COMPARING THE USE OF RHETORICAL APPEALS BY TWO MALAYSIAN POLITICIANS IN THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

NOR ASHIKIN BINTI AB MANAN[1*] & ALIA IZZATI SHAM SHUL SHUKRI[2]

[1]Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perak, Kampus Seri Iskandar, Malaysia
[2]Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam Selangor, Malaysia
noras914@uitm.du.my

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon Aristotle's rhetorical appeal theory, the study was conducted to compare the use of rhetorical strategies by two Malaysian politicians namely Syed Saddiq [P1] and Hannah Yeoh [P2] in their social media communication. Two research questions were formulated for the study: (a) What were the rhetorical strategies used by the two politicians? (b) Which type of rhetorical appeals were used the most among the two politicians? This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach and the data for the study were social media postings collected from the target politicians' social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) related to the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis dated from the 17th of December 2021 to the 10th of January 2022. The data were analysed and classified based on Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of *ethos*, *pathos,* and *logos*. It was found that both politicians adopted different types of rhetorical strategies depending on the message they intended to convey. Syed Saddiq [P1] used more *pathos* while Hannah Yeoh [P2] utilised more *ethos*. It can be concluded based on the findings that Syed Saddiq and Hannah Yeoh had utilised Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of *ethos, pathos, and logos* in their social media posts during the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis to establish their credibility as politicians, to appeal to the public's emotion and sympathy as well as to provide evidence to back up their arguments and claims. This study contributes to the literature on persuasive strategies used by politicians and political communication.

Keywords: Rhetorical appeals; communicative practices; social media interaction; *ethos, pathos; logos.*

Introduction

A method of persuading the audience through speech, language, and stylistic techniques is called rhetoric (La Torre et al., 2020). Scholars have argued that persuasion relies on a rhetorical strategy "starting with *pathos*, followed by *logos*, and ending with the *ethos*" (p.3) as a process to shape common beliefs and persuade an audience for different purposes in various ways (Aristotle, 2007 as cited in La Torre et al., 2020). Many studies have been conducted on rhetorical appeals used by politicians in their social media communication. For example, Rossini et al. (2018) and Yoo and Zúñiga (2019) were interested in the patterns of political persuasion and communicative strategies in the social mediascape to better understand the nuances of politicians' communicative practices in digital means.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study was to compare the use of rhetorical appeals by two Malaysian politicians namely Syed Saddiq [P1] and Hannah Yeoh [P2] in their social media communication. Their social media communication on a specific issue which was the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis in December 2021 was the focus of this study. The flood crisis went viral on the internet and these politicians were among those who had been actively posting updates on the issue on their social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during the crisis.

Politicians often use social media platforms to persuade the general public as well as influence public opinion by applying techniques that stimulate public reactions. The posts are strategically curated to strengthen the exposure and reinforce their image in the public sphere. Hence, the objectives of the current study are:

RO1: To compare the rhetorical strategies used by the two politicians.
RO2: To determine the type of rhetorical appeals used the most among the politicians.

To address the research objectives, two research questions were formulated:
RQ1: What were the rhetorical strategies used by the two politicians?
RQ2: Which type of rhetorical appeals were used the most among the two politicians?

Literature Review

Persuasion has been a topic of interest to scholars in various contexts. In the context of political discourse, persuasion is significant as it is the act of persuading the general public to support a candidate or political member that is essential for a political campaign (Zhu & Zhu, 2022). A study by Rossini et al. (2018) further supported this as it was found that candidates who used persuasion on social media and applied the right persuasion strategies achieved well in the general election. Thus, the communicative practices used on social media posts must be planned to maximize persuasive strategy (Hardin, 2010). Although persuasion is defined in various ways by scholars, the context is similar in that it is an attempt to change an individual's opinion or attitude through a message as an intermediary. As such, communicative practices and persuasive strategy with a focus on politicians' rhetoric are essential components to be studied.

