages, the type of impersonalisation that occurs is through objectivation. Van Leeuwen (2008: 46) defines it as “when social actors are represented by means of reference to a place or thing closely associated either with their person or with the action in which they are represented as being engaged.” Generically, objectivation of social actor was identified once (0.29%) in the findings, as shown:

#### **#School NOT Spouse**

In the above example, the message echoes the activism to end child marriage in Malaysia, particularly the local movement *Pelajar Bukan Pengantin* (A Student, Not A Bride). In the sign, the social actor is represented by the noun ‘school’, a place in which young children engage in and are strongly associated to, as opposed to ‘spouses’. The slogan indicates the unlikely association of underage kids to husbands, and the need to de-normalise it.

#### **4.1.9 Somatization**

On a more specific note, a form of objectivation that is more prominent in the context of Women’s March MY protest is somatization – with 15 instances (4.32%) – where the social actors are represented by referring to a part of their body as shown below:

**HER BODY HER CHOICE  
MY VAGINA IS PRIVATE PROPERTY!  
LET MY NIPS BE FREE  
MY UTERUS MY BUSINESS**

Women as social actors are represented through their body parts, and their agency is represented as such. In this case however, Van Leeuwen (2008) suggests semi-objectivation, as the somatization through reference of body parts is pre-modified by a possessive pronoun “my” or “her” denoting the “owner” of the body part. It suggests that the social actor’s agency is not completely diminished, but possessivated somatization still indicates a sense of alienation of women as social actors that are physically involved in a manner that is unsolicited or intrusive.

#### **4.1.10 Possessivation**

Possessivation is a form of premodification of nominalisations or nouns. In the findings, 20 instances (5.76%) of possessivation were identified. Premodification or postmodification of nominalisations (typically in the form of possessivation) activates a social actor by giving a noun (both concrete or abstract) a rightful owner (e.g. – *your masculinity, our rights, our bodies, etc*).

***IS YOUR MASCULINITY THIS FRAGILE?  
MY FAVOURITE SEASON IS THE FALL OF THE PATRIARCHY  
OUR RIGHTS! OUR VOICE! OUR BODIES! OUR MINDS! OUR POWER!***

Possessivation has the power to incriminate the viewer or reader through a second-person possessive pronoun (e.g. *IS YOUR MASCULINITY THIS FRAGILE?*) as well as to introduce the social actors as an active, collective force via ownership (e.g. - *OUR RIGHTS! OUR VOICE! OUR BODIES! OUR MINDS! OUR POWER!*). The larger purpose of this representation aligns with that of activation, where nominalisations are given an agent of responsibility that serves as the active dynamic force in a specific action or event.

*4.1.11 Nomination*

Two instances (0.58%) of nomination were identified in the findings – where one are realised through proper noun (formal name, *KAM AGONG*) and the other by titulation (*QUEEN*), by bestowing an honorific title or designation to someone.

***THE STORY OF KAM AGONG  
YES QUEEN***

*4.1.12 Personalisation*

Personalisation represents social actors as human beings, as opposed to impersonalisation which may pose them as an object or a circumstance. In the collection of protest sign messages, personalisation only occurred in a single instance (0.29%) where social actors are present, realised by the personal pronoun *she*:

*She needed a hero, So that's what she became.*

Realised by personal pronoun *she*, the protest message above humanises the social actor despite retaining her anonymity. Although the singular female pronoun may symbolise girls or women, personalisation provides the portrayal of an individualistic character and their role in the narrative.

*4.1.13 Nominalisation*

The exclusion of social actors is prominent in the findings, with 114 instances (32.85%) of Suppression, nominalisation with 42 instances (12.1%) and agent deletion with 72 instances (20.75%). Nominalisation turns verbs signifying actions or events into nouns which signify things, concepts, or people. Jorgensen & Phillips (2002: 83) define nominalisation as a linguistic feature which minimises or passively deletes the actors' agency and emphasises the effect of the action itself. Nominalisations and process nouns similarly allow the exclusion of social actors (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Such form of passivation is apparent in some of the protest sign messages shown below:

***CAT CALLING IS NOT A COMPLIMENT  
MISOGYNY KILLS  
MISOGYNY KILLS  
HATING WOMEN KILLS  
AND YES, YOU TOO INTERNALIZED MISOGYNIST  
OPPRESSION ENDS WITHIN THESE STEPS***

In the above examples, “*catcalling*”, “*hating women*”, all functioned as nominals, although they referred to actions. Nominalisation passivates the social actor in a way that their agency is deleted. Hence, the nominals “*cat calling*”, “*hating women*” do not focus on who the perpetrator is, but rather focuses on its effect on the recipient. The implication of such word choice is twofold: not only does it exclude the actor, but it also presents the action as an aim, enabling an impersonal tone to the sentence.

