CSR as a Catalyst for Crisis Resilience: The Role of Non-Profits During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores the critical role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a mechanism for crisis response in the non-profit sector, focusing on the Social Hero Foundation (SHF) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally associated with for-profit enterprises, CSR has evolved into an essential framework for non-profits to engage in community support, foster resilience, and enhance stakeholder trust. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research dissects SHF's CSR communications on Facebook during the pandemic's early months, identifying the narratives of solidarity and caring as key discursive themes. The solidarity discourse underscores collective action, resilience, and the inclusive framing of community challenges, positioning SHF as a pivotal leader in resource reallocation and crisis mitigation. Simultaneously, the caring discourse highlights altruistic commitment through unconditional aid and support for marginalized groups, reflecting ethical CSR principles. These discourses establish SHF's credibility and reinforce its mission to promote unity and sustainability in Malaysian society. The findings demonstrate that CSR communication, when employed strategically, enables non-profits like SHF to build enduring relationships with stakeholders and strengthen communal bonds during crises. This research contributes to the understanding of non-profit CSR strategies by revealing how empathetic, community-centered narratives can enhance both immediate crisis response and long-term social cohesion. The study affirms that CSR can be a transformative tool in non-profit crisis management, emphasizing that well-articulated CSR practices reinforce trust and solidarity, which are essential for resilient societies.

Introduction

In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved beyond its traditional confines in the for-profit sector to become a vital strategic tool for non-profit organizations. Originally, CSR was closely associated with business strategies aimed at enhancing corporate reputation, meeting regulatory demands, or fulfilling philanthropic goals(Etikan, 2024). However, CSR's scope and potential have broadened substantially, now offering non-profit organizations a powerful framework for addressing community needs, fostering social cohesion, and achieving sustainable impact(Fung Wong & Kim, 2020). This transformation is particularly evident in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where non-profit organizations stepped into essential roles within communities. For these organizations, CSR offers more than just a framework for community support; it represents an opportunity to build deeper, trust-based relationships with stakeholders, demonstrating their commitment to social welfare and resilience during unprecedented challenges(Chen et al., 2021; Glaveli, 2020).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, CSR took on a heightened significance for nonprofits, as they provided critical services, distributed resources, and addressed intensified community vulnerabilities(Mellahi, Rettab, Sharma, Hughes, & Hughes, 2023). Non-profits became key players in bridging the gaps left by strained public and private sectors, particularly in regions where government resources were limited. The Social Hero Foundation (SHF), a non-profit based in Iskandar Malaysia, exemplifies how non-profit organizations can adopt CSR not merely as a programmatic activity but as a means to unify, support, and empower their communities in times of crisis(SHF, 2020). The Social Hero Foundation (SHF) is a non-profit organization based in Johor, established under the Prime Minister's Department Trustees

(Incorporation) Act of 1952, dedicated to sustainably supporting charitable activities and promoting national unity through racially inclusive programs. SHF aims to build a resilient community that supports all societal segments in Malaysia, regardless of race, creed, or religion. Through the Iskandar Malaysia Social Hero Awards (IMSHA), SHF recognizes and celebrates individuals who positively impact their communities. SHF also serves as a collaborative platform for NGOs, government agencies, and the private sector to work together in addressing social challenges more effectively. With a vision to transform Malaysia's nonprofit sector, SHF provides internationally recognized capacity-building training to empower NGOs and Non-Governmental Individuals (NGIs) with the skills and resources necessary for sustainability and amplified social impact.

Through its CSR initiatives on Facebook during the pandemic, SHF was able to address the immediate needs of vulnerable populations while also fostering a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility(García-Sánchez & García-Sánchez, 2020). This approach highlights the unique position of non-profits to connect with individuals at a grassroots level, using CSR to cultivate a collective identity rooted in empathy, compassion, and mutual aid(Zhao, 2021).

