



# Social Media Civic Activism During COVID-19: Content and Sentiment Analysis of Malaysia's Food Bank Campaign

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of the Food Bank Campaign as civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on strategic communication through social media by Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia. Using content analysis of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts, along with interviews, the study explores how different communication strategies affected public engagement. In addition, sentiment analysis was conducted using the Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner (VADER) tool to assess the emotional tone of audience responses across platforms. Grounded in Framing Theory, PR Excellence Theory, and Strategic Communication Theory, the study highlights the importance of two-way communication in building lasting relationships with stakeholders. Findings show that engagement levels varied based on message content, visuals, and the parties involved, with grassroots communities and corporate partners playing key roles. However, gaps in responding to underprivileged communities' inquiries were identified. The paper underscores the importance of interactive, two-way communication in fostering long-term relationships with stakeholders, offering practical insights for NGOs on how to effectively use social media for civic activism both during and after crises.

Keywords: civic activism, social media, communication strategies, COVID-19 pandemic, food bank campaign, SDG 2: Zero hunger, SDG 17: Partnership for the goals

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## **Abstrak**

Artikel ini mengkaji peranan Kempen Food Bank sebagai satu bentuk aktivisme sivik semasa pandemik COVID-19, dengan memberi tumpuan kepada komunikasi strategik melalui media sosial oleh Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan analisis kandungan terhadap hantaran di Facebook, Instagram dan Twitter, serta temu bual, kajian ini meneliti bagaimana strategi komunikasi yang berbeza mempengaruhi penglibatan awam. Selain itu, analisis sentimen turut dijalankan menggunakan alat Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner (VADER) bagi menilai nada emosi respons khalayak merentas platform. Berpandukan Teori Pembingkaian, Teori Kecemerlangan Perhubungan Awam dan Teori Komunikasi Strategik, kajian ini menekankan kepentingan komunikasi dua hala dalam membina hubungan yang berterusan dengan pihak berkepentingan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tahap penglibatan berbeza berdasarkan kandungan mesej, visual dan pihak yang terlibat, dengan komuniti akar umbi dan rakan korporat memainkan peranan penting. Walau bagaimanapun, jurang dalam memberikan respons terhadap pertanyaan komuniti kurang berkemampuan turut dikenal pasti. Artikel ini menegaskan kepentingan komunikasi dua hala yang interaktif dalam memupuk hubungan jangka panjang dengan pihak berkepentingan, di samping menawarkan panduan praktikal kepada NGO tentang cara menggunakan media sosial secara berkesan untuk aktivisme sivik, sama ada semasa mahupun selepas krisis.

Kata kunci: aktivisme sivik, media sosial, strategi komunikasi, pandemik COVID-19, kempen bank makanan, SDG 2: Sifar Kelaparan, SDG 17: Kerjasama demi Matlamat

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia led to the creation of the Food Bank Campaign to combat rising food insecurity, with nearly 2.75 million cases and 31,532 fatalities reported since December 2019 (Daud, 2021; “COVID-19: Malaysia’s death toll,” 2022). To curb the spread, the government imposed a Movement Control Order on March 18, 2020 (Shah et al., 2020). The resulting economic downturn pushed over 600,000 middle-income households (M40) into the lower-income group (B40), exacerbating poverty and inequality (Yeo, 2021). Civic activism surged in response, with grassroots movements and NGOs stepping in to address humanitarian needs (Nungsari et al., 2021; Pleyers, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media, especially Facebook, became a vital platform for information-seeking and civic engagement. With in-person activities restricted, young people turned to social media to share COVID-19 updates and engage in online civic actions (Aoun & Aoun Barakat, 2023). Platforms like Facebook were essential for communication, solidarity, and staying informed during lockdowns (Lelisho et al., 2023). This shift enabled communities to coordinate grassroots efforts involving NGOs and corporations, making social media a key tool for bottom-up civic activism during the pandemic (Abbas et al., 2021; Aoun & Aoun Barakat, 2023; Lelisho et al., 2023; Youngs, 2020). Recent research underscores that while NGO digital activism is a well-established field, its strategic adaptation to evolving social media environments is still uneven. Hutchinson (2019) argues that activist content struggles to gain visibility in algorithm-driven platforms dominated by commercial influencers, emphasizing the need for NGOs to adopt micro-platformization strategies to enhance their outreach. Similarly, Moreno-Cabanillas et al. (2024) analyzed the top 30 international NGOs and found that while many maintain a strong presence across major platforms like Facebook and Instagram, they predominantly rely on monologic, one-way communication tools, underutilizing dialogic features that enable meaningful interaction. These insights suggest that despite extensive literature, the actual operationalization of interactive strategies by NGOs remains limited, and further research is needed to explore platform-specific best practices—particularly in localized contexts like Malaysia. The Food Bank Campaign in Malaysia has been successfully implemented through strong community and corporate support, ensuring sufficient donations for underprivileged groups (Mohd Ali Tan et al., 2024). NGOs

have been pivotal, using their expertise in organizing, fundraising, and advocacy to manage food banks and facilitate CSR initiatives (Nungsari et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2020). They guide corporations in effectively channeling financial and in-kind donations, reinforcing partnerships between corporations, NGOs, and the community, and highlighting their essential role in promoting civic activism during crises.

Due to the pandemic, there has been increased use of online communication for such civic activism (Aoun & Aoun Barakat, 2023; De Santis et al., 2020; Susann, 2021), so it is argued that social media offers new options for charities and communities to organize social movements (Mardiah et al., 2022). Therefore, this research aims to analyze the social media content of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia through social media platforms as an act of civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. Key questions driving this study are: What communication strategies did Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia employ on social media during the Food Bank Campaign, and how do these strategies reflect the application of PR Excellence Theory in a crisis communication context? How did Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia utilize two-way communication to engage various parties in their Food Bank Campaign during the pandemic through social media? To address these research questions, content analysis grounded in the Framing Theory, Strategic Communication Theory, and PR Excellence Theory was conducted. This analysis involved systematically collecting and examining various forms of social media content, including Instagram posts, tweets, Facebook updates, and stakeholders' engagement such as shares, comments, and replies. Each piece of content, ranging from text to multimedia elements like videos, images, hashtags, and emoticons, was analyzed. The unit of analysis was individual posts, with the engagement metrics such as likes, comments, retweets, and shares contributing to the data's depth. Additionally, 15 in-depth interviews with directors, volunteers, project managers, and communication team members of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia provided valuable qualitative insights to complement the content analysis.

To analyze the content of messages, social media posts are coded into five constructs: Social Media Topic, Social Media Post Intention, Visual Contents, Engaged Parties, and Engagement Tactics. This study helps to understand what had happened to the Food Bank Campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia had engaged participants of this campaign through social media. The

Food Bank Campaign exemplifies successful civic activism in Malaysia during the pandemic, offering both theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, it reinforces Framing Theory, PR Excellence Theory, and Strategic Communication Theory by demonstrating how NGOs can leverage social media for two-way communication to foster trust and stakeholder engagement. Practically, it highlights effective engagement tactics, such as external links and hashtags, topics and messages framing, while underscoring the importance of timely responses to maintain trust and participation. Additionally, sentiment analysis of audience comments was conducted to gain deeper insight into emotional responses and the quality of stakeholder engagement across different platforms. These insights offer valuable lessons for civic activists globally, showcasing how social media can drive community mobilization during and after the pandemic. In conclusion, this study contributes to this discourse by analyzing the social media communication strategies of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, particularly their engagement tactics during the pandemic.

## **Literature Review**

### **Food Bank Campaign as Civic Activism during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened global food insecurity, with the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) warning of potential food shortages due to export restrictions and rising production costs. Vulnerable regions, particularly those with high poverty rates and limited social safety nets, were hit hardest (Ma et al., 2021). Across Asia, Africa, and other regions, studies indicated that access to food was severely affected (Elsahoryi et al., 2020; Galanakis, 2020; Udmale et al., 2020). In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order imposed on March 18, 2020 resulted in widespread economic hardship, leading to the rise of initiatives like the Food Bank Campaign (Daud, 2021). The pandemic pushed middle-income households into poverty, further exacerbating inequality (Yeo, 2021). The state's inadequate response prompted greater civic activism, with grassroots groups, NGOs, and corporations mobilizing to meet humanitarian needs (Pleyers, 2020; Tayeb & Hong, 2021). This collective effort highlighted the growing role of civil society in addressing crises (Nungsari et al., 2021).

Civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic adapted to the digital sphere, driven by the challenges and emotional responses arising

from the crisis. Social media became a vital platform for organizing, disseminating information, and mobilizing resources, enabling collective action despite physical distancing (Castells, 2007; Youngs, 2020). By fostering shared identities and solidarity, it empowered communities to address urgent needs, support marginalized groups, and advocate for systemic change, bridging gaps left by governments and reshaping civic engagement (Bowe et al., 2021; Pleyers, 2020).

In response to the hardships caused by the pandemic and the lack of sufficient governmental support, grassroots movements like the Food Bank Campaign emerged. Initially sparked by the #KitaJagaKita movement led by Hanna Alkaf in March 2020, and the “White Flag” initiative created by Nik Faizah Nik Othman in June 2021, these campaigns aimed to aid underprivileged communities struggling during the lockdown (Azlan, 2021; Leong & Rosli, 2021). The Food Bank Campaign became a vital civic activism initiative, using social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to mobilize food assistance and establish local food banks, promoting the idea of mutual aid under the slogan ‘Kita Jaga Kita’ (Abbas et al., 2021; Leong & Rosli, 2021). This campaign not only addressed immediate needs but also fostered a collective identity and solidarity among Malaysians.

NGOs are essential not only for managing immediate relief efforts but also for creating sustainable solutions through strategic partnerships. Their role in CSR initiatives ensures that corporate donations are used efficiently, aligning corporate objectives with community needs (de Jong & van der Meer, 2017). By leveraging their advocacy skills and networks, NGOs raise awareness about food insecurity and encourage more active participation from both the public and private sectors. Moreover, NGOs serve as a bridge between grassroots movements and larger institutional efforts, ensuring that resources reach the most vulnerable populations (Shah et al., 2020). Their ongoing efforts can help build a more resilient support system, which is vital for addressing food insecurity beyond the pandemic, laying the groundwork for long-term civic activism (Nungsari et al., 2021).

### **Strategic Communication Theory on Social Media, PR Excellence Theory, and Framing Theory**

This study draws on Strategic Communication Theory, Framing Theory, and PR Excellence Theory to understand how NGOs use social media to engage with stakeholders, build trust, and mobilize collective action during crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategic

Communication Theory emphasizes the planned and purposeful use of communication to achieve organizational goals (Hallahan et al., 2007). Strategic communication, particularly in the context of societal issues, has been increasingly explored by civil society groups and NGOs (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Bravo & Fuentes, 2010). Public relations scholars argue that communication strategies should aim to improve society (Heath, 2010). In the context of social media, this involves leveraging interactive features to engage stakeholders, deliver targeted messages, and promote desired actions. According to Barger (2011) and Hallahan et al. (2007), strategic communication on social media must prioritize two-way communication, enabling real-time interaction and feedback between organizations and their audience. This two-way interaction fosters meaningful engagement, ensuring that audiences are not merely passive recipients of information but active participants in the communication process. Recent studies emphasize the role of interactive social media features, such as comments, shares, and real-time updates in fostering stronger connections with stakeholders during crises (Amores et al., 2023; Veil et al., 2011).

Dialogic communication, as defined by Kent and Taylor (1998), underscores the importance of two-way interaction, advocating for organizations to engage in dialogues with their publics rather than relying solely on one-way dissemination of information. While these principles remain fundamental, evolving technologies and the dynamic nature of social media demand further exploration of how dialogic communication can be effectively operationalized during crises (Valentini, 2021). Chen et al. (2011) and other researchers (Aoun & Aoun Barakat, 2023; Araujo & Kollat, 2018; Saffer et al., 2013) underscore that social media's ability to facilitate social interactions empowers organizations to shape audience behavior by fostering a sense of community, enhancing engagement, and encouraging collective action. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) identified three key functions of social media for non-profit organizations: information, community, and action. These functions align with strategic communication objectives: disseminating information, building community relationships, and motivating stakeholders to take concrete actions, such as through donations or volunteerism. While there is a growing body of research examining the role of social media in civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic, studies focusing specifically on how NGOs strategically leverage these platforms within the Malaysian context remain limited. While studies

like San Cornelio et al. (2023) explore how environmental influencers use Instagram to mobilize action through care-driven communication and personal storytelling, such lifestyle-oriented, small-scale activism has yet to be fully explored within the NGO institutional context in Malaysia. This study therefore bridges that gap by focusing on a formal NGO's strategic use of platform-specific engagement during a national crisis.

Building on these ideas, PR Excellence Theory, developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), proposes that two-way symmetrical communication is the most effective model of public relations. In this model, both organizations and stakeholders engage in balanced communication, listening to and adjusting their perspectives based on reciprocal dialogue. This creates trust, understanding, and long-term relationships. J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (2002) argue that mutual understanding and collaboration between organizations and their publics are essential for fostering credibility and trust, but their work predates the widespread use of social media. Contemporary research highlights the need to adapt PR Excellence Theory to leverage social media's unique capabilities for real-time feedback, participatory communication, and relationship-building during crises (Tam et al., 2022). While PR Excellence Theory emphasizes strategic, relationship-centered communication, more recent crisis communication scholarship suggests that such normative approaches should be complemented by adaptive, situationally responsive strategies in complex crises (Coombs & Tachkova, 2022). For example, social media platforms enable NGOs to balance the dissemination of information with responsive dialogic engagement, fostering transparency and credibility (Valentini, 2021). However, resource constraints hinder NGOs' ability to implement these principles effectively at scale. Practical solutions, such as automation tools for real-time interaction, collaborations for resource optimization, and leveraging social media analytics, are needed to enhance inclusivity, responsiveness, and sustainability in crisis communication. Future research should explore best practices for refining these strategies amidst such challenges.

When integrating Strategic Communication Theory with PR Excellence Theory, social media becomes a powerful tool for NGOs, offering opportunities for interactive and relationship-based communication. Strategic communication enables NGOs to craft and deliver messages that resonate with their audiences, while PR Excellence

Theory ensures these communication efforts are rooted in meaningful dialogue and stakeholder engagement. This integration provides a critical framework for understanding how social media supports civic activism, emphasizing practices such as the use of interactive hashtags, multimedia storytelling, and participatory content creation to mobilize collective action and build trust (Amores et al., 2023). Framing Theory, a key concept in communication studies which examines how the presentation of information shapes audience interpretation and emotional engagement (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993) will also be applied in this research. Frames emphasize specific aspects of an issue, guiding public perception. With the rise of digital and social media, framing has expanded to include visuals, hashtags, and interactivity as tools for shaping discourse and engagement (De Vreese, 2005; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). Scholars highlight that framing involves both the construction of messages and audience interpretation, especially in environments dominated by user-generated content (Scheufele, 1999). This study applies framing theory to the social media strategies of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia during the Food Bank Campaign. By highlighting urgency, solidarity, and collaboration, the organization employed frames that emotionally resonated with grassroots communities and corporate stakeholders. Framing theory provides a lens to understand how visuals and narratives drive public engagement and collective action. In crisis communication, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, framing effectively mobilized civic activism by aligning messages with public values and concerns. Thus, by combining the principles of Framing Theory, Strategic Communication Theory, and PR Excellence Theory, this research highlights how effective communication strategies, updated to reflect contemporary social media practices, can be used to drive engagement, strengthen trust, and ensure the success of civic activism initiatives during a pandemic.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a comprehensive content analysis methodology to investigate the social media strategies of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia during their Food Bank Campaign amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis focused on understanding public engagement and the effectiveness of the organization's communication strategies on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter during the peak campaign period, which spanned from June 1, 2021, to December

31, 2021. A total of 308 posts were examined, comprising 101 from Instagram, 100 from Facebook, and 107 from Twitter.

The primary data consisted of social media posts from the official accounts of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia. These posts were systematically collected and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Twitter data were captured using the NCapture web browser extension, while Facebook and Instagram posts were manually gathered and subsequently imported into NVivo. Each social media post, which included various media elements such as text, images, videos, hashtags, and emoticons, was treated as a unit of analysis. These posts were analyzed both quantitatively, through engagement metrics, and qualitatively, through textual analysis and message framing. Engagement metrics, which provided insight into how the public interacted with the campaign's posts, included the number of likes, comments, shares, and retweets. These metrics offered a quantitative understanding of the level of public interaction and the reach of the campaign across different platforms. The engagement figures also helped gauge the extent to which the campaign resonated with its audience and the success of its mobilization efforts. To gain a deeper understanding of the content and its potential impact, textual analysis was employed. This analysis allowed for the exploration of the deeper meanings and themes within the posts, including the comments and replies. By analyzing comments and replies, the study incorporated the audience's feedback and interactions, providing additional insights into stakeholder engagement and the two-way communication dynamics central to PR Excellence Theory. Through this method, the study aimed to interpret the language, tone, and structure of the posts to uncover recurring themes and key messages conveyed throughout the campaign. Particular attention was given to how these messages were framed, focusing on how the organization highlighted specific issues such as urgency, community solidarity, and emotional appeals.

