

3 Southeast Asian Governments' Initial Crisis Rhetoric during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Online News

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Abstract

Introduction: Governmental responses to the pandemic vary by country. This study seeks to evaluate the Government's preliminary crisis rhetoric by employing a framing typology frequently utilised in Public Relations as reported in mass media across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. This study examines articles regarding government narratives published from January to March 2020 in Detik.com, Straitstimes.com, and Thestar.com. A total of 22.338 news reports about the pandemic were retrieved from the respective media. The three media was selected due to its national reach and readership.

Methods: This paper employs qualitative-thematic and content analysis to analyze the materials collected from internet news sources. The study was conducted systematically, involving several steps. A thematic analysis was performed on the government messages to reveal governments' initial crisis intersecting concept of crisis rhetoric and framing typology in PR.

Findings: The Indonesian Government adopted the rhetorical appeal of 'kairos', 'ethos', and 'pathos' as means of persuasion to build the frame of choice and issues in the messages to the public. The Malaysian Government exhibited 'ethos' and 'pathos' appeal to build frame of responsibility and action in the messages carried out by the Government in the mass media. Meanwhile, the Singapore government uses the rhetorical appeal of 'logos' and 'ethos' in creating frame of action, responsibility, and situations that exist in the news covering government statements from Singapore.

Originality: Studies linking framing with rhetoric are scarce, mostly framing analysis focusing more on the journalist activities in constructing the frame within the news.

Keywords: Crisis-Rethoric, Pandemic, Frame Building.

Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China, has spread to more than 81 countries and caused a global crisis. Various governments have implemented certain measures to curb the spread of the virus, which may be considered the new norm in the modern era. The response to the pandemic differs from one affected country to another. While US President Donald Trump at that time, perceived the Covid-19 threat as less severe than it appeared, other nations contended that the pandemic would pose a significant risk to their country. New Zealand has prioritised health considerations over economic and societal ramifications since the outbreak began. The discourse employed by the state government is more inclined to prioritise a trade-off between prompt and suitable action and decision-

making grounded in credible evidence. (Bui et al., 2022). Novel virus infections, including HIV, influenza A subtypes H1N1, H5N1, SARS-CoV1, MERS-CoV, and Ebola, have resulted in global public health problems over the past 20 years. However, the SARS-CoV2 coronavirus strain's sudden and rapid spread of Covid-19, which caught many governments around the world off guard, highlighted a lack of readiness (Djalante et al., 2020).

The pandemic's impact continues to be experienced across various countries. Thus, the decision-making process concerning the dissemination of information to the public is a crucial element in crisis management. Due to Covid-19, several nations in Southeast Asia also experienced the situation. Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia were among the countries that had a relatively high number of cases in the early days of the pandemic from January to May 2020. As seen in the chart, Singapore has the highest total cases among Southeast Asian countries, with 21.707 cases, while Indonesia has the second highest, with 13.112 total cases, and Malaysia is in fourth place, with 6.535 cases. (Worldometers of Coronavirus Countries, 2020).

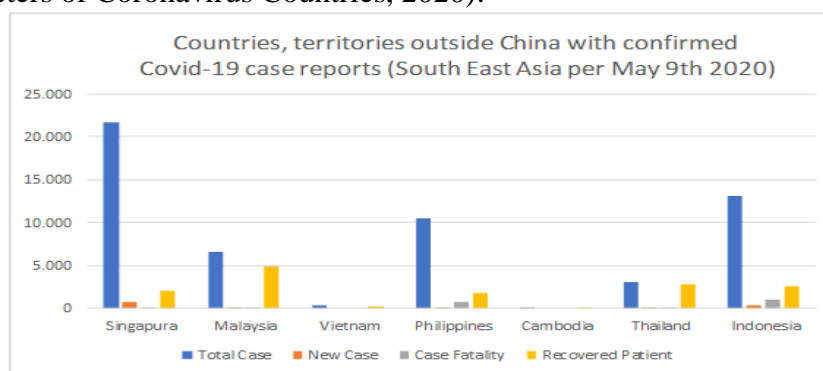


Figure 1. Countries, territories outside China with confirmed Covid-19 case reports (source: Worldometers Coronavirus Countries, 2020)

Various countries have implemented different policies in response to the pandemic over the course of a few months. Various policies are implemented, depending on the type of policy, such as quarantine, work from home, social and physical distancing, and others, at different levels, whether local, regional, national, or even international. Depending on the different geographical targets, the policy enforcement system varies in terms of whether it is compulsory or voluntary (Cheng et al., 2020). During the initial phase of the pandemic, numerous studies concentrated on the ramifications of Covid-19, including its social (Qiu et al., 2020), economic, and health implications, among others. In terms of message analysis, previous research was more partial in nature regarding the rhetoric of public communication by the Government during the Covid-19 pandemic or related to the speed of the government initial response, effectiveness of the initial response, comparison of government policies, and others (Wild et al., 2023; Yavetz & Aharony, 2023; Yue, 2021). In the framing context, there was much research on the framing of government policies during pandemics in certain countries or even comparing the media framing of a Covid-19 issue (Aziz et al., 2022; Maati & Švedkauskas, 2020; Nurindra, 2021; Youmans & Bahador, 2022). Nonetheless, despite the significance of political communication during pandemics, comprehensive study on Covid-19-related crisis rhetoric of the government message and its consequences remains limited, especially when it is related in terms of frame building as represented in the typology of framing commonly used in Public Relations. This frame type identification and manifestation in the government's message is particularly understudied.