At the core of SHF's approach were two dominant themes in its CSR communication: solidarity and caring. These themes, embedded within SHF's public messages, resonated with the community by promoting a collective response to adversity. Solidarity, as portrayed by SHF, emphasized the importance of unity and collaboration. By framing its CSR efforts as a community-wide endeavor, SHF was able to inspire individuals to participate in collective action, working together for the common good(Rama, Milano, Salas, & Liu, 2009). This aligns with broader understandings of CSR that suggest collaborative problem-solving is central to building resilient communities, particularly in times of crisis. The solidarity narrative also underscores SHF's role in reorganizing resources and mobilizing community support, which positioned the organization as a leader within the local social fabric(Raimo, Rella, Vitolla, Sánchez-Vicente, & García-Sánchez, 2021).

The discourse of caring was equally significant, emphasizing an altruistic commitment to the welfare of the most vulnerable. By focusing on unconditional giving and support, SHF underscored the ethical and humanitarian dimensions of CSR(Fordham & Robinson, 2018). This commitment to unconditional care is particularly resonant in the non-profit sector, where the social mission is central. Through these dual focuses, SHF illustrates how non-profits can use CSR to both address urgent needs and establish a long-term foundation of trust and shared responsibility within their communities(Buendía-Martínez & Monteagudo, 2020). The case of SHF thus demonstrates that CSR, when applied thoughtfully by non-profits, can create enduring social impact, positioning these organizations as indispensable agents of community resilience and cohesion.

Research Objective

The objective of this thesis is to explore the role that non-profit organizations, such as the Social Hero Foundation, play in CSR communication during times of crisis, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study seeks to contribute to the development of CSR research in Malaysia by examining how non-profits use social media to foster community engagement, build solidarity, and maintain relationships with stakeholders. Additionally, this research aims to provide insights that will benefit practitioners, academics, and the public relations sector by expanding the understanding of non-profit CSR strategies.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:
1. How does the Social Hero Foundation represent its purpose and role in society through CSR communication?
2. How effectively does the Social Hero Foundation integrate its communication with stakeholders on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. By answering these questions, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of non-profit CSR strategies and their societal impact, particularly in crisis scenarios, thus filling a critical gap in CSR literature.

Methodology

Research Design
This study adopts an inductive research design, focusing specifically on the Social Hero Foundation's communication of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) through its Facebook platform. An inductive approach is suitable for this research as it allows for the development of theoretical insights grounded in observed data, particularly in an area where non-profit CSR communication has not been extensively studied. Given that language plays a central role in constructing social meanings and perceptions, the study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary analytical tool. Specifically, Fairclough's three-dimensional model is utilized to examine the linguistic and discursive structures within the Foundation's CSR communications. This model, which integrates textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, is well-

suited for uncovering the deeper meanings embedded in the language used by the Foundation, revealing how CSR narratives are constructed and how they influence social realities, particularly in times of crisis.

Data Collection

Data for this research was sourced from the Social Hero Foundation's Facebook status updates, posted between 18 March 2020 and 12 May 20 -a period that coincides with the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. These dates were strategically selected to ensure the capture of CSR communication during a critical time when the organization's activities were likely to reflect an urgent response to the pandemic. Facebook, as one of the most widely used social media platforms in Malaysia, offers a rich repository of CSR-related discourse, particularly as it allows for both textual and visual engagement with stakeholders. The data comprises textual content (such as status updates, captions, and comments) and visual materials (including images, infographics, and videos) to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Foundation communicated its CSR initiatives.

To ensure the validity and relevance of the data, additional reference was made to the IMSHA Winners Network Awareness Report, a document that tracks the Social Hero Foundation's CSR efforts and their impact on the local community. This secondary data source was used to triangulate the findings from Facebook, offering an extra layer of verification for the study's observations. The combination of primary and secondary data allows for a more robust analysis of the Foundation's CSR communication.

Research Instrument and Sampled Data

Facebook serves as the primary platform for this study's data collection, as it holds significant value in Malaysia as a communication tool for organizations and communities alike. The Social Hero Foundation, in particular, has leveraged this platform to reach a broad audience, making it an ideal medium for analysing their CSR discourse. The research focuses not merely on the tangible CSR activities carried out by the Foundation but places a greater emphasis on the linguistic and semiotic representations of these activities. The aim is to unpack the underlying narratives, ideologies, and power structures communicated through the Foundation's CSR messages.