The omission of social actor also insinuates the generalisation of such action to outweigh specific doers, suggesting that the action happens way too often, and anyone can be the perpetrator. It also allows the delivery of meaning in very few words, wherein the spatial boundary of the protest sign mediums (cardboards, flags, etc.) play a role in the direct and effective delivery of message in slogans. In other protest signs, active forms are also depicted through imperative sentences, whereby the subject is omitted, but the doer is assumed. The use of imperatives is posed as orders and vocatives, whereby the subject is typically in the second person *you*, which refers to the readers or viewers of the protest in the context of the march.

#### 4.1.14 Agent Deletion

The exclusion of social actors could also be seen through suppression realised via agent deletions, where the agency of the sayer is omitted in sentences construed in the imperative mood, and directed to a covert subject, the hearer. Although the representation of social actor is suppressed, Schmerling (1975) asserts that imperatives function as a sentence type in their own right which results in the covert subject following a special deletion rule, which traditionally assumes the second person as the intended subject in imperatives. “*As the imperative can be used only in addressing someone, the subject of an imperative sentence must always be in the second person.*” (Sweet, 1960: 111).

72 protest signs (20.75%) employed the imperative mood which omits the agency of the sayer, whereby the construction and representation of the protest sign messages were done through the use of material and mental processes. Protesters’ choice of verbs revolved mainly on the process of ‘doing’ (material) as well as ‘feeling’ and ‘thinking’ (mental), which revealed how protesters perceive and experience their world view – specifically the issue of women’s rights in the context of this study. Shown below in Table 2 are examples of material and mental processes conveyed in sample protest sign messages.

**Table 2.** Transitive Processes in 2019 Women’s March Protest Signs

<b>TRANSITIVE PROCESS</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<b>Material</b>	<i><b>FIGHT MISOGYNY</b></i> <i>break up with your misogyny, I’m bored</i> <i><b>STOP VICTIM BLAMING</b></i>
<b>Mental</b>	<i><b>RESPECT EXISTENCE OR EXPECT RESISTANCE</b></i> <i><b>FUCK SEXUAL HARASSMENT!</b></i> <i>Be immodest <b>REBEL</b> disobey and <b>know</b> you deserve to be <b>FREE</b> – Mona Eltahawy</i>

The use of material process by the protesters may reveal power relations. On the exertion of power, Thwaite (1983) states that it is more influential within the domains of ‘doing’ rather than ‘sensing’, ‘saying’ or ‘behaving’ due to the fact that influencing action by physical force is easier than influencing how people think. In using material processes, determining the ‘doer’ is also important. As the covert subject of an imperative sentence is always assumed as the second person, protesters employ the imperative mood to command the action on the reader, telling them what to do. Such interpretation can be justified in the context of the march, where organisational demands call for tangible action instead of performative activism on part of the government and people in power. This is evident in material process verbs being used in imperative sentences commanding for action (e.g. – *BAN, CRIMINALISE, PROTECT, END*, etc.) from the government regarding issues that continue to victimise women in present society. The choice of material process verbs *FIGHT, STOP, BREAK UP*

also display an exertion of power, as slogans are construed as orders, suggesting authority on part of the speaker. Hence, the prominence of material clauses, of protesters commanding for the people in power to act is seen as the protesters' way to challenge power relations through verbal dissent.

Aside from urging for proactive and constructive action from the government, the use of mental clauses can be seen as the protesters' way to attempt to change the thoughts or mentality of viewers and readers on issues of women's rights in the local sphere by invoking the feeling of admirability (*RESPECT WOMEN*), hate (*FUCK SEXUAL HARRASSMENT*), and believing (*EXPECT RESISTANCE*), all constructed in the form of a command to the viewers and readers.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the results, activation, classification, nominalisation, and agent deletion are the most prominent categories of social actor representation, encompassing a balance between inclusion and exclusion in the discourse. The representation of social actors in the protest signs also highlights three main narratives in the feminist discourse surrounding the march 1) *us vs. them* via solidarity and incrimination, 2) generalisation of harmful actions, and 3) the resistance and reclamation of power by women.