This study contributes to the literature by employing the intersection of framing and crisis rhetoric. The analysis builds on research regarding the use of framing typology in the Government's crisis rhetoric to bridge the knowledge gap about the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and the appeal of crisis rhetoric in the Government's messages. This is the background for this study to look at these three countries, especially in government statements that appear in three mainstream online mass media in these countries. This study tries to find out the initial crisis rhetoric of three countries in Southeast Asia during the Covid-19 pandemic that appeared in online news by implementing framing typology analysis in PR.

Southeast Asian countries have demonstrated varied responses to the spread of Covid-19, particularly populous and developing nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia, alongside Singapore, a developed country in the region. This paper examines the responses of three ASEAN member states, all of which experience significant levels of mobility among their citizens, both tourists and migrant labor. Consequently, every policy implemented by each nation will be eagerly anticipated by other nations as valuable information to inform their decision-making process. These three countries, as part of ASEAN, also have an existing framework for cooperation that encompasses health security measures. Thus, this framework can provide mutual support for each other's regional endeavors in developing policies pertaining to pandemic response in the future. Based on the background, during the initial period of the epidemic, countries worldwide were struggling to cope with the rapid spread of the virus. Consequently, the focus was mostly on individual countries' responses rather than a unified effort in the Southeast Asia region. Consequently, the policies implemented by each country likewise exhibit variation. This study aims to record and examine the initial reactions of the governments of the Southeast Asian countries, which are considered the top powerful countries in Southeast Asia, according to the Asia Power Index. Based on this, it will be useful to analyse these countries and reconstruct the crisis rhetoric that arose in their public statements between January and March 2020. The main goals of this study are to identify the specific type of crisis rhetoric that the three countries use. Secondly, it aims to identify the typology of framing utilised in the messages conveyed to the public. Lastly, it seeks to analyse the manner in which the governments of these three countries employed crisis rhetoric and framed their initial response to the pandemic.

The three online mainstream media analyzed in this paper are Detik.com (Indonesia), thestar.com.my (Malaysia), and thestraistimes.com (Singapore). (Woda et al., 2021) added that Detik.com commonly aligned as a company that periodically disseminating informative news that was widely accessed by readers. According to data from 'www.alexa.com,' 'detik.com' is among the top 5 most visited websites in Indonesia, with a channel engagement rate of 31.4% (Alexa, 2020). While thestar.com.my or The Star Online was selected because of its national reach and readership in Malaysia due to its news reporting is the highest circulated newspaper nationally (Lai Hoon, 2022). The Straits Times is a leading mainstream news media in Singapore which has printed and digital version of its news (Kaur-Gill, 2022). The reason of choosing these media was obviously to represent the leading news media in the respective countries.

Indonesia has embraced the democratisation of mass media; however, still frequently encounters problems in the realms of politics and governance. Only one media outlet is government-owned, while the remainder are privately held. During each governmental period, the mass media in Indonesia was influenced by the trajectory of the media oligarchy (Tapsell, 2015). Recent years have seen a transformation in the

Malaysian media landscape, influencing the interaction patterns of Malaysians, their opinion formation, and their purchasing decisions. Malaysia ranks among the foremost countries in communication technology, with approximately 89% of its population utilizing the internet, translating to 25.4 million internet users (Kovalan et al., 2021), the emergence of digital media does not render traditional media irrelevant in the country. The discussions surrounding news and content on social media have minimal impact on the community's mindset (Hamedan et al., 2009). According to Nielsen.com (2017) reports that daily newspapers, television, radio, outdoor media, and in-store media maintain a 70% outreach throughout Malaysia. The data indicated that over 90% of Malaysians aged 15-24 engage with both traditional and digital media, while only about 1% utilize digital media exclusively. Factors influencing the consumption of traditional media, such as newspapers, include escapism and cognitive needs, rather than social, emotional, and personal needs (Ghazali, A.H.A & Omar, 2014).

The media in Singapore is highly advanced and strictly regulated. The principal organisations in the Singaporean media sector are Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp. Singapore Press Holdings is associated with the governing party and possesses a considerable media monopoly. Nevertheless, Singapore's media regulation system is more complex. It has been shaped over decades by meticulously designed legislative changes from political leaders. It aims to implement a highly paternalistic political worldview. The Singaporean Fourth Estate concept suggests that the executive should be shielded from a non-representative press that could hinder effective government (Tey, 2008).

Framing strategies are frequently employed to alter public perceptions of an issue, creating a positive sense of legitimacy or justification for actions or options taken, as perceived by multiple stakeholders or society at large. The study of the framing strategy is significant to see the Government's efforts of the three countries in dealing with the crisis by gaining legitimacy from the public by using certain framing strategies. In particular, to see what framing strategies were used by the three countries at the beginning of the crisis phase, The framing is designed to influence public perceptions and as noted by Tuchman (1978) in (Ninan et al., 2022), to limit political alternatives while strategically shaping the intended effect. (Entman, 1993) stated that framing aims to shape conclusions regarding situational definitions, causes, and solutions. Framing theory provides a useful framework for examining the dynamics in public relations. The rhetorical method of constructing messages is linked to fundamental psychological processes that individuals employ to process information, develop opinions, and draw conclusions about their environment (Hallahan, 1999).