Aristotle's rhetorical appeals

Ethos, in general, focuses on appealing to the readers' belief system, to convince them and change their way of thinking (Saaty, 2020). This type of persuasive strategy is generally framed by establishing the credibility of the communicator. To attract and appeal to the voters, politicians usually try to establish their credibility and improve their reputation. Next, *pathos* is described as the appeal to elicit and trigger the audience's emotions (Oeppen Hill, 2019). Saaty (2020) affirmed that *pathos* is a rhetorical device that is used to invoke the audience's feelings and place the audience in a certain frame of mind so that he or she is receptive to a message. In the use of *pathos* for political purposes on social media, the posts usually present emotional and motivational appeals. On the other hand, *logos* refers to the appeals of reasons and facts (Mshvenieradze, 2013). For instance, Isai et al. (2020) stressed that *logos* use logic, justification, argumentation, and evidence. In a political context, posts categorised in this type of appeal present facts and evidence to support the politicians' claims. Table 1 shows the description of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals; *'ethos', 'pathos'* and *'logos'.*

Table 1: Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals

Ethos	The art of convincing by the character of an author is referred to as Ethos (i.e. credibility) or ethical appeal. There is a tendency to believe in people whom we respect. Projecting an impression to the reader that you are someone worth listening to is one of the central problems of argumentation, in other terms placing yourself as an author of an authority on the paper's subject, as well as a person who is both worthy of respect and likeable.
Pathos	The art of persuading using appealing to the emotions of readers is referred to as Pathos (i.e. emotional). Seeing how pathos, and emotional appeal, are used to persuade can be based on texts ranging from classic essays to contemporary advertisements. An audience's emotional response can be affected by the choice of language, and an argument can be enhanced through the use of an effective emotional appeal.
Logos	Logos (i.e. logical) refers to reasoning-based persuading. Deductive and inductive reasoning shall also be considered, as well as the discussions of what leads to a persuasive as well as an effective reason for the backup of claims. The heart of argumentation is based on 'giving reasons', and it cannot be over-emphasised. Kinds of support that could be used to authenticate a thesis shall be studied, as well as consideration of some common logical fallacies, to avoid them while writing.

Source: *Aristotle's Rhetoric (1959)*

Communicative practices and social media platforms

Communicative practice is a form of interaction between two or more individuals. Social media sites are interactive communication systems that enable internet users to create, communicate and exchange content with one another across platforms (Swani & Milne, 2017). To understand the association between politics and social media use, Rossini et al. (2018) conducted a study on the content politicians put up on different online platforms. It was found that candidates are inclined to use Twitter as a site to post persuasive content as well as negative political attacks on their opponents. In contrast, Facebook is used to curate posts more on personal traits.

Methodology

This study adopted Zhang and Wildermuth's (2009) qualitative content analysis approach, which is a research method for the subjective interpretation of text data content through the systematic classification process of coding and detecting themes or patterns. The results of the study were then presented descriptively.

Data for the study

The data for the study were Facebook posts and Twitter tweets posted by two (2) selected Malaysian politicians: Syed Saddiq [P1] and Hannah Yeoh [P2]. The researchers used purposive sampling for this study as proposed by Campbell et al. (2020), since this method is best suited to meet the study objectives. The politicians were selected for the study based on the specified requirements which were: (a) being keen on reformation, (b) being critical of the government and societal issues, and (c) having social media platforms.

To compare the communicative practices of the two politicians about Aristotle's mode of persuasion, research data were collected from the politicians' open Facebook and Twitter pages. The relevant Facebook and Twitter posts related to the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis were selected. Taman Sri Muda is a residential area in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. On the 17th of December 2021, the residential area was hit by one of the worst flash floods in the history of Selangor. Many residents lost their homes and even lives as parts of the residential area were inundated in flood waters as deep as four metres. The incident caught the local government off guard and caused an uproar among the public for the lack of coordination in the rescue efforts during the crisis. Facebook and Twitter posts put up by the two politicians dated from the 17th of December 2021 to the 10th of January 2022 were used for the study. The selected posts were those which contained reasonable evidence of calls for more government accountability on the issue.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis was adopted for the study. The first phase of data analysis involved sorting the identified posts and tweets according to the criteria set for the study. These posts were then coded and the main themes were identified with *ethos, pathos, and logos.*

Results and Findings

Table 2 shows the number of Facebook and Twitter posts put up by Syed Saddiq [P1] and Hannah Yeoh [P2]. Based on Table 2, it can be seen that Syed Saddiq [P1] put up more than double the number of posts by Hannah Yeoh [P2] which are 20 and 9 posts respectively.

