Constructing CSR Communication Through The Discourse Of Caring And Solidarity

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Abstract

This study investigates how non-profit organizations in Iskandar Malaysia construct Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication through the discourse of caring and solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis. Focusing on the Social Hero Foundation (SHF) and its partner NGOs, the research employs Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) text, discursive practice, and social practice integrated with Mele and Garriga's CSR typology (ethical and integrative orientations). Six Facebook posts published between March and December 2020 were purposively selected for in-depth analysis. Findings reveal that inclusive pronouns, emotive language, and numerical substantiation are strategically deployed to frame beneficiaries as active partners, foster collective agency, and legitimise urgent action. The study offers a replicable CDA-based analytical model for NGO crisis communication and enriches CSR theory by demonstrating the operationalisation of ethical and integrative CSR within digital discourse.

Keywords: CSR communication; caring discourse; solidarity discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; Malaysia; non-profit organizations; Facebook; crisis communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) serves as a critical strategic and ethical practice through which organizations negotiate legitimacy, build trust, and demonstrate alignment with societal expectations, especially in times of crisis. While CSR scholarship in the corporate sector is well established, the nonprofit domain particularly in Malaysia—remains underexplored. The COVID- 19 pandemic created unprecedented pressures for non-profit organizations (NPOs) to mobilise resources rapidly while sustaining transparent, trust-based relationships with stakeholders.

Recent studies (Ibrahim, 2023; Nahar & Maslinawati, 2023) underscore that crisis contexts elevate the salience of credible, values-driven communication. This paper examines the Social Hero Foundation (SHF), a prominent umbrella NGO in Iskandar Malaysia, to explore how discourses of caring and solidarity are constructed in CSR messaging and how these narratives function as mobilising strategies during the pandemic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR communication in NPOs is fundamentally mission-oriented and dialogic, seeking not only to inform but also to engage and mobilise stakeholders (Waters & Ott, 2014; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Digital platforms, particularly social media, have expanded the scope for real-time, participatory engagement (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013). In crisis contexts, ethical imperatives intensify, necessitating messaging that reflects empathy, reciprocity, and collective responsibility (Carroll, 2021; Coombs, 2015). Caring discourse indexes moral obligation and attentiveness to vulnerability, while solidarity discourse foregrounds unity-in-action. Fairclough's CDA framework facilitates a layered examination of such discourses, linking linguistic features to production practices and socio-cultural contexts (Fairclough, 1992, 2003, 2013). Integrating Mele and Garriga's (2004) CSR typology, particularly the ethical and integrative categories, provides theoretical grounding for interpreting how language enacts socially responsible practice.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

Objective: To explain how SHF constructs caring and solidarity in CSR communication during COVID-19 and how these discourses mobilise stakeholder support.

Research Questions:
RQ1: How are caring and solidarity discourses constructed in SHF's Facebook posts?
RQ2: What discursive strategies mobilise public engagement via social media?
RQ3: How do these strategies reflect ethical and integrative CSR within the social practice dimension?

4. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study applies Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework: (1) textual analysis, examining lexis, and intertextuality; (2) discursive practice, focusing on content production and dissemination; and (3) social practice, interpreting findings within broader socio- cultural contexts. Mele and Garriga's CSR typology is integrated at the social practice stage to assess ethical and integrative dimensions. Six Facebook posts by SHF and partner NGOs from March–December 2020 were purposively sampled for their salience of caring/solidarity discourse and engagement metrics. Coding focused on inclusive pronouns, emotive vocabulary, numerical substantiation, and calls-to-action. Inter-member checking with the supervisory team ensured analytical credibility.

5. Findings

5.1 Caring as Relational Ethic

Posts normalise empathy by highlighting needs and acknowledging contributions (e.g., 'frontliners', 'B40 families'). Gratitude expressions and second-person address construct beneficiaries and supporters as morally salient actors. Modality choices frame aid as obligation, aligning with ethical CSR.

5.2 Solidarity as Collective Agency

Inclusive pronouns ('we', 'together') and imperative forms ('join us', 'act now') invite co-action. Intertextual references to hospitals, shelters, and partner NGOs depict a coordinated network response, reinforcing integrative CSR.

5.3 Numerical Substantiation and Legitimacy

Quantified impacts families aided, PPE items sewn, meals delivered serve as tangible proof of effectiveness. Numbers enhance credibility and sustain donor/volunteer engagement.

5.4 Production and Dissemination Practices

Posts are timed with crisis peaks, cross-posted by partner NGOs, and optimised for shareability, extending reach and reinforcing network solidarity.

Theme	Linguistic/Discursive Features
Caring	Inclusive pronouns, emotive language, gratitude expressions, moral obligation framing
Solidarity	Collective pronouns, imperative calls to action, intertextual references, quantified impacts

6. Implications for Practice

NGOs can enhance crisis communication by adopting a CDA-informed strategy: use inclusive and emotive language to humanise beneficiaries, integrate verifiable data to build trust, and coordinate messages across networks for greater reach. Embedding ethical and integrative CSR principles within message design not only mobilises resources but also strengthens long-term legitimacy.

7. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how SHF operationalises caring and solidarity discourses to mobilise stakeholders during COVID-19. The CDA-based model developed here is replicable across NGOs and crisis contexts. Future research could extend the analysis across regions and crisis types to test transferability.

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