Government communication methods vary from one country to another depending on their policies in various situations. For example, an effective communication plan should contain clear messages presented via appropriate media as well as continuing community interaction with varied groups. At the time of the Zika outbreak in 2016, the Brazilian Government suggested a specific crisis communication strategy. An additional illustration highlighting the significance of government communication methods can be observed during the California wildfires in 2017. It was observed that government officials and organizations primarily prioritized preparatory efforts while inadvertently neglecting the dissemination of information pertaining to relief and recovery. This discrepancy was evident through the examination of social media accounts. However, as Vera-Burgos and Griffin-Padgett pointed out, leaders who used restorative language on social media in the midst of national crises facilitated a smoother transition into the

subsequent recovery phase. This was exemplified by the leadership in Huston, Texas during the occurrence of Hurricane Harvey in 2017 (Yavetz & Aharony, 2023).

Public communication carried out by the Government plays a very crucial role, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Singapore adopts multi-platform, multilingual, and multi-format media to reach a pluralistic society. These include television, radio, print media, digital displays, and online platforms such as websites, social media, and WhatsApp. To ensure relevance for a diverse audience, Singapore's Ministry of Communication and Information has also developed a variety of content and programs to reach young and old alike regarding Covid-19 information (MCI, 2020). Indonesia's Government public communications are mostly ceremonial; some active accounts and websites provide practical tips. Social media accounts have already garnered thousands of followers or subscribers, but the quality of content and engagement still needs to be improved. Some websites have provided special pages to prevent disinformation (hoax), but there are still websites and accounts that contain unscientific and dubious information (Fisip.ui.ac.id, 2020). In Malaysia, key leaders, including as the Prime Minister, were accountable for managing successful crisis communication by delivering prompt answers to the pandemic and ensuring that citizens received and acted upon the information disseminated by the Government and other agencies. This study aimed to assess the crisis communication strategies employed by the Prime Minister during the pandemic, acknowledging that there is no universal communication method (Low & Chong, 2021). The government of Singapore employed a whole-of-government approach, ensuring consistent and evidence-based messaging. This approach was a part of strategy to manage pandemic through clear leadership and governance (Long et al., 2020; G. K. S. Tan & Lim, 2022).

Governments' communication cannot be separated from the mass media because it has a significant role in crisis communication. Therefore, the study of how the media reflects on the messages sent by the Government to the public is very important. Certain forms of information need to be designed to effectively reach the public to respond well in the case of a pandemic.

The latest studies showed a lack of initial response and quick response from the Government in minimizing disaster risks in terms of organizations, including in the media (Rosemary et al., 2022). The Government's management of the pandemic in Indonesia frequently garners attention within the country, as the media frequently documents instances of inadequate public communications implemented by the Government. Rhetoric is understood as a form of word processing skills. During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, governments worldwide employed these skills in response to the unforeseen circumstances. This study examines the Government's emphasis on the rhetoric of state leaders, including the President, Prime Minister, and relevant department ministers, as presented in mass media during crisis situations. Experts in communication consider the contemporary presidency to be primarily rhetorical in nature. This perspective on the presidency is founded on three components: (1) The President establishes objectives and formulates responses to national issues; (2) the media amplifies the substance of the President's communication, thereby redirecting focus from the President's actions to his statements; and (3) the President's ongoing campaign efforts promote a focus on image and personality, diminishing the attention given to substantive issue exploration (Kuypers, 2009).

Rhetoric was used to persuade in various instances; nevertheless, this is also a point of debate among Greek philosophers. The rhetorical theory discussed is broad and

complex; however, the rhetorical perspective employed here integrates a strong compatibilist viewpoint along with its foundational assumptions and objectives (O'Neill, 1997) as noted by (Green, 2004). Meanwhile, rhetoric is an invitation to understanding and is also key in politics. Rhetoric can help offer perspective and invite others to view an event from the rhetorician's point of view, thus playing an important role in politics. Crisis rhetoric defined as 'discourse initiated by policymakers as an attempt to communicate to various constituents that certain developments are critical and suggest certain actions to deal with the crisis' (Cart, 2014). Furthermore, leaders must call on followers to support solutions to the crisis, inspiring the audience to work hard to achieve or support these 'community' goals. Numerous scholarly investigations in the fields of psychology and sociology have elucidated the significance of citizens' faith in Government as a crucial factor influencing public adherence to emergency policies. (Liu et al., 2021). The importance of leadership is crucial in making essential decisions to address the problem, managing media relations, shaping the narrative and effectively conveying policies to various groups of stakeholders as noted by (Lorenzetti, 2022).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that during times of pandemic, several heads of state have employed diverse rhetorical responses. In a comparative analysis conducted by (Lorenzetti, 2022) the rhetorical responses employed by two prominent political leaders, US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, were examined. Both individuals were known for their contentious nature, and the study revealed the presence of populist speech and practices. Both politicians oversimplify the intricate nature of the pandemic and underestimate its profound consequences. From a rhetorical analysis perspective, the framing of pandemics primarily revolves around the attribution of responsibility, people-building, and policymaking.