Table 2: Total number of Facebook Posts and Tweets

Politician	Number of Facebook and Twitter Posts During the Study Period
Syed Saddiq [1]	20
Hannah Yeoh [2]	9

The politicians' Facebook and Twitter posts were classified based on the use of *ethos, pathos, and logos* in their persuasive attempts. Thus, ethos, pathos, and logos were considered as the main themes. Meanwhile, sub-themes that emerged from *ethos* were: (a) Humanitarian Activities, (b) Personal Accomplishment, (c) Story, and (d) Future Plans, while the sub-themes that emerged from *pathos* were (e) Emotional Appeal and (f) Motivational Appeal, and finally the sub-themes which emerged from logos were (g) Facts and Figures, and (h) Rational Reasoning. Table 3 summarises the sub-themes which emerged from the data analysis.

Table 3: Sub-themes that emerged from data analysis

Themes	Sub-themes			
Ethos	a) Humanitarian Activity Highlights	b) Personal Accomplishment	c) Stories	d) Future Plans
Pathos	a) Emotional Appeals	b) Motivational Appeals		
Logos	a) Facts & Figures	b) Rational Reasoning		

Table 4: Rhetorical Strategies used by the politicians

Politician	Rhetorical Appeal Used in the Social Media Posts		
	Ethos	Pathos	Logos
Syed Saddiq	8	9	6
Hannah Yeoh	4	3	2

Table 4 summarises the frequency of *ethos, pathos,* and *logos* being utilised by Syed Saddiq [P1] and Hannah Yeoh [P2] in their social media posts during the study period. It was found that both politicians adopted different types of rhetorical appeals depending on the message they intended to convey. Syed Saddiq [P1] used more *pathos* while Hannah Yeoh [P2] utilised more *ethos*.

The use of *ethos, pathos, and logos* by the politicians in their Facebook and Twitter posts will be discussed in the following section. Some of the posts and tweets were in Malay, thus, they were translated into English. The excerpts were taken directly from the politician's social media pages and had not been edited or paraphrased.

The use of ethos to portray credibility

During the period of the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis, the politicians posted updates on their humanitarian activities in response to the crisis. For example, Syed Saddiq [P1] informed the general public from time to time about his activities in response to the situation.

Excerpt 1: "*Saya singgah beli barang-barang keperluan untuk mangsa banjir. Saya akan masuk balik kawasan Sri Muda untuk sampaikan barang-barang keperluan untuk manga banjir.*" (P1/POST12/T/19-12)
Translation: "I stopped by to buy necessities for the flood victims. I will go back to the Sri Muda area to deliver the necessary items to the flood victims."