In addition to content analysis, the study conducted 15 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including directors, volunteers, project managers, and communication team members from Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia. These interviews provided qualitative insights into the strategic communication approaches employed by the organization during the campaign. The interviews also offered a deeper understanding of the internal decision-making processes behind the social media content and helped contextualize the findings from the content analysis. This study

received ethical approval from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC), University of Malaya (Reference No. UM.TNC2/UMREC\_2218), prior to data collection. All interview participants (n = 15) were provided with an information sheet describing the study objectives, procedures, foreseeable risks/benefits, data uses (primary research and publication), and their rights; participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time without penalty, including request for exclusion of their information from analysis where feasible. Written informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were protected through removal of personal identifiers and use of pseudonyms; access to identifiable data was restricted to the researcher and authorised supervisors. Interview materials and derived datasets were stored securely and will be retained and disposed of in accordance with institutional requirements. For the social media component, only publicly accessible posts from the official social media accounts of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia were analysed; consistent with internet research ethics guidance, public availability was not treated as an automatic waiver of ethical responsibility, and the study adopted a context-sensitive approach that prioritised minimising harm, respecting contextual privacy expectations, and avoiding unnecessary identifiability. Where public user comments were referenced, identifying details were omitted or anonymised and quotations were paraphrased where necessary to reduce traceability.

The coding process for both the textual analysis and message framing followed an inductive approach. Categories were developed directly from the data, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the content. Coders were extensively trained to ensure consistency in applying the coding instructions. To enhance the reliability of the coding process, regular team discussions were held to address any discrepancies. This collaborative approach to coding ensured that the analysis remained consistent and aligned with the research objectives. To further ensure the validity of the study, a pilot test of the coding scheme was conducted, allowing for adjustments based on feedback and observations. Additionally, data were collected from multiple social media platforms, providing a more comprehensive and representative analysis of the campaign's engagement and impact.

To better understand audience engagement across each category, sentiment analysis was conducted on public comments using the Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner (VADER) tool,

which is designed for social media text. Comments were classified as positive, neutral, or negative and linked to their respective categories and sub-categories across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This analysis offered additional insights into the emotional responses of audiences, contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of engagement beyond quantitative metrics.

In summary, the study's methodology integrated engagement metrics, textual analysis, message framing, and sentiment analysis, offering a comprehensive examination of the communication strategies employed by Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia. The inclusion of qualitative interviews enriched the findings, offering valuable insights into the organization's efforts to engage the public during a time of crisis.

### **Coding, Data Analysis, and Interpretation**

By organizing the qualitative data, the study produced five main categories of analysis: 1) Social media topics, 2) Intention of social media posts, 3) Visual content, 4) Engaged parties, and 5) Engagement tactics involved in communication. To develop a clear understanding of each category and subcategory, the researchers defined and classified them accordingly (Tables 2a-6b). Under the social media topics (Table 2a), there were nine categories identified: 1) Cooperation with corporate entities, 2) Cooperation with NGOs, 3) Donation, 4) Event information, 5) Food bank organization information, 6) Pandemic information, 7) Civic activist recruitments, 8) Relationship building, and 9) Showcase achievements. Intention of social media posts (Table 3a) was classified into five categories: 1) Brand and relationship building, 2) Fundraising and donations, 3) Information sharing, 4) Pandemic protocol, and 5) Volunteer recruitment. Visual content (Table 4a) was categorized into four types: 1) Images, 2) Live broadcast, 3) Poster, and 4) Video. Engaged parties (Table 5a) was classified into seven categories: 1) Non-profit organization, 2) Potential activist, 3) Government, 4) Grassroots community, 5) Underprivileged community, 6) Corporation, and 7) Volunteer. Finally, Engagement tactics (Table 6a) was classified into five categories: 1) External link, 2) Hashtag, 3) Pin location, 4) Engaging content, and 5) Feedback and response.

In the above codes, the researchers assessed the most dominant meaning of social media posts when one post expressed more than one meaning. Table 1 lists selected examples of social media posts from the dataset and shows how they had been coded for reference. Later, the researchers compared the average engagement rates of the

various engagement activities of participants, including likes, shares, retweets, and comments on different social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter accounts of Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia) within the period of June 2021 and December 2021. The engagement rates are presented in all tables based on different codes as percentages to allow comparisons of the engagement rates of different social media topics (Table 2b), social media intentions (Table 3b), visual content (Table 4b), engagement parties (Table 5b), and engagement tactics (Table 6b). The engagement rates of each platform was calculated by total engagement (including likes, shares, comments, and tweets) and divided by the number of followers of each social media platform (Figure 1). Total average engagement rate is the total engagement on the three social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) divided by three (Figure 2). This study operationalised social media engagement using interaction-based metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, consistent with established engagement literature and common social media analytics practice (Fulgoni, 2016; Srivastava et al., 2018). Engagement rate is defined as the ratio of total interactions (like, comments, shares, and retweets) to the total number of followers or impressions, which is widely recognized for assessing social media performance (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). This method aligns with platform-specific metrics developed by major social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, as highlighted in Trunfio and Rossi's study. Additionally, sentiment analysis results were visualized through heatmaps to illustrate audience emotional responses across sub-categories and platforms. Using the VADER tool, each comment was scored from -1 (most negative) to +1 (most positive). The heatmaps display average sentiment scores per sub-category on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These visualizations enhance the analysis by supporting cross-platform comparisons and providing a deeper understanding of engagement beyond quantitative metrics.

The social media platform has an auto-translation button to translate all posts from Bahasa Malaysia to English as well (see Table 1 for translation). Finally, to further enrich the discussion and analysis, the posts will be examined through textual analysis, and interview data will be incorporated to assess social media engagement and communication strategies. The results will be presented in the following findings and discussion sections.

**Table 1***Example of social media posts from the data set*

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Category</b>
Facebook	<p>YAYASAN FOOD BANK MALAYSIA would like to express our sincerest gratitude for the support and generous contribution we received from Xiaomi Malaysia to make our CSR mission a great success!</p> <p>We're delighted to raise contributions, sponsorship, donations from the corporate company and community at large. Every contribution is important for us so that we can keep going with our Zero Hunger &amp; Zero Waste mission. No amount is too little and your donations will be greatly appreciated.</p> <p>#TogetherWeFeedTheCommunity</p> <p>#NoMiWithoutYou</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Media Topic - Cooperation with Corporate</li> <li>• Social Media Post Intention - Fundraising and Donations</li> <li>• Visual Content - Images</li> <li>• Engaged Parties - Corporation</li> <li>• Engagement Tactics - Hashtag</li> </ul>
Instagram	<p>SELANGOR FRIENDLY PACKAGE PROGRAMME</p> <p>Done with the distribution of 250 bags containing basic food items to 250 recipients at Seri Rantau Pelabuhan Kelang Apartment. Also attended by YB Puan Rodziah Ismail, Ybrs. Dr. Anthony A. Had a hard time making this programme a success. The Bingkisan Mesra Programme is a collaborative programme between YFBM and the Selangor State Government in an effort to help those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic among them such as school bus drivers,</p>	<p>Social Media Topic - Event Information</p> <p>Social Media Post Intention - Information Sharing</p> <p>Visual Content - Images</p> <p>Engaged Parties - Government</p> <p>Engagement Tactics - Hashtag</p>

Platform	Examples	Category
	<p>taxi drivers and others. Thank you to all involved in making this mission a success.</p> <p>#BingkisanMesraSelangor #YayasanFoodBankMalaysia</p>	
Twitter	<p>A kind donation received from Ng Sook Peng. If you're keen in making contribution for a better community, welcome to contact us at 010-3333260. 🍀 #Kechara #foodbank #hungerknowsnobarriers #donation</p>	<p>Social Media Topic - Donation</p> <p>Social Media Post Intention - Fundraising and Donations</p> <p>Visual Content - Images</p> <p>Engaged Parties - Grassroots Community</p> <p>Engagement Tactics - Hashtag</p>

## Figure 1

### Engagement Rate Formula

Engagement Rate = (Total Engagement / Total Followers for each social media platform) x 100%

"Total Engagement" refers to the total number of likes, comments, shares and retweets,  
 "Total Followers" refers to the total number of followers of the social media account.  
 The engagement rate is expressed as a percentage to allow for comparisons between different posts or social media accounts.