Activation allows the representation of social actors as a dynamic force in an action, enabling a strong presence of the protesters through the first- and second-person pronouns. This creates clarity in the distinction of *us vs. them* in the discourse of protest. The use of first-person pronouns not only allows individual agency in voicing dissent (e.g., *I want sexual orgasm not sexual harassment*), but also extends into unity and solidarity of the protesters in mass mobilisation (e.g., *I am with her*, *We are not ovary-acting*). Similarly, solidarity is also signified through collectivisation, but a contrary effect is intended in association used to incriminate oppressors into one group (e.g., *racists, sexism, rape apologists*). The same effect is also signified through second-person pronouns meant to incriminate (e.g., *Is your masculinity this fragile?*). The use of second person pronouns remains vague, serving as an outward call to viewers, as well as a jab to the oppressors themselves. From a bigger perspective, the act of signifying solidarity and incrimination creates the political discourse of *us vs. them*, which reflects the two main strategies of ideological representation: positive self-representation and negative other representation (Van Dijk, 2003; 2005).

On the other hand, the resistance and reclamation of power by women is signified using classification and objectivation (somatization) in the signs. The fight for women and their rights are amplified through gender-based classification, with recurring use of 'women', 'girls', and 'sisters' echoing from one protest sign to another, signifying a collective resistance against a patriarchal society. The use of somatization by protesters in voicing their dissent can be seen as pandering to the objectification of women, however in the feminist perspective this serves as an act of taking back their power by taking ownership of such terms and language from those who use it to degrade women (Muscio, 2002; Aziz, 2019).

In terms of social actor representation by exclusion, both nominalisation and agent deletion via the imperative mood place an emphasis on a certain action or event realised by process nouns (e.g. – *“catcalling”, “getting called out”, “hating women”*), and verb processes (e.g. – *“respect women”, “fight misogyny”, “expect resistance”*). The agency of the social actors is omitted and instead focuses on the action or event itself (e.g. – *“misogyny kills” “fuck sexual harassment”*). As nominalization influences how a certain text is read and interpreted, Van Dijk (2008) stated the preference of nominalisation can be due to lack of or irrelevant knowledge about the agent or agency, the lack of space, author focus on actions or victims rather than on the agents, as well as hiding or downgrading the responsible negative agency. In signs where actor agency is deleted, nominalisation is incorporated

to give more emphasis on harmful actions rooted in misogyny and its immediate effect (e.g. – *Misogyny Kills, Child Marriage is Child Abuse*). Nominalisation also enables the deletion of information, such as that of the participants, time, and modality (Fowler, 1991), which in turn contributes to the focus on the action itself, regardless of its perpetrators, settings, nor context. Given the spatial boundary of protest sign mediums and the conscious emphasis on harmful actions instead of its doers, protesters deem it more space-effective and delivery-efficient to condemn the act in general than to pick out perpetrators, given that the crime is common and the effect on its victims can be detrimental.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine the discourse of protest by analysing textual strategies for expressing ideologies in the 2019 Women's March protest signs. The analysis identified 14 categories of social actor representation and 3 main feminist narratives in their expressions of dissent. Although this study contributes to the gap in the literature, the findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. The first is the data size. This study faced certain limitations in the data collection process. Given the unpredictable size and movement of the protest crowd, a more systematic and distributed means of event capturing is recommended for future research in capturing protest signs and slogans for the purpose of analysis. Secondly, considering the multiracial and multilingual nature of our society, future studies on the language of protest could consider signs written in Mandarin, Tamil, and Iban, among other languages. Future research may also consider observing protests with different causes and goals to see how the themes as well as textual resources vary accordingly. To conclude, it is well established that protest movements depend highly on the visibility and readability of its messages in reaching out to its audience. With the right verbal resources, protest signs can be an effective medium for spreading ideologies as well as negotiating power balance in enacting social changes demanded by the people.

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