In the excerpt, Syed Saddiq [P1] used the word "*Saya*" which means "I" to portray that he dealt with the issue and highlighted his timely response to the plight of Taman Sri Muda flood victims.
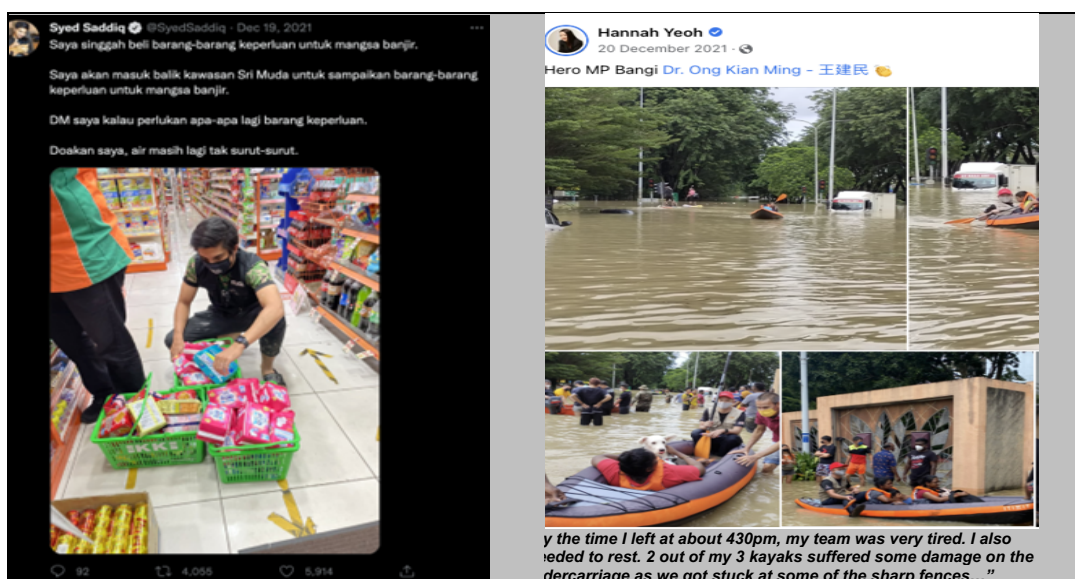
Figure 1: Social media posts by Syed Saddiq [P1] and Hannah Yeoh [P2]

The use of *ethos* can also be seen through stories posted by these politicians. Both Syed Saddiq [P1] and Hannah Yeoh [P2] used this type of persuasive appeal in the hope of building a connection with the public. In excerpt 2 by Syed Saddiq [P1] tried to depict the hard work shown by his team and the public who volunteered during the rescue efforts by using a narrative. His story was also meant to emphasise good camaraderie. While in excerpt 3, he highlighted his team's accomplishment in providing timely aid to the flood victims.

Excerpt 2:*"Kami pergi rumah ke rumah untuk bantu. Semangat mereka luar biasa. Hilang rasa penat bila jumpa mereka."* P1/POST14/T/20-12
Translation: "We went from home to home to help. Their spirit is extraordinary. Our tiredness disappeared when we met them."

Excerpt 3: *"Saya sekarang di Taman Sri Muda. Memang kawasan ni gelap tak ada lampu dah. MUDA dah sediakan 2 bot dan lagi 3 akan sampai nanti. Kita dapatkan juga beamlight, makanan dan minuman untuk misi menyelamat. Doakan semua urusan dipermudahkan."* P1/POST6/T/19-12
Translation: "I am now at Taman Sri Muda. The area is dark without any light. MUDA has already prepared two boats and three more will arrive later. We managed to get a beam of light, food, and drinks for the rescue mission. Let's pray everything goes well."

Figure 2: Syed Saddiq took a picture of the darkness and posted it on his social media platform

Hannah Yeoh [P2] also related a story as one of her persuasive strategies when informing the public about a situation. She described her rescue effort by detailing the incident as a narrative.

Excerpt 4: *"By the time I left at about 430 p.m., my team was very tired. I also needed to rest. 2 out of my 3 kayaks suffered some damage on the undercarriage as we got stuck at some of the sharp fences…"* P2/POST3/F/20-12

Her narrative was meant to portray her credibility as a politician. Her detailed account of the rescue efforts proved that she was there at the scene working side by side with her team members.