## Figure 2

### Average Engagement Rate Formula

Average Engagement Rate =  
 (Total Engagement Rate on Facebook + Total Engagement Rate on Instagram + Total Engagement Rate on Twitter) / 3

"Total Engagement Rate on Facebook" is the total engagement rate on Facebook during the specified time period  
 "Total Engagement Rate on Instagram" is the total engagement rate on Instagram during the specified time period

"Total Engagement Rate on Twitter" is the total engagement rate on Twitter during the specified time period  
 Dividing the sum of these three total engagement rates by 3 will give the overall average engagement rate across all three social media platforms.

## Findings and Discussion

The study yielded three significant findings: variations in post topics and intentions influenced social media engagement levels; diverse tactics and visual content, particularly videos, boosted interaction; and multiple parties, including NGOs, corporations, and grassroots communities, played essential roles in driving collective action. These insights reveal how strategic content and collaborations effectively engaged the public, offering valuable lessons for enhancing future civic activism. The following sections present detailed findings and discussions on: 1) Social media topics, 2) Communication intentions, 3) Visual content, and 4) Engaged parties and tactics. Notably, the correlations between these factors and engagement levels are further substantiated by sentiment analysis, which provides deeper insight into public emotional responses and content resonance.

### Social Media Topics

The analysis of social media posts from Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia (YFBM) during the pandemic revealed that a significant portion of the content focused on providing organizational information (23.6%) and showcasing achievements (21%) (Table 2a). While these posts were crucial for maintaining transparency by informing the public about the organization's activities, reach, and overall success, they resulted in lower engagement compared to posts that emphasized more immediate or collaborative efforts. For instance, one post celebrating YFBM's accomplishments noted that the Food Bank Runcit initiative had benefited up to 713 families (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). Although the post conveyed a positive message, it garnered minimal interaction compared to posts that discussed pandemic protocols or solicited donations. Specifically, the engagement rate for organizational information posts averaged 0.81%, and for showcasing achievements, it averaged 0.80% (Table 2b). Despite the value of transparent messaging, such content appeared less engaging to audiences during the pandemic. This trend is consistent with strategic communication research and the PR Excellence Theory, which posits that while transparency is critical for long-term credibility, audience engagement tends to be higher when posts address immediate needs or urgent concerns (Grunig et al., 2002). Posts focused on operational success and accomplishments often fail to evoke emotional responses or prompt action, particularly during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. As one interviewee observed, "The people seemed more interested in posts where they could help or make

a difference, such as sharing posts with the groups and friends aligned with similar interests or facilitating donations” (Informant 2, August 2021). Sentiment analysis further reinforces this pattern. Although posts related to showcase achievements and organizational information reflected a higher proportion of positive sentiment, their average sentiment scores were moderate, indicating limited emotional intensity. The heatmap (Figure 3) highlights that these posts elicited particularly low emotional resonance on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, even when feedback was largely positive. These findings support the notion that while audiences appreciate transparency, they are more likely to engage when content provokes stronger affective responses.-

In contrast, action-oriented posts—particularly those related to pandemic relief efforts—were more effective at driving engagement. This indicates the need for organizations like YFBM to re-evaluate their content strategies to better align with public engagement preferences during critical moments. The data further reveals that posts focused on pandemic protocols and collaborations with NGOs and corporations consistently attracted higher engagement rates compared to other topics. Pandemic-related posts had an average engagement rate of 3.04%, while posts featuring collaborations with NGOs averaged 1.06%, and those with corporations averaged 1.11% (As shown in Table 2b). For example, a post highlighting YFBM’s collaboration with Air Selangor expressed appreciation for the company’s continued support of the Malaysia Food Bank Foundation’s initiative to assist B40 families, and it garnered significantly more interaction than posts focused on organizational updates or accomplishments (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). The sentiment data further supports this. Posts related to pandemic information and collaborations with NGOs and corporations achieved relatively higher sentiment scores on Facebook and demonstrated consistently positive emotional responses across platforms (Figure 3). This suggests that audiences were not only more engaged with content addressing real-time needs, but also more emotionally responsive when such posts emphasized collective action and urgency.

These findings align with prior research that underscores the importance of community-centered messaging during crises (Bowe et al., 2021; Nungsari et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2020; Severo et al., 2021; Tayeb & Hong, 2021). In line with the PR Excellence Theory, collaborative posts helped strengthen the organization’s credibility and encouraged stakeholder involvement (Cheney et al., 2010; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier,

2006; Tam et al., 2022; Valentini, 2021). As one interviewee stated, “When we mention other NGOs and corporations, it fosters a sense of collaboration among different groups, and people who feel involved are more likely to share the content with their friends” (Informant 4, July 2021). Thus, both engagement metrics and sentiment data illustrate that collaborative, solution-driven posts were more effective in sustaining public attention and participation.

Conversely, posts related to volunteer recruitment and relationship-building consistently generated the lowest engagement rates across all topics. Posts calling for volunteer participation averaged an engagement rate of 0.11%, while relationship-building posts averaged 0.19% (Table 2b). For example, a typical volunteer recruitment post appealed for volunteers to help deliver Grocery Food Bank aid boxes directly to recipients’ homes (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). Despite the critical role that volunteers play in YFBM’s operations, these posts attracted limited interaction, likely due to the restrictions imposed by the Movement Control Order (MCO), which made it difficult for individuals to participate in volunteer activities. One interviewee explained, “It was difficult to recruit volunteers during the MCO because people couldn’t move around freely. This affected our ability to engage the public in volunteer activities” (Informant 5, August 2021). Sentiment analysis adds further insight. These posts related to volunteer recruitment and relationship building recorded the lowest sentiment scores across platforms (Figure 3). This demonstrates how emotional tone and contextual relevance critically influence engagement outcomes.

On the other hand, the lower engagement with these posts reflects the operational challenges faced during the pandemic, where public participation in physical activities like volunteering was severely restricted. This highlights a broader issue for organizations during crises: sustaining long-term engagement when physical participation is limited. To address this, non-profits like YFBM may need to rethink their recruitment strategies by exploring alternative ways to engage the public, such as offering remote volunteer opportunities or shifting the focus to financial contributions. Volunteer recruitment posts could also be enhanced by incorporating emotional appeals or success stories, which could help create a stronger connection between the public and the organization’s mission.

In summary, this analysis highlights the importance of strategic content framing during crises. While transparency and the sharing

of organizational information are essential for building credibility, they do not generate the same level of public engagement as posts addressing immediate needs. Posts focused on pandemic protocols and collaborative efforts garnered the highest engagement levels, indicating that the public is more inclined to engage with content that emphasizes collective action and provides real-time solutions to urgent problems. In contrast, posts centered around volunteer recruitment and relationship-building struggled to gain traction, likely due to the operational constraints of the pandemic. Moving forward, YFBM and similar organizations should prioritize audience-centered, emotionally charged messaging, and adapt strategies based on platform-specific responses and real-time sentiment feedback.