By focusing on the linguistic choices, narrative framing, and discursive practices evident in the Foundation's Facebook updates, the study seeks to understand how the organization constructs its identity and engages with its stakeholders in times of crisis. The selection of Facebook posts as the primary data set was driven by the platform's interactive nature, where public responses (through comments and shares) also provide insights into how the CSR messages are received and interpreted by the community. This dynamic interplay between the Foundation's communication and public engagement is key to understanding the effectiveness and impact of their CSR efforts.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study is grounded in **Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**, which provides a comprehensive framework for linking textual elements to broader social contexts. Fairclough's three-dimensional model facilitates a multilayered analysis that begins with a close examination of the textual features, such as language, structure, and rhetoric used in the Social Hero Foundation's CSR communications. The second dimension focuses on **discursive practices**, which involve understanding how these texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. This step is crucial for interpreting the interaction between the organization and its audience, particularly how CSR messages are shaped by and reflective of broader social processes.

The final dimension situates these texts within the wider societal practices, enabling an exploration of the social, cultural, and ideological contexts in which the CSR narratives are constructed and received. This analytical process allows the study to move fluidly from microlevel linguistic analysis to macro-level interpretations of societal impacts, providing a nuanced understanding of how language is used to conceptualize CSR in the non-profit sector, especially during periods of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

Discourse	Solidarity	Caring
Key Elements	• Come together to work out common good • Willpower to overcome challenges and difficulties • Persistence in actions Support and trust	• Offer aids • Commitment • Dedication • Responding to the needy • Being concerned for society • Giving without conditions
Framing of Responsibilities:	• Create a resilient community without discrimination • Work together for a better society	• Identify and respond to people's needs

	• Solve individual problems or difficulties as family members	• Caring and being concerned for the community and people • Relocation of resources to the needy
Implications to Organization – Stakeholders relation:	☐ Responsiveness to the problems of people	☐ Acting as responsible citizens
	☐ Leader in reorganizing resources	• Helping marginalized groups and organizing resources for them • Improving lives

Table 1: Discursive Themes of CSR Communication: Solidarity and Caring in Crisis Response

The analysis of the Social Hero Foundation's Facebook communications during the COVID19 pandemic reveals two dominant discursive streams: **solidarity** and **caring**. These streams are deeply interwoven and central to the organization's portrayal of its role within the community. Each discourse is characterized by specific elements that reflect the Foundation's approach to addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic and fostering long-term social cohesion.

The **discourse of solidarity** is marked by an emphasis on **collective action** and the **willpower** to overcome challenges as a community. Key elements include calls for individuals to come together to work towards the common good, demonstrating **persistence** and resilience in the face of adversity. The Foundation's messaging highlights the importance of creating a **resilient, inclusive community**—one where no one is discriminated against and where individual difficulties are addressed as collective issues. These framing positions the organization as a leader in **reorganizing resources**, taking a proactive role in ensuring that the community remains united in its efforts to tackle problems collaboratively.

On the other hand, the **discourse of caring** focuses on **concern for the community's wellbeing**. It highlights actions driven by **compassion**, such as offering aid, showing commitment, and responding to the needs of marginalized groups. The Foundation frames itself as deeply invested in **relocating resources** to those most affected by the pandemic, without expecting anything in return. This element of **unconditional giving** underscores their **dedication** to social responsibility. The emphasis is on **acting as responsible citizens** by helping to improve lives, especially those of the most vulnerable members of society.