Building trustworthiness with future plans

Trustworthiness is a valuable component in politics. Based on the analysis, it can be seen that Hannah Yeoh [P2] built trustworthiness with the general public by providing information on plans to mitigate the risk of future crises through the use of phrases like "*urgent actions by Government to help flood victims*". Regardless of the issue being discussed, an audience is more likely to be convinced by someone they trust. Hannah Yeoh [P2] also posted the following updates:

Excerpt 5: *"Press conference in Parliament today on urgent actions by Government to help flood victims: (1) paid leave for flood victims to clean up home, (2) waive water bill and electricity bill, (3) announce financial assistance and how to apply, (4) use SMS MKN correctly, (5) military assistance for rescue mission"* (P2/POST1/F/20-12)

The post was meant to convince the public that she was aware of what was needed on the ground where the victims were suffering and in dire need of assistance especially from the government. Thus, the post was a way of convincing the public that she was on their side and that she was in parliament as their representative.

Figure 3: Hannah Yeoh [P2] at a press conference

Pathos used as emotional and motivational appeal

In this study, *pathos* was used in a variety of ways. Since the use of p*athos* affects the emotions of the audience, Syed Saddiq [P1] astutely utilised it to draw the public's attention toward his sincerity. He posted multiple public apologies on his social media platform.

Excerpt 6*: "Saya minta maaf sangat. Memang banyak DM yang saya terima untuk bantu kawasan Taman Sri Muda Shah Alam. Team MUDA ada di sana."* (P1/POST4/T/19-12)
Translation: " I am very sorry. I did receive many DM to help Taman Sri Muda Shah Alam. Team MUDA is there (to help)."

He used words like *"Saya minta maaf sangat"* which means "I am very sorry" posted across his social media platforms to show remorse and shame for the government's shortcomings and late response to the plight of the flood victims during the tragedy. His humble apology was meant to appeal to the public's emotions by showing his sincerity and empathy.

Describing situations to maximise emotion and motivation

In relation to Aristotle's *pathos*, persuasion with the use of emotions as a strategy can also create an action when the audience is moved by the context. Based on the findings, it was found that Syed Saddiq [P1] often utilised *pathos* in his appeal to the public to take action and provide aid to the flood victims.

Excerpt 7: *"Ada yang sampai menjerit kerana lapar, penat & marah (***Translation**: "Some of the victims are screaming due to hunger, fatigue and anger"*). I am sorry. I wish I could do more. Do help them out at maribantu.my/banjir"* (P1/POST9/T/20-12)

Excerpt 8: *"Masih ada dalam 38 manga banjir yang sedang menunggu tempat di Pusat Perlindungan Sementara. Bantu mana yang boleh."* (P1/POST17/T/19-12)
Translation: "There are still 38 flood victims who are waiting for placement at the Temporary Shelter. Help in whatever way possible."

The choice of words in both posts can invoke a sense of motivation among the audience to help the victims. During the crisis, the flood victims' struggles were placed at the centre of the messages to maximise the impact on the public's emotions, and thus, motivate them to take action.

Logos as a persuasive appeal

Logos is an appeal based on logic or facts. In other words, *logos* use facts and evidence to persuade a reader to see the validity of the argument. For example, in posts published by Syed Saddiq [P1] he published the amount of donations received for the flood victims to show his trustworthiness. He also pointed out that an audit would be conducted to ensure transparency in his dealing with the funds.

Excerpt 9: *"UPDATE 02.19pm: RM306,834.00! Setiap ringgit & sen HANYA untuk tujuan misi banjir seluruh negara. AUDIT akan dibuat & dikongsi kepada semua."* (P1/POST1/F/19-12)
Translation: "UPDATE 02.19pm: RM306,834.00! Each ringgit and sen ONLY to help flood victims all over the country. An AUDIT will be conducted and the outcome will be shared with everybody."

Adopting rational reasoning to persuade

The fact that these two politicians dared to question the government's inaction during the tragedy strongly planted their credibility among the audience. In excerpt 10, Syed Saddiq [P1] highlighted the government's failure to take timely actions. He provided rational reasoning by drawing a parallel between the government's response to the flood crisis and another government-sponsored programme which was heavily promoted.