**Table 2a.**

*Coding Scheme Definitions and Frequency of Codes on Social Media Topic*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Definition of the Code</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
1. Social Media Topic		
1.1 Cooperation with Corporate	collaboration or partnership with corporate	15.04
1.2 Cooperation with NGO	partnerships with other non-governmental organizations	3.82
1.3 Donation	requests for donations, updates on donation drives, and announcements of donations received	12.41
1.4 Event Information	provides information about Food Bank Campaign events	13.84
1.5 Food Bank Organization Information	provides information about the Food Bank Organization	23.63
1.6 Pandemic Information	provides information about the COVID-19 pandemic	4.30
1.7 Civic Activist Recruitments	recruiting and engaging volunteers	1.67
1.8 Relationship Building	establishes or strengthens the relationship between Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia and its stakeholders	4.30

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Definition of the Code</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
1.9 Showcase Achievements	Showcases achievements of Food Bank Campaign	21.00
	Total	100

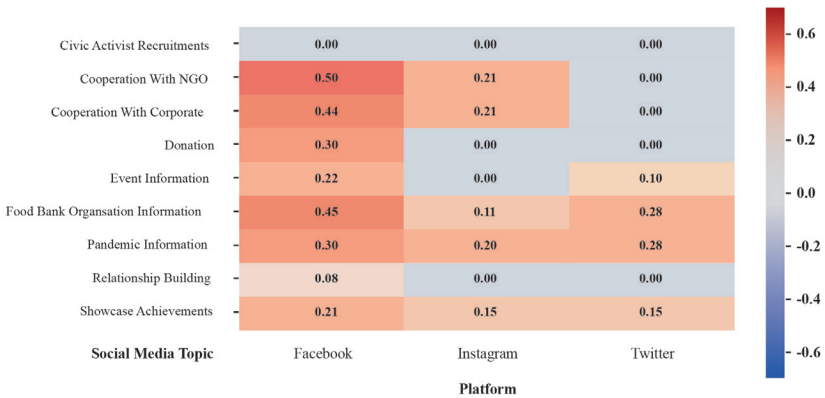
**Table 2b.**

*Engagement Rates of Codes on Social Media Topic*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Facebook Engage-ment Rates (%)</b>	<b>Instagram Engage-ment Rates (%)</b>	<b>Twitter Engage-ment Rates (%)</b>	<b>Average Engage-ment Rates (%)</b>
1. Social Media Topic				
1.1 Cooperation with Corporate	0.39	2.49	0.47	1.11
1.2 Cooperation with NGO	0.29	2.65	0.23	1.06
1.3 Donation	0.79	1.30	0.94	1.01
1.4 Event Information	0.56	1.71	0.41	0.89
1.5 Food Bank Organization Information	0.56	1.25	0.62	0.81
1.6 Pandemic Information	0.42	8.00	0.70	3.04
1.7 Civic Activist Recruitments	0.32	0.00	0.00	0.11
1.8 Relationship Building	0.10	0.00	0.47	0.19
1.9 Showcase Achievements	0.79	1.02	0.59	0.80

**Figure 3.**

*Heatmap of Sentiment Scores for Social Media Topic Codes Across Platforms*



Note. Cell values represent the average VADER compound sentiment scores of public comments associated with posts coded under each social media topic across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Scores range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ , where negative values indicate more negative sentiment, 0 indicates neutral sentiment, and positive values indicate more positive sentiment. Warmer colours indicate higher positive sentiment scores, whereas cooler colours indicate lower, less positive, or negative sentiment scores.

### **Intentions of Social Media Posts**

The analysis of social media content from Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia (YFBM) revealed that the majority of posts (60.77%) were aimed at information sharing (Table 3a). This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that non-profit organizations frequently use social media for one-way communication to disseminate information (Gomez & Vargas-Preciado, 2016; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024). However, while such posts are crucial for maintaining transparency, they often generated lower engagement compared to posts that prompted direct action, such as fundraising and donations (1.07%) or pandemic protocols (1.03%). One example of an information sharing post stated: “Despite the challenges which Covid-19 pandemic presents, they continued on with a project - Jelajah Merdeka (Roam for Independence), to help more than 2000+ families that are in need.” (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). While this post provided necessary updates, its engagement rate was relatively low, reflecting the trend that purely informational posts do not resonate

as deeply with the audience. As noted by one interviewee, “While informative posts keep the public updated, they don’t drive much engagement unless tied to something actionable, like fundraising or a call for volunteers” (Informant 2, August 2021). Sentiment analysis (Figure 4) shows that information sharing posts carried a mostly neutral tone across platforms, indicating limited emotional resonance. Despite this, Instagram saw higher engagement (2.45%), suggesting audiences valued the content for its informational clarity rather than emotional appeal. The findings align with PR Excellence Theory, which emphasizes the need for two-way communication between organizations and their stakeholders (Grunig et al., 2006; Tam et al., 2022; Valentini, 2021). However, YFBM’s reliance on one-way communication for information dissemination may have limited its potential for deeper engagement.

Posts with calls for action, such as donations and pandemic protocols, tended to engage the public more effectively. For example, a post on Facebook urging donations read: “Can you imagine if one day you wake up and see no food being served on the table? No provision to buy necessities? ...we would like to invite you to be our Food Bank Heroes today by donating and contributing as much as you can.” (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). This post garnered significantly higher engagement, driven by the sense of urgency and collective responsibility it invoked. As one interviewee explained, “We saw more engagement when we framed posts around urgent calls for donations rather than just updates. People were more likely to respond when they felt they could help immediately” (Informant 3, July 2021). Sentiment analysis (Figure 4) reinforces this pattern. Posts categorized under fundraising and donations revealed a strong positive emotional tone on Twitter (0.40) and Facebook (0.20). Despite the negative sentiment observed on Instagram (-0.60)—likely influenced by platform or visual content dynamics—the overall sentiment trend underscores that audiences on text-driven platforms were more emotionally engaged when content emphasized direct involvement and urgency. Similarly, sentiment analysis for *pandemic protocol* posts reflected strong positive responses on Facebook (0.65) and Instagram (0.40), suggesting that urgency related to health and crisis relief also triggered emotionally positive engagement.

These findings suggest that while information sharing is critical for organizational transparency, posts that actively involve the audience in direct actions, such as fundraising or volunteering, are more successful

in fostering engagement. The textual analysis of fundraising posts further supports this observation, with those framed around urgency or collective action generating more immediate responses. Platform-specific sentiment trends also reveal important distinctions. Instagram posts focused on information sharing had the highest engagement rates (2.45%), followed by fundraising and donations (1.44%), and pandemic protocols (2.00%). In contrast, Facebook saw its highest engagement in fundraising and donations (0.78%), while information sharing (0.58%) lagged behind (Table 3b). These patterns highlight that while Instagram can drive visibility, emotional response and engagement may depend on how well the message format fits user expectations and platform norms.

Overall, the findings highlight the need for NGOs like YFBM to balance transparency with more engaging, two-way communication. While information-sharing posts are important, they are less effective without clear calls to action. As emphasized by the PR Excellence Theory, two-way dialogue is essential for building lasting stakeholder relationships. This aligns with Lovejoy and Saxton’s (2012) framework, which identifies information, community, and action as the three key functions of social media for non-profits. YFBM’s communication activities aimed to raise awareness, build partnerships, and mobilize support through donations and volunteering—objectives central to Strategic Communication Theory. However, their focus on one-way informational posts often lacked the community-building and action-driven messaging needed to fully achieve these goals. As Chen et al. (2011) and others note, interactive social media can shape behavior and foster a sense of collective action—an opportunity YFBM could have leveraged more strategically.

**Table 3a.**

*Coding Scheme Definitions and Frequency of Codes on Social Media Post Intention*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Definition Of The Code</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
2. Social Media Post Intention		
2.1 Brand and Relationship Building	build the brand image of the organization and establish or strengthen relationships with stakeholders	19.74
2.2 Fundraising and Donations	raise funds or solicit donations for Food Bank Campaign	14.87

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Definition Of The Code</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
2.3 Information Sharing	provide factual information about food bank programs, services, or initiatives	60.77
2.4 Pandemic Protocol	provide information about information related to the pandemic	2.56
2.5 Volunteer Recruitment	recruit individuals who are willing to volunteer their time and effort to help the underprivileged community during the pandemic	2.05
	Total	100

**Table 3b.**

*Engagement Rates of Codes on Social Media Post Intention*

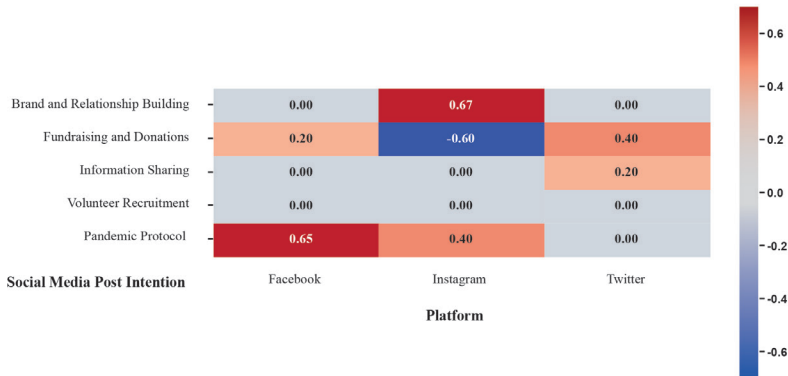
<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Facebook Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Instagram Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Twitter Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Average Engagement Rates (%)</b>
2. Social Media Post Intention				
2.1 Brand and Relationship Building	0.26	0.65	0.56	0.49
2.2 Fundraising and Donations	0.78	1.44	1.00	1.07
2.3 Information Sharing	0.58	2.45	0.52	1.18
2.4 Pandemic Protocol	0.50	2.00	0.59	1.03
2.5 Volunteer Recruitment	0.65	0.00	0.00	0.22