Discussion

The Social Hero Foundation's (SHF) CSR communication strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a well-orchestrated narrative rooted in both solidarity and caring discourses. The Foundation's approach, as reflected through its Facebook posts, demonstrates how nonprofit organizations can adopt CSR frameworks traditionally associated with for-profit enterprises, yet adapt them to emphasize community resilience and collective well-being (Herlin & Pedersen, 2013). The focus on solidarity reflects the organization's commitment to collective action and community empowerment. This mirrors the findings of Coombs who argue that CSR in crises fosters a sense of social responsibility that transcends corporate boundaries, influencing broader societal behaviour(Coombs & Holladay, 2012). The SHF's emphasis on working together for the common good, as highlighted in their posts, aligns with broader CSR literature that posits collaborative problem-solving as key to building community resilience (Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016) Furthermore, by framing its CSR efforts around inclusivity and equal access to support during the pandemic, SHF encourages community members to view societal challenges as shared responsibilities, a perspective that reinforces social cohesion and facilitates mutual aid in times of crisis (Putnam, 2000). This approach not only builds trust within the community but also positions SHF as a leader in mobilizing local resources to address collective issues, enhancing its credibility and social legitimacy.

On the other hand, the caring discourse evident in SHF's communication emphasizes unconditional giving and concern for the vulnerable. This approach resonates with the argument made by Carroll that CSR in non-profits often takes a more altruistic form, focusing on the redistribution of resources and support to the most marginalized. SHF's commitment to offering aid without expectations reflects the ethical dimensions of CSR(Carroll, 2016),. Moreover, SHF's responsiveness to the needs of the community aligns with stakeholder theory, which emphasizes the importance of addressing stakeholder concerns in shaping CSR practices (Fassin, 2009). By consistently prioritizing the needs of vulnerable groups, SHF reinforces a model of CSR rooted in empathy and social responsibility, which reinforces trust and loyalty among community members. This proactive approach further reflects insights from Godfrey who argues that CSR practices geared toward genuine community benefit can yield positive reputational outcomes for organizations by fostering deep-rooted community connections and enhancing societal goodwill(Godfrey, 2005). Through this model, SHF not only addresses immediate social needs but also strengthens its role as a key social agent committed to fostering equitable support within the broader community. Additionally, SHF's role in reorganizing resources during the pandemic positions the organization as a leader within the community. This echoes the work of Maignan who highlight the leadership role of organizations that engage in effective CSR communication(Maignan & Ralston,

2002). By portraying themselves as responsible citizens committed to improving lives, SHF is not only fostering community engagement but also reinforcing its organizational identity as a key player in the social welfare landscape of Iskandar Malaysia (Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006)

Moreover, the integration of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) allows us to uncover the power dynamics at play in SHF's CSR communication. As Fairclough posits, discourse plays a critical role in shaping both social identities and relationships, with SHF's messaging clearly positioning them as both caretakers and leaders(Fairclough, 1992). This aligns with the findings of Cho, who suggest that non-profit CSR discourses often revolve around constructing a narrative of empowerment and responsibility, which can have profound implications for stakeholder engagement and long-term community relations(Cho, Michelon, Patten, & Roberts, 2015). Furthermore, the framing of SHF as a proactive leader echoes the sentiments of van Dijk, who emphasizes that discourse serves as a medium through which organizations can establish authority and legitimacy within a community(van Dijk & Kirk, 2008). By actively engaging in supportive language and actions, SHF not only creates a sense of belonging and shared values but also fosters an environment where the community feels connected and empowered to participate in collective efforts. Through CDA, we can see how SHF carefully constructs its image as an essential pillar of societal support, which enhances its role and recognition within the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Social Hero Foundation (SHF) has effectively demonstrated the potential for non-profit organizations to employ CSR communication as a means of fostering community solidarity and care, especially during crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. By anchoring its messages in the discourses of solidarity and caring, SHF was able to cultivate a sense of collective resilience and shared responsibility within the community, strengthening social bonds and trust among stakeholders. This approach not only reinforced SHF's role as a leader in addressing community needs but also emphasized the organization's dedication to ethical, altruistic support, which aligns with foundational CSR values. Through the lens of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, SHF's strategic use of language and narratives enabled it to build both social legitimacy and stakeholder engagement, positioning itself as a

key agent of social welfare in Iskandar Malaysia. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of CSR in the non-profit sector, highlighting its impact on community empowerment and sustainable social cohesion.

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