Government strategies are often in line with the Aristotelian rhetorical devices 'kairos' (appeal to urgency), 'ethos' (appeal to a sense of social norms), and 'pathos' (appeal to emotions). Government policy during the Covid-19 crisis happened to be in line with Aristotelian rhetoric, employing official statements during the early stages of the pandemic from January to March 2020 that were captured by the media. By highlighting the critical significance of rhetorical abilities in managers' capacity to garner support for a new practice utilizing emotionalization and moralization tactics under urgency, we contribute to the body of literature already in existence. Importantly, we demonstrate the effectiveness of rhetoric based on 'ethos' and 'pathos' when joined with 'kairos', or the opportune, urgent, and deliberate choice of the moment to act. This paper uses Hallahan's framing typology as a framework to look at the intersection with the Aristotelian rhetorical device. The public previously struggled to access complete government statements disseminated through the media, relying instead on mass media reports.

In addition, framing limits or defines the meaning of a message based on the individual's understanding of the message. Frames reflect judgments made by the creator or framer of the message. In the present context, (Hallahan, 1999) emphasized that the most important factor in PR is to create a relationship between the organization and its target audience. The key to facilitating this relationship is understanding how the target audience perceives the world. If the public frame is understood, the information that will be disseminated to the audience could be combined by utilizing three framing styles: valence framing, allocating degrees to framing by placing information in a negative or positive position, and semantic framing.

The concept of framing emphasizes the communication process (de Vreese, 2005). Communication is a dynamic process that encompasses frame building, which refers to the initiation of framing, and frame setting, which involves the interaction between media frames and audience tendencies.(Entman, 1993) identified that frames exist in various contexts, such as the communicator, text, receiver, and culture. Certain components are essential to the framing process, which comprises several distinct stages: frame construction, frameset, and the assessment of framing consequences from both individual and social perspectives (Bui et al., 2022).

Frames are cognitive tools used by people to construct, convey, interpret or evaluate information. This includes information sources, intermediaries, media and audiences. Hallahan identifies a minimum of seven sorts or models of framing applicable in public relations, encompassing framing circumstances, qualities, choices, actions, issues, responsibilities, and news.

Table 1. Typologies of Hallahan’s framing model applicable for Public Relations

| What is Framed | Description | Key Sources |
|----------------|---|---|
| Situations | The dynamics between individuals in everyday contexts and literary works. The framing of situations establishes a framework for analysing communication. Relevant to discourse analysis, negotiation, and various interactions. | Bateson (1972) Goffman (1974) Putnam & Holmer (1992) Tannen (1993) |
| Attributes | The properties of objects and individuals are emphasised, while others are overlooked, hence skewing the information processing regarding salient features. | Ghanem (1997) Levin Schneider & Gaeth (1998) McCombs & Ghanem (1998) |
| Choices | Framing alternative decisions in terms of loss or gain may lead to biased decision-making in uncertain contexts. | Ries & Trout (1981) Wright & Lutz (1993) Bell Raiffa & Tversky (1988) Kahneman & Tverksy (1979 1984) Levin Schneider & Gaeth (1998) |
| Actions | In persuasive circumstances, the likelihood of an individual taking action to achieve a desired objective is affected by the presentation of alternatives in either positive or negative terms. | Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy (1990) Smith & Petty (1996) |

| | | |
|----------------|--|--|
| Issues | Social issues and conflicts can be articulated in various terms by different stakeholders who compete for their favoured interpretations of a problem or circumstance to dominate. Individuals typically ascribe the causation of events to internal or external sources, depending on their perceptions of stability and control. | Best (1995) Gamson & Modigliani (1989) Snow & Benford (1988 1992) |
| Responsibility | People play their roles to optimise rewards and avoid liability based on their self-image. People blame personal behaviour rather than social issues. | Iyengar (1991) Iyengar & Kinder (1987) Kelley (1967 1972a) Protess et al.(1991) Wallack Dorfman Jernigan & Themba (1993) |
| News | Media reports employ recognisable cultural motifs to convey information about happenings. Sources compete for their desired framing to be highlighted via frame entrepreneurship and frame sponsorship. | Gamson (1984) Gamson et al. (1992) Ryan (1991) |

Note: Hallahan (1999) highlighted seven types of framing that are commonly used in PR practice. Key sources are supporting references on the framing models

Upon comprehending the target audience and implementing the appropriate framing, the subsequent step involves structuring the messages utilizing a framing framework. This encompasses the consistent application of terminology, a thematic organization elucidating propositions or hypotheses, and a rhetorical framework incorporating metaphors, similes, renowned exemplars and illustrations, provocative language and descriptors, catchphrases, and visual imagery. In order for the message to be persuasive--that is, to have an impact on people's underlying beliefs or overt behaviors--it must, in fact, contain enough hints for recipients to understand it. These hints are provided through framing. It may be claimed that framing is crucial to public relations, not just useful. Public relations specialists primarily function as framing strategists, developing programmes to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, and obligations should be articulated to advantage clients. Selecting a frame is a vital strategic decision in a public relations effort. Public relations communicators develop specific themes, such as important messages or arguments, through strategic framing.