**Visual Content**

The analysis reveals that visual content significantly boosted engagement on social media platforms during the Food Bank Campaigns. Among the different types of content, videos proved to be the most engaging format across platforms, with the highest average engagement rates: Facebook (0.67%), Instagram (1.67%), and Twitter (0.65%) (Table 4b). This trend underscores the power of dynamic storytelling, as videos foster emotional connections with audiences, making content

**Figure 4.**

*Heatmap of Sentiment Scores for Social Media Post Intention Codes Across Platforms*



Note. Cell values represent the average VADER compound sentiment scores of public comments associated with posts coded under each social media post intention across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Scores range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ , where negative values indicate more negative sentiment, 0 indicates neutral sentiment, and positive values indicate more positive sentiment. Warmer colours indicate higher positive sentiment scores, whereas cooler colours indicate lower, less positive, or negative sentiment scores.

more relatable and impactful, especially during crises (Grunig et al, 2002; Guo & Saxton, 2014). For example, a post featuring a video of a food distribution drive reported that Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia had travelled to Taman Negara, Kuala Tahan, to provide assistance to local residents and Indigenous communities in Kampung Kuala Tahan and Kampung Pagi (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). As one interviewee noted, “Instagram worked best for visual content and stories that involved more personal, action-driven appeals. Facebook was better suited for updates and calls for donations” (Informant 4, August 2021). This emphasizes the importance of real-time impact in visual content, which tends to attract higher engagement during crises.

In contrast, although images were the most frequently used content type (67.07%), they did not perform as well as videos. While images are valuable for information dissemination, they tend to support one-way communication, which is less effective in fostering engagement (Grunig et al., 2006; Tam et al., 2022; Valentini, 2021). For example, a Facebook

post featuring images of families receiving aid reported that the Food Bank Relief programme had distributed basic food assistance to 300 families, yet it attracted only modest attention (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). As one interviewee observed, “Static images don’t seem to generate the same level of emotional connection as our video content” (Informant 2, July 2021).

Similarly, live broadcasts, although offering real-time interaction, showed relatively low engagement due to factors like timing or insufficient promotion. A Facebook live broadcast showing the behind-the-scenes of a meal distribution event failed to draw significant interaction. As one informant remarked, “Live videos are great for engagement, but you need to promote them ahead of time to get people to tune in” (Informant 5, August 2021). Live content can be effective but requires careful planning to maximize participation (Grunig et al., 2006; Tam et al., 2022).

Posters, though widely used (14.33% of total content), had lower engagement rates, especially on platforms like Twitter where content moves quickly. For instance, a post which reads, “Let’s make a difference in other people’s lives. Your donations really can make a difference.” accompanied by a digital poster, garnered limited interaction (Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia, 2021). As one respondent noted, “Posters don’t hold people’s attention as much as videos or live streams. On fast-paced platforms, they get lost in the shuffle” (Informant 3, July 2021). This supports the idea that visual content needs to be tailored to both the platform and audience behavior for maximum engagement (Guo & Saxton, 2014).

The findings demonstrate that tailoring visual content to the platform and message is crucial. Videos, particularly those showing the impact of donations or real-time updates, were the most effective in driving engagement. Meanwhile, static images and posters, while useful for sharing information, were less effective in fostering two-way communication. To enhance stakeholder relationships, NGOs like YFBM should prioritize dynamic content, such as videos and live interactions, which offer more opportunities for emotional engagement and interactive dialogue.

As supported by interview data, sentiment analysis and content analysis, incorporating interactive elements into visual content can boost engagement across platforms. Overall, the sentiment analysis (Figure 5) reveals distinct platform-based emotional patterns. Although certain

visual content types achieved high engagement, both engagement and sentiment levels were highly dependent on platform characteristics. Instagram, with its visual-centric design, consistently elicited stronger emotional responses—particularly for videos (0.20) and images (0.30). In contrast, Twitter’s text-heavy nature corresponded with weaker sentiment across all visual formats, including videos (0.00) and posters (0.00). Facebook demonstrated moderate emotional resonance, with the highest sentiment observed for posters (0.10) and images (0.07). These findings underscore the need to align content strategies with platform-specific affordances to optimize both emotional impact and audience engagement.

**Table 4a.**

*Coding Scheme Definitions and Frequency of Codes on Visual Content*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Definition of the Code</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
3. Visual Content		
3.1 Images	post includes one or more images that are used to convey the message of the post	67.07
3.2 live Broadcast	post includes live broadcast related to the Food Bank Campaign	1.22
3.3 Poster	post includes a designed poster used to convey a message or information related to the Food Bank Campaign	14.33
3.4 Video	post includes videos as a form of visual content	0.30
	Total	100

**Table 4b.**

*Engagement Rates of Codes on Visual Content*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Facebook Engage- ment Rates (%)</b>	<b>Insta- gram Engage- ment Rates (%)</b>	<b>Twitter Engage- ment Rates (%)</b>	<b>Average Engage- ment Rates (%)</b>
3. Visual Content				
3.1 Images	0.47	1.68	0.56	0.91
3.2 Live Broadcast	0.36	0.60	0.00	0.32

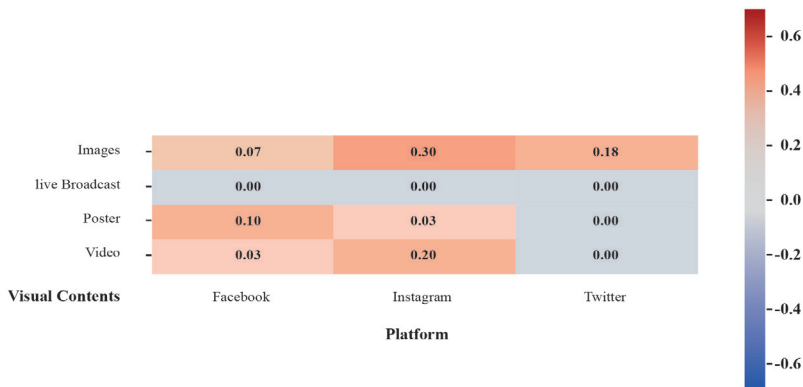
Coding Options	Facebook Engagement Rates (%)	Instagram Engagement Rates (%)	Twitter Engagement Rates (%)	Average Engagement Rates (%)
3.3 Poster	0.48	1.45	0.00	0.64
3.4 Video	0.67	1.67	0.65	1.00

### Engaged Parties

According to Cheney et al. (2010), strategic communication focuses on building long-term relationships between organizations and their audiences through continuous engagement. This aligns with the findings from the YFBM case, where NGOs (25.17%) and corporations (20.47%) were the most frequently mentioned stakeholders in social media posts (Table 5a). These posts often highlighted partnerships with organizations such as the Federal Territory Youth Council, Mango

**Figure 5.**

*Heatmap of Sentiment Scores for Visual Content Codes Across Platforms*



Note. Cell values represent the average VADER compound sentiment scores of public comments associated with posts coded under each visual content category across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Scores range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ , where negative values indicate more negative sentiment, 0 indicates neutral sentiment, and positive values indicate more positive sentiment. Warmer colours indicate higher positive sentiment scores, whereas cooler colours indicate lower, less positive, or negative sentiment scores.

Chutney, and Air Selangor, serving as a communication strategy to build trust and strengthen relationships. For instance, YFBM collaborated with Sahabat Jariah Malaysia and Yayasan Kebajikan Negara to distribute essential supplies to 300 families in Kedah. This underscores the role of transparent communication in maintaining trust, especially during crises.

Posts engaging potential activists, including donors, volunteers, and grassroots communities, made up the third-largest group of social media content, with grassroots communities being the most engaged (2.09%). This is consistent with the new civic activism landscape shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, where grassroots groups took the lead in providing mutual aid, filling gaps left by the government and traditional charities (Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2020). As noted by one interviewee, “Many grassroots groups approached us directly, even from overseas, showing interest in donating and supporting our efforts.” This high level of engagement from grassroots groups underscores their critical role in civic activism during crises, reinforcing the notion from PR Excellence Theory that effective communication builds trust and long-term commitment from diverse stakeholders.