Excerpt 10: *"Ya Allah!!! Dah 24jam tapi masih tiada update dari @MKNJPM. Mana SMS blasting? Mana whole-of-nation coordination? Bila buat Expo Keluarga Malaysia besar besaran boleh pula spam SMS Rakyat kita sedang penat, sakit & lapar. Show leadership please."* (P1/POST16/T/19-12)
Translation: " Ya Allah!!! It has been 24 hours but there is still no update from @MKNJPM. Where is the SMS blasting? Where is the whole-of-nation coordination? During Expo Keluarga Malaysia there was major spamming of SMS. Our people are tired, sick, and hungry. Show leadership please."

Hannah Yeoh [P2] also drew the public's attention in excerpt 11, to the fact that although Malaysia is known for owning a submarine, the government failed to provide boats for the rescue mission during the tragedy.

Figure 4: Sample of Hannah Yeoh [P2] post

Excerpt 11: *"A nation known for submarine purchase but cannot deploy rescue boats fast enough to save citizens"* (P2/POST5/F/20-12)

Discussion

The first research question for the study was: "What were the rhetorical strategies used by the two politicians?" Based on the findings, both Syed Saddiq and Hannah Yeoh utilised either *ethos*, *pathos,* or *logos* as their rhetorical strategies to get the public's attention. Next, the second research question for the study was: "Which type of rhetorical appeals were used the most among the two politicians?" It was found that Syed Saddiq had utilised more *ethos* compared to the other two strategies while Hannah Yeoh had utilised more *pathos*. According to Varpio (2018), *ethos* is a personal appeal that speaks of the writer's character, reliability, and trustworthiness. It demonstrates the sender's authority and credibility. In the study, both Syed Saddiq and Hannah Yeoh adopted *ethos* in portraying their credibility by performing humanitarian activities as well as highlighting their accomplishments through stories. Stucki et al. (2018) provided an in-depth analysis of Wisse's (1989) work in which *ethos* has two variants in rhetoric: (a) the speaker's reliability in suggesting that he will tell the truth and (b) the quality of the speaker in winning the sympathy of the hearers. As politicians are public figures, they need to showcase their involvement in any event. The use of *ethos* would further establish their credibility, leading to these politicians being perceived as trustworthy by the audience, which is a central aspect of this rhetorical appeal.

However, when trying to seek financial assistance from the public, Syed Saddiq utilised *pathos* to appeal to the public's emotions. In certain circumstances, emotional appeal can be more effective at persuading the audience than a rational message. This is achieved by triggering the human senses and providing self-satisfaction to the readers (Saylors, 2019). Politicians would construct their messages to generate more emotional reactions. It was evident in the study that both politicians had used the flood victims' situations or sufferings to further invoke the audience's emotions which would subsequently create a motivational appeal. This finding is similar to Bronstein et al. (2018)'s study in which politicians used *pathos* to post information in areas such as the economy, society, and security issues to create an effective alliance with the public.

The study also revealed that Syed Saddiq and Hannah Yeoh had used rational reasoning or *logos* to inform the public about the government's lack of action and coordination during the

flood crisis. According to Lewis and Weigert (2012), cognitive trust is built on rational reasoning. Hence, when the message is understood with clarity and purpose, it gives a sense of trustworthiness and credibility reflected in the politician. These results resonated with past studies conducted by Stucki and Seger (2018) which concluded that backing arguments with evidence increases one's trustworthiness.

However, while the distinction between these communicative practices seems apparent on the surface, establishing the boundaries between *logos, ethos*, and *pathos* could be tricky as they overlap and co-exist throughout the persuasive acts. In other words, while the speaker may express their thoughts in favour of rational arguments, at the same time he or she may invoke the audience's emotion (Cockcroft et al., 2014; Romanova & Sminova, 2019).

Conclusion

It can be concluded based on the findings that Syed Saddiq and Hannah Yeoh had utilised Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of *ethos, pathos, and logos* in their social media posts during the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis to establish their credibility as politicians, to appeal to the public's emotion and sympathy as well as to provide evidence to back up their arguments and claims. Their social media postings were carefully curated to reflect their personalities as the new generation of Malaysian politicians.

Acknowledgments

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