Hallahan also mentioned that PR professionals, political consultants, and various political activists use framing to effectively convey messages. PR and other political

consultants primarily function as framing strategists, selecting the aspects of a candidate, topic, or cause to stress or de-emphasize. This decision might be crucial in a political campaign. Political figures act as architects by creating precise arguments and employing rhetorical devices to make a case from their chosen viewpoints.

The situation framing within the government context involves the development of scenarios that illustrate a central concept. Political communicators and the Government regularly create scenarios in which political figures engage with others. Framing attributes can manifest through specific terminology, jargon, words, or metaphors employed within the message. The use of framing risk is deemed essential, as negative information exerts greater influence and is processed more comprehensively than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001). The tendency to take greater risk if the choices are tended to loses, in the other hand people tend to avoid risk if the choices are tended to gain. Within the framing of argument lead to support for an action. Valencing arguments are used to encourage desired action. Social problems arise when people or groups recognise a specific state as problematic and actively seek to draw public attention to their concerns through claim-making. The framing of responsibility entails the exertion of effort in claiming credit and attributing blame for failures associated with public policy or events such as natural disasters, accidents, or pandemics, as recently experienced. The framing of news pertains to the methods of presenting the narratives.

Methods

For the purpose of examining the Government's initial crisis rhetoric response to the Covid-19 pandemic, news reports contain public addresses, speeches, and policies retrieved from news reports by detik.com, thestar.com, and thestraittimes.com. The keywords used for the search process were Corona, SARS-Cov2, and Covid-19. The term Covid-19 was introduced by the WHO on February 11, 2020, while considering the initial period of the crisis ranging from January to March 2020. This data collection includes 22.339 news reports from detik.com, 6.702 reports from thestar.com.my, and 33.625 from straitstimes.com. The periode of the study from January to March encompassed the first case confirmed by the three countries. Singapore confirmed its first case of Covid-19 in January 23, Malaysia confirmed the first case in January 25 and Indonesia confirmed its first case on March 2nd, 2020. Relevant articles from the three target publications collected from the news site search engine feature as well as from the google search including search term with designated keywords Covid-19, Corona virus, and SARS-Cov2 along with adding the targeted media upon the keyword search, The Star Online, Detik.com, and The Straitstimes. From the enormous number of articles, this study only selected articles which primary focus on the Covid-19 and has government's messages through the respective leader in charge to the matters, for instance, president, prime minister, ministry officer and other key sources from the government or nation leader. Using this selection criteria, this study identify 134 articles from Detik.com, 46 articles from The Star Online and 186 articles from The Straitstimes.

This paper employs qualitative-thematic and content analysis to analyze the materials collected from internet news sources. The study was conducted systematically, involving several steps. These stages included becoming acquainted with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally, producing a report. Two coders were involved in the analytical procedure. Therefore, only texts that are pertinent to the Covid-19 situation and

are connected to the Government's rhetoric of the three nations will be considered. It is necessary to categorize it into information and policies intended for public consumption.

Results

From the total of 336 articles under analysis of the three online media, this study indicated that the Indonesian Government adopted the rhetorical Aristotelian model using the appeal 'kairos' to develop a framing type of choice that has to be taken as an urgency of government policy. The 'pathos' rhetoric appeal was also adopted in several presidential statements that mentioned the main priority in the Covid-19 case was to rescue Indonesian citizens who were at the time in Wuhan, which was the epicentre of the spread of the disease, to develop framing of issues to draw public concern, which connected emotionally. The 'ethos' appeal was also adopted to create a framing of choice, which can lead to another crisis if the Government has not taken a particular decision.

At the beginning of the pandemic, from January to February, President Joko Widodo's statements did not convey that the coronavirus outbreak was a crisis. In other words, the government response to the coronavirus outbreak was not considered a threat that could potentially spread to Indonesia. The response was depicted in the narrative that appeared in the mass media from President Joko Widodo, as more efforts were directed towards evacuating Indonesian citizens in China, where the outbreak was first reported.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, in his Instagram account, as reported by Detik.com, on Friday (31/1/2020), said that *"Like many other countries that have and are preparing to evacuate their citizens in the Hubei Province of China, Indonesia mobilized to evacuate at least 243 Indonesians in Wuhan and surrounding cities"* (Halid, 2020).

Only a few messages by the President of Indonesia were directly in the form of public addresses to the people, as most were in the form of government team press conferences or messages through social media, such as Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter accounts. Meanwhile, regarding policies, the President of Indonesia often delegated the task of explaining them to the public through the Minister or appointed officials. The Government's response shows that in the first two months (January-February) of the outbreak in China, the Indonesian Government still considered the event as an external threat rather than a crisis that required specific actions at the national level.

In a press conference, as reported by Detik.com, on Tuesday (31/3/2020), Joko Widodo stated, *"The core of our policy is obvious and firm. Public health comes first. Therefore, control the spread of Covid-19 and treat patients who are exposed"* (Anwar, 2020). The framing of crisis messages began to appear in the Indonesian media in March 2020. These messages were either presented by the President of Indonesia or the relevant officials. Several posts by the President through his social media accounts intentionally packaged public service messages to emphasize the importance of social distancing through Twitter accounts. Additionally, the Indonesian President shared tips regarding Covid-19 prevention through other social media platforms, such as YouTube.