Furthermore, while underprivileged communities were not as actively engaged in initiating communication on social media, they used these platforms as vital resources to seek help. As indicated in the social media analysis, particularly in the comments, these communities frequently used platforms like Facebook and Instagram to inquire about campaigns and request assistance. This aligns with Grunig et al. (2006) and Tam et al.’s (2022) assertion that effective communication should not only engage stakeholders but also facilitate inclusive dialogue in addressing the needs of all stakeholders, including marginalized groups.

While grassroots groups showed high engagement, NGOs, corporations, and potential activists also played important roles in supporting civic activism, although their engagement rates were somewhat lower. The study also highlighted relatively low engagement from government entities and underprivileged communities, which may be attributed to a lack of government support or reluctance from vulnerable populations to engage publicly on social media. These differences in engagement become even more meaningful when examined alongside sentiment analysis results (Figure 6), which reveal how audiences emotionally responded to different stakeholder groups. For instance, grassroots communities not only recorded the highest

engagement (2.09%) but also received the strongest emotional sentiment on Facebook (0.40), indicating not just participation, but emotionally resonant support. Non-profit organizations, though widely mentioned, generated a particularly strong sentiment on Twitter (0.50), suggesting deeper audience appreciation within specific platform cultures. In contrast, volunteers, while critical to campaign delivery, elicited minimal sentiment ( $\leq 0.03$ ), reflecting a potential gap in emotionally-driven storytelling and representation. Similarly, corporations and government entities showed relatively flat sentiment responses across platforms, which may signal transactional perceptions rather than emotionally compelling involvement.

This integration of sentiment and engagement data enhances our understanding of which stakeholder mentions translated into meaningful emotional responses, not just visibility. It affirms that effective civic activism communication requires both reach and emotional resonance, echoing PR Excellence Theory’s emphasis on two-way, inclusive, and emotionally engaging strategies to build trust and long-term relationships during crises.

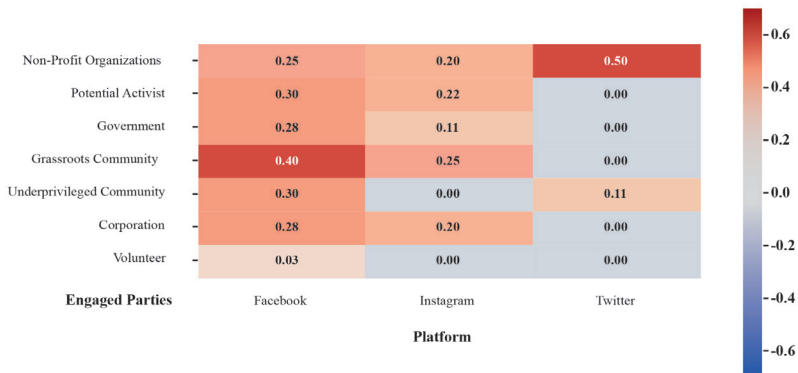
**Table 5a.**

*Coding Scheme Definitions and Frequency of Codes on Engaged Parties*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Definition of the Code</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
4. Engaged Parties		
4.1 Non-Profit Organizations	at least one non-profit organization mentioned in the post	25.17
4.2 Potential Activist	at least one potential activist, such as potential volunteer or donor mentioned in the post	18.46
4.3 Government	at least one government entity or stakeholder mentioned in the post	10.40
4.4 Grassroots Community	at least one grassroots community mentioned in the post	10.74
4.5 Underprivileged Community	at least one underprivileged community mentioned in the post	10.07
4.6 Corporation	at least one corporation mentioned in the post	20.47
4.7 Volunteer	at least one volunteer mentioned in the post	4.70
	Total	100

**Table 5b.***Engagement Rates of Codes on Engaged Parties*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Facebook Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Instagram Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Twitter Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Average Engagement Rates (%)</b>
4. Engaged Parties				
4.1 Non-Profit Organizations	0.28	2.73	0.23	1.08
4.2 Potential Activist	0.43	2.82	0.94	1.39
4.3 Government	0.71	0.92	0.70	0.78
4.4 Grassroots Community	1.76	4.50	0.00	2.09
4.5 Underprivileged Community	0.00	2.17	0.47	0.88
4.6 Corporation	0.27	2.71	0.00	0.99
4.7 Volunteer	0.17	2.40	0.00	0.86

**Figure 6.***Heatmap of Sentiment Scores for Engaged Parties Codes Across Platforms*

Note. Cell values represent the average VADER compound sentiment scores of public comments associated with posts coded under each engaged party category across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Scores range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ , where negative values indicate more negative sentiment,  $0$  indicates neutral sentiment, and positive values indicate more positive sentiment. Warmer colours indicate higher positive sentiment scores, whereas cooler colours indicate lower, less positive, or negative sentiment scores.

## Engagement Tactics

Social media's interactive features enable NGOs to build stronger stakeholder relationships through dialogue and two-way communication, fostering trust, participation, and sustainable collaboration (Barger, 2011; Grunig et al., 2006; Hallahan et al., 2007; Tam et al., 2022; Valentini, 2021; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). In this context, the analysis reveals that YFBM leveraged two primary tactics for engagement: external links (45.34%) and hashtags (39.13%) (Table 6a). These tools, though simple, can be effective in engaging both partners and civic activists. By incorporating external links such as WhatsApp, website links, and QR codes, YFBM enabled easier access to information, facilitating donations and volunteer sign-ups. The integration of campaign hashtags with popular pandemic-related hashtags such as #kitajagakita, #Whiteflag, and #foodbankmalaysia—further amplified the organization's visibility and connected it with broader conversations and movements. This aligns with the PR Excellence Theory (Grunig et al., 2002), which emphasizes that effective communication strategies involve engaging stakeholders in ongoing dialogue through accessible and inclusive channels. This tactical effectiveness is further supported by sentiment analysis (Diagram 7), which reveals that posts utilizing hashtags generated the strongest emotional response on Twitter (0.40). This suggests that hashtags not only broadened reach but also stirred meaningful emotional engagement—likely due to their association with widely shared narratives and trending social causes. In contrast, external links elicited milder but positive sentiment on Facebook (0.11) and Instagram (0.15), showing that while primarily functional, they still contributed to user appreciation by facilitating access to helpful resources. These insights demonstrate that high-performing tactics like hashtags can serve both strategic reach and emotional connection when tied to resonant movements or community concerns.

However, while YFBM utilized these engagement tactics, the study also found significant shortcomings in its feedback and response rate, which was just 0.73% (Table 6b). While the development of strategic communication has led to the perception and conceptualization of strategic communication as a process that can originate from bottom-up and not always top-down, asymmetrical, one-sided, and managerial (Torp, 2014), the low response rate undermines opportunities for YFBM to build stronger relationships with potential activists, underprivileged communities, and other stakeholders. Several social media comments

expressed frustration over the lack of replies, with users posting questions like “How can I get help from your campaign?” or “No one has replied to my message.” These insights from the social media analysis suggest that YFBM missed opportunities to engage effectively with its audience, particularly those seeking assistance, thereby weakening the potential for two-way symmetrical communication. Effective communication involves not only broadcasting information but also engaging in participatory dialogues to address stakeholders’ needs (Grunig et al., 2006). In the context of the social media era, Tam et al. (2022) further highlight the importance of real-time feedback and reciprocal engagement to foster trust and inclusivity. In this case, the underprivileged communities, while not as proactive in advocacy, still used social media to inquire about help and campaign details. A more interactive and responsive approach could have better addressed their needs and reinforced trust between the organization and its audience. YFBM’s minimal interaction in responding to inquiries highlights the need for NGOs to adopt more robust feedback mechanisms that ensure timely and meaningful exchanges. This is further supported by sentiment analysis findings (Figure 7), which show that posts tagged under “Feedback and Response” elicited a relatively positive sentiment on Instagram (0.25), indicating that audiences reacted well when the organization engaged in dialogue—though such interactions were limited and inconsistently applied.