The next framing typology that was often conveyed in the President's media messages was related to the choices that the Government must make. One of them is the Government's refusal to implement a lockdown, despite being suggested by health associations and scientists. A lockdown was not considered a necessary action in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, the term 'lockdown' was changed to large-scale social restrictions (PSBB). The framing of choice also appears in the decision to order 'chloroquine' and 'Avigan', which were considered effective against Covid-19, and in the implementation of mass rapid tests in most affected areas.



Figure 2. Framing attributes of government messages during the Covid-19 pandemic (source: Detik.com 28/3/2020; K Sagita, 2020)

The image of President Joko Widodo 'twit' appeared in Detik.com news report (28/3/2020), as it is showed a message on physical distancing, as *"Some of the things we needed to make a habit of during the Corona pandemic have not passed. It is not difficult to implement; it only requires strong discipline. Keep your distance because we take care of each other. Keep your distance. We protect each other"*(K Sagita, 2020).

The Minister of Communication and Information (Kominfo) urged the public not to consume hoaxes about the Coronavirus and assume that the Coronavirus is only a medical problem so that it did not need to be drawn into the realm of economics to politics. Minister Plate said that, *"Corona is a medical problem that is treated medically. Don't associate it with information or lead non-medical opinions, as it can have an impact on the economy and politics by building logic and narratives that are not useful for society"* (Haryanto, 2020).

The framing seen in the message conveyed by the Minister of Communication and Information puts more emphasis on the current situation in Indonesia. The uncertainty felt by the public is reflected in various posts on social media that are considered to cause disinformation and encourage the public to trust only official government sources. Not only the Minister of Communications and Informatics but also Indonesian Vice President Ma'ruf Amien was noted to convey that there were obstacles to evacuating Indonesian citizens in Wuhan, which was the epicentre of the spread of the virus at that time. The Government's narrative emphasizes the uncertain situation that is happening, so it requires legitimacy from the public so that there is no unrest or reaction from the public. Vice President Ma'ruf Amien stated on Detik.com that, *"Actually, the Government already means that we have prepared to carry out the evacuation; yes, we have. But now Wuhan is an isolated area, so no one is allowed to enter, and no one is allowed to leave"* (Satria, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic hit Malaysia during the succession of government leadership. This was precisely the moment after Prime Minister (PM) Mahathir Mohammad declared his resignation, followed by the appointment of Home Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin to the position of PM. In the initial phase of the coronavirus outbreak, Malaysia was still under the command of PM Mahathir Mohammad from January to February, considering that the appointment of PM Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin was on March 1, 2020.

The findings in Malaysia indicated that the Malaysian Government adopted 'pathos' to build a frame of responsibility. This was reflected in the policy of mandatory donations for all ministers and deputies during the early stages of a pandemic to ease

public difficulties. The appeal of ‘ethos’ was also adopted to develop the frame of arguments supporting action that needs to be taken as a new leader navigates his country during the pandemic.

During the early phase of the outbreak, Malaysia also prioritized the safety of Malaysians in China, where the first coronavirus cases were detected. Hence, the Malaysian Government made the necessary efforts to evacuate its citizens from China. In the initial phase, coronavirus infection, which was later called Covid-19, was not considered a threat to the nation. The effort explains the few government narratives that were released in the mass media during the early phase of the pandemic. The potential of the virus to spread and infect a large number of people was not promptly perceived by the Malaysian Government. In fact, such threats were described as fake news that sprung up on various media platforms. Several reports circulating on social media, Facebook, and Twitter mentioned the influx of Chinese tourists, the number of infections undisclosed by the Government, and the death toll that was not reported by the Government swirling in public cyberspace.

As a multicultural country, Malaysia is very sensitive to racial issues, which can easily trigger a conflict. The situation is also considered a threat when a racial issue is associated with the Covid-19 outbreak in China. Malaysia's then PM, Mahathir Mohammad, stated that the Government needed to take legal action against media organizations that used the virus to stoke racial tensions in the Muslim-majority country.

Concrete steps only began after the new Malaysian PM took up the leadership post. In the initial phase of holding the reins of Government, PM Muhyiddin Yasin started to set numerous national policies, one of which was a stimulus package aimed at workers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Malaysian Government opted to provide an incentive of RM 600 (approximately IDR 2.100.000) per month for workers affected by the pandemic and asked all workers to take unpaid leave since Malaysia imposed a restriction control order (MCO) in March 2020.

The Malaysian Government tend to use the rhetorical appeal of ‘ethos’ with the credibility of the speaker or person for the public address. Apart from taking a policy approach in responding to the crisis, the Malaysian Government also executed a state approach in collaboration with the Kingdom.

The Malaysian Government continues to use the charisma of Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah in supporting the Government MCO policies through a decree issued on March 17th, 2020. *"As the Head of State, His Majesty also called on all Malaysians, regardless of race and religion, to stay united and play their part in helping the Government contain the spread of Covid-19 in the country"* (Star.com, 2020).

The Malaysian PM called on all ministers and their deputies to donate two months of their salaries to the Covid-19 Fund. The government imposed a direct deduction of two months' salary from at least 32 cabinet members and 38 deputy ministers to support Covid-19 funds for affected communities. PM Muhyidin stated *"This step shows the earnestness of the government to assist those who have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic"* (Koya, 2020).

The Malaysian Government also realized that framing moral responsibility is not sufficient to address the impact of the pandemic. Hence, financial policies supporting the acceleration of handling Covid-19 were also made a priority. PM Muhyiddin launched an economic stimulus package worth RM 250 billion (around Rp. 929 trillion) for its

citizens, which was also called the Concern Package. This stimulus package has been effective since March 27, 2020.

The Malaysian PM emphasized that in times of crisis, the Government cares for its people and shows that, as Prime Minister, it has the best momentum because the crises it faces vary from political to economic to pandemic. The responsibility and framing typology highlighted in PM Muhyiddin's narratives show that the Government he leads is under challenging conditions and requires full support from the people.

The Singapore government adopted an 'ethos' appeal to frame the situation, which is still being determined with a continued public address stating the capability of handling the potential upcoming crisis based on its experience handling health issues before. The frame of action that the PM urged the people of Singapore also stressed 'logos' that every action or policy based on the recent update about Covid-19 frames responsibility and situation.

In the case of Singapore, PM Lee Hsien Loong was primarily responsible for presenting public addresses directly to the public through official state speeches. Singapore is also a multicultural country like Malaysia. PM Lee's speech was delivered in three languages: English, Malay, and Mandarin. The communication approach employed by the PM to convince the Singaporean public was quite different from the style used in Indonesia and Malaysia. Singapore preferred a direct approach to reach the public through the PM's speeches, which focused on minimizing panic buying or long lines at supermarkets, rumours, and conspiracy theories as obtainable in other countries.

Singapore has a long history of handling epidemics. For instance, Singapore experienced a health crisis in 2003 following the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), characterized by a higher mortality rate. Through this experience, PM Lee reassured the public that the current Covid-19 pandemic is not as dangerous as SARS. Nevertheless, the public was reminded that the pandemic should not be underestimated. Hence, the Singaporean Government explicitly mentioned the current approaches, which might be updated or changed if the virus eventually spreads and overwhelms the country's health facilities. The choice of words used in the nine-minute speech on March 28, 2020, was to ensure that the public is always informed.

The Straits Times reported that PM Lee's speech had a quick impact. The long queue at the supermarket started to disappear, and activities were returning to normalcy. Each of the PM's speeches and public messages emphasized the prevailing conditions experienced by Singapore and the concrete steps taken by the Government to improve the country's present state. In his speech, PM Loong mentioned, "*Singapore is facing a massive storm, and it needs the strongest leadership team with the strongest mandate to see it through the Covid-19 crisis*" (Liang, 2020).

The Indonesian government combines the 'kairos', 'pathos', and 'ethos' appeals of rhetoric in the statements conveyed by its public officials to develop the frame of choice and issue. The Indonesian Government implemented a strategy to emphasize and strengthen the emotional and empathetic aspects of the challenges faced by Indonesian citizens in Wuhan, China, which need an immediate resolution through the process of evacuation. The Government's greatest priority is the preservation of the well-being of its citizens. In terms of ethos, the Indonesian Government aims to demonstrate that the authorities have diligently and skillfully developed the most effective approach in response to the pandemic.

Malaysian government rhetoric tends to be more policy-focused and leaves technical matters to the relevant response teams. Malaysian Government adopted the

‘ethos’ appeal and ‘pathos’ appeal to build the framing of responsibility and frame of argument that lead to an action of the Government related to the possible economic impact, as well as the frame of action needed to be related to the specific situation.

Singapore government rhetoric's response to the pandemic emphasises the ‘logos’ and ‘ethos’ appeal to frame the situation and action taken by the Government. The presence of ‘logos’ then becomes the key to many positive responses that show effectiveness and resilience. Despite informing the public that the country is presently at high risk, the government still encouraged the public to take practical preventive steps for themselves and their families to help resolve the crisis. Hence, the message highlights that both the Government and the public must work together to minimize the risk of exposure to the virus, ensure the safety of citizens, and move the country forward again.

Discussion

The initial crisis rhetoric response of the Indonesian Government in the early pandemic was recorded as far from firm, so media coverage related to Indonesian government policies was often recorded negatively. In the first three months, the government's response was limited to data collection, ranging from the number of cases to fatality rates and recoveries. The media also often shows negative coverage because the Indonesian Government exhibits limitation in providing information to the public (Rosemary et al., 2022). The Government is still focused on the medical response in health services (hospitals) rather than on comprehensive prevention efforts. Mas'udi and Winanti (2020), as cited in (Rosemary et al., 2022), emphasize that the Government's initial response to Covid-19 indicates that the pandemic has not become a serious issue and the Government's agenda. (Indah Wahyuni et al., 2021) finding on government rhetoric mentioned about persuasion strategies used by leaders in Indonesia also corresponded to the Aristotle concept of logos, pathos and ethos to persuade the audiences. Leaders must show sympathy or empathy for the feelings of their audiences, as this facilitated the public communication process by showing understanding on their constituents.

As for journalism practice the media can serve as ‘watchdogs’ to scrutinize every story and government strategy on the management of the epidemic. Constructive criticism will assist the government and society in managing the pandemic. As a ‘watchdog,’ the media compels the government to formulate policies grounded in empirical evidence and field data, prioritizing the public interest, particularly for marginalized groups. The news article titled “*Menkes Prepares 100 Hospitals to Handle Coronavirus*” addresses this matter. This report outlines the implementation of standard operating procedures by the government in healthcare facilities. The media serves as a conduit for the government to disseminate information to the public (Woda et al., 2021).

Government of Malaysia believe that their communication needs to embrace all of the ethnicity in the country. The communication strategy applied as noted by (Perumal et al., 2022) indicated that the leaders play a vital role in ensuring the community they represent are well-informed and are up to date with issues pertaining to government policies and decisions. In the ongoing context of the pandemic, which persistently endangers lives and has engendered heightened anxiety, fear, and stress within the populace, it is imperative for leaders to prioritise the emotional well-being of the community. Nevertheless, there are instances where media framing poses a risk to the community (Ahmad, 2022). Media in Malaysia and Indonesia tend to have similar framing but not necessary the same. Malaysia government portrayed to have more focus

on action, while Indonesia government looked more uncertain with their policy (Almahallawi & Rahim, 2022; Mohamed & Al Giffari, 2021). Malaysia also faced challenges during the first wave of pandemic related to the new leader in charge, with the negative sentiment emerge in the country, however the Muhyidin responses to the pandemic cultivate better portrayal of him as the new leader (Hairi & Jamil, 2024).

The findings also corresponds with (Almahallawi & Rahim, 2022) that the published news in Malaysia concentrated on various generic frames including humanity, the assignment of accountability, and economic and ethical concerns. Conflicts were identified in the coverage, however it exhibited the lowest rate among the published subjects. This signifies the media's commitment to addressing significant matters related to individuals' daily concerns rather than exploring disagreements and disputes among the parties involved.

Singapore adopting a government-wide approach involves the collaboration of many ministries in order to attain policy coherence and foster synergy. Singapore's response to the crisis was characterized by a focus on safeguarding the well-being of its populace and promoting economic resilience and preparedness for the future. Singapore has adopted a two-pronged approach to address the Covid-19 epidemic, grounded in the values of scientific evidence and societal accountability. Initially, the crisis was managed by a scientific approach, wherein empirical facts and scientific substantiation guided the formulation and execution of policies and initiatives (O. S. Tan & Chua, 2023).

During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore instituted an elimination strategy focused on removing community transmission via swift discovery, isolation and treatment. During the circuit breaker era, Singapore implemented stringent social distancing measures by closing schools, offices, and nonessential businesses. The Covid-19 strategy was often described as top-down and state-directed, with civil society being energised by the state but mostly marginalised (Chen et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). Some studies highlighted that Singapore experience with 2003 SARS outbreak has proven shape its ability to response Covid-19. This country emphasized strategies utilized in reducing virus's spread, embracing multi-sector collaboration, digital technology, legal frameworks and economic responses (Feitelson et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; S. Bin Tan et al., 2022).

In some cases the leaders of Malaysia and Singapore share similar metaphors in their message Covid-19 is characterized as a 'adversary' in Malaysia and Singapore. Mr. Muhyiddin refers to it as 'musuh senyap' (silent adversary), while Mr. Lee designates it as a 'shared enemy'. These metaphors pose a risk due to the detrimental nature of adversaries. The properties of the virus are largely unspecified, however they have been developing via ongoing research. Nevertheless, the Prime Ministers utilize scant technical terminology, and their metaphors perpetuate the ambiguity around Covid-19 (Rajandran, 2020). The message of combating the same enemy help the country diminished stigmatization around Covid-19 that still captured within media coverage of Singapore media as heterogenous country. Early mainstream stories regarding the spread of Covid-19 infection linked the virus as Chinese virus as the country of origin of the disease. Despite prevalent media warnings against xenophobia, narratives constructed the portrayal of virus disseminators also existed (Kaur-Gill, 2022).

During the initial crisis, including the pandemic, the practice of journalism often falls into stigmatization in news narratives by linking the source or cause of the initial pandemic to occur, either by using sources from the citizens or public officials who are not equipped with scientific information. The practice has been repeated in several

pandemic cases, such as SARS, Ebola and Covid-19 (Kaur-Gill, 2022). To avoid this, comprehensive information from the government is indeed needed as an initial provision for journalists to avoid stigmatization or racism in pandemic news writing.

At the first stage of pandemic, Singapore received positive sentiments from global media as the government showed its gold standard in crisis management. Singapore was first regarded as the 'gold standard' until it was proven that it could not prevent the virus's spread among its migrant workers living in overcrowded conditions (Mokhtar, 2020) in (Thirumaran et al., 2021). The media will continue to tend to provide different portraits according to the information received by journalists, therefore the preparation of well-structured and well-planned policy-making messages will help the mass media forward a frame that is in line with the intention of the policy-maker.

Conclusion

The three Southeast Asian countries tend to combine rhetorical appeal in constructing their public message and build different types of framing to stress or emphasize the condition as their initial response to the pandemic. Indonesia and Malaysia have similarity of rhetorical appeal, but the frame developed for the government response stressed on different types of framing. Singapore is quite different, stressing more on logos and ethos rhetorical appeal to frame the government's messages. Framing is pertinent in government communication in various situations. This study provides the theoretical contribution that rhetoric as a persuasion effort can be useful in developing message framing. This research also poses some limitations that can be improved by future research. Framing is still introducing many new concepts but rarely compares or crosses paths with rhetoric, which already has a myriad of structures of analysis.

Conflict of Interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organization related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

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