Despite the gaps in engagement, NGOs like YFBM demonstrated expertise in leveraging social media to connect with corporations and other NGOs, using engagement tactics like external links and hashtags. The collaborative relationships formed with corporate entities, such as Cocoland, strengthened the organization’s credibility and facilitated efficient resource allocation. Corporations, in turn, benefited from these partnerships by enhancing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) profiles, guided by the NGOs’ expertise in efficiently utilizing donations. This symbiotic relationship underscores the role of NGOs in organizing communities and resources, especially during times of crisis, according to the principles of PR Excellence Theory.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of strategic engagement tactics on social media, such as the use of external links and hashtags, for building trust and facilitating action. However, to fully harness the potential of these platforms, YFBM must improve its feedback mechanisms and responsiveness, as these are essential

components of effective two-way communication. By enhancing its engagement strategies, YFBM could strengthen its relationships with grassroots communities, volunteers, corporations, and other stakeholders, ensuring the long-term sustainability of its civic activism efforts.

**Table 6a.**

*Coding Scheme Definitions and Frequency of Engagement Tactics*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Definition of the Code</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
5. Engagement Tactics		
5.1 External Link	including an external link in the post to achieve the intended objective	45.34
5.2 Hashtag	the use of hashtags in social media posts to increase visibility and engagement	39.13
5.3 Pin Location	the practice of tagging the location of a non-profit organization or an event in a social media post	1.24
5.4 Engaging Content	content that is designed to stimulate TA interest, and encourage them to interact with the content	8.70
5.5 Feedback and Response	Adding comments to the post as a means of interaction, such as answering inquiries, providing support, and asking questions	5.59
	Total	100

**Table 6b.**

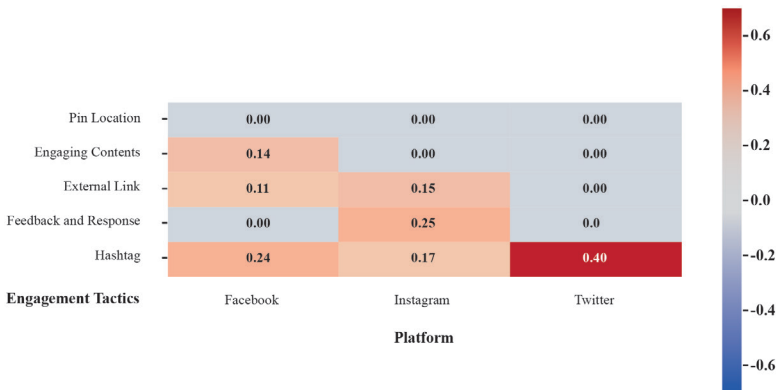
*Engagement Rates of Codes on Engagement Tactics*

<b>Coding Options</b>	<b>Facebook Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Instagram Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Twitter Engagement Rates (%)</b>	<b>Average Engagement Rates (%)</b>
5. Engagement Tactics				
5.1 External Link	0.45	2.37	0.75	1.19
5.2 Hashtag	0.44	1.86	0.70	1.00
5.3 Pin Location	0.42	0.00	0.00	0.14

Coding Options	Facebook Engagement Rates (%)	Instagram Engagement Rates (%)	Twitter Engagement Rates (%)	Average Engagement Rates (%)
5.4 Engaging Content	0.35	0.00	0.00	0.12
5.5 Feedback and Response	1.56	0.64	0.00	0.73

**Figure 7.**

*Heatmap of Sentiment Scores for Engagement Tactics Codes Across Platforms*



Note. Cell values represent the average VADER compound sentiment scores of public comments associated with posts coded under each engagement tactic across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Scores range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ , where negative values indicate more negative sentiment, 0 indicates neutral sentiment, and positive values indicate more positive sentiment. Warmer colours indicate higher positive sentiment scores, whereas cooler colours indicate lower, less positive, or negative sentiment scores.

## Conclusion

The study emphasizes the crucial role social media played in fostering civic activism during the pandemic, particularly due to the shift in information-seeking behaviors aimed at maintaining physical distancing (Abbas et al., 2021; Lelisho et al., 2023; Youngs, 2020), as demonstrated through YFBM’s Food Bank Campaign. The findings reveal that

the level of public engagement varied across topics, visual content, engagement tactics, and the different parties involved. These variations matter because they highlight how specific strategies, such as using collaborative posts, videos, and tailored content, effectively fostered emotional connections and collective action, whereas less interactive or one-way communication strategies fell short of engaging audiences meaningfully. The integration of sentiment analysis further deepens these insights by revealing the emotional quality of public response. Content involving grassroots communities and hashtag-driven posts generated the strongest emotional resonance, particularly on Facebook and Twitter, underscoring their potential to activate civic sentiment and participation. In contrast, posts related to underprivileged communities and volunteers elicited weak emotional responses, indicating a communication gap in reaching and resonating with these groups. Feedback and response posts, though limited in number, produced relatively strong positive sentiment on Instagram (0.25), affirming that audiences valued interactive, two-way communication. However, these moments of genuine engagement were inconsistently applied across platforms, limiting their broader impact. Together, these findings suggest that while YFBM successfully amplified visibility, it did not consistently cultivate emotionally engaging, inclusive dialogue across its stakeholder base.

While message framing—such as emphasizing urgency, solidarity, or partnership—contributed to engagement, its impact should not be overgeneralized. The data suggest that framing was effective primarily when aligned with real-time needs and emotional appeals, particularly in action-oriented posts. However, framing alone was insufficient to drive engagement without complementary factors such as interactivity, timeliness, and platform alignment.

From a theoretical perspective, the application of Grunig's PR Excellence Theory provides a deeper understanding of how strategic communication influences stakeholder engagement. The two-way symmetrical model, which promotes dialogue and mutual understanding between organizations and their stakeholders, aligns with YFBM's approach to transparency and relationship-building. In addition, Strategic Communication Theory reinforces this perspective by framing communication as a purposeful, coordinated effort undertaken by organizations to support their overarching goals. Rather than viewing communication as a reactive or isolated activity, the theory

positions it as an integrated function that contributes to mission-driven outcomes. In the context of civic activism, this approach encourages NGOs to develop communication strategies that not only inform but also engage and mobilize stakeholders in line with their social objectives. However, the findings revealed a gap in fully employing two-way communication, leading to missed opportunities for engaging underprivileged communities and grassroots groups effectively. Addressing this limitation through reciprocal communication could enable NGOs to strengthen relationships with these stakeholders, amplifying the campaign's inclusivity and reach. By doing so, NGOs could transform passive audiences into active participants, ensuring broader representation and engagement during civic activism initiatives.

Practically, the findings indicate that successful social media strategies during crises require dynamic and platform-specific content to maximize engagement. For instance, Instagram's focus on visual storytelling fostered emotional connections, while Facebook facilitated community discussions, and Twitter excelled in advocacy and real-time awareness through hashtags. These platform-specific differences highlight the importance of tailoring content and strategies to the unique characteristics of each platform. Additionally, engaging tools like hashtags and external links enhanced visibility, but their effectiveness was limited when unaccompanied by genuine dialogue and responsiveness. The study emphasizes that NGOs must prioritize interactive communication, such as responding promptly to inquiries and incorporating audience feedback, to build trust and strengthen stakeholder relationships.

Moving forward, NGOs can enhance their civic activism campaigns by applying these lessons, focusing on interactive and inclusive strategies that leverage the strengths of social media platforms. Sustaining the momentum of civic activism post-pandemic will require maintaining engagement through dynamic content, fostering reciprocal relationships, and building collaborative partnerships with diverse stakeholders. Future campaigns should also explore innovative approaches to engage marginalized communities, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs addressed.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The researchers of this study have identified and acknowledged several limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings. Firstly, the

subjectivity of content analysis is inevitable, and may limit the objective representation of social media content. Secondly, the sample size of online content collected is limited to only one organization's social media platform, which may not reflect the broader picture of social media communication strategies in other organizations or campaigns. Thirdly, the study only captured the views and reactions of active social media users and not those who were passive viewers of online content, and thus, may not reflect the complete picture of social media engagement. Furthermore, since the researchers only retrospectively collected the original social media posts, some users may have deleted their posts during the collection period, leading to a loss of information. Finally, the findings may not be generalizable to other social media campaigns and networks, as the cultural context of Malaysia and unique nature of the Food Bank Campaign may have influenced the results. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand the broader implications of social media communication strategies in the context of different campaigns and cultural settings. Specifically, future studies should explore how evolving social media platforms and shifting cultural dynamics can be leveraged to foster more inclusive and effective civic engagement. This would help NGOs remain agile and resilient in an ever-changing digital landscape, ensuring their ability to adapt and sustain civic activism efforts in diverse scenarios and crisis.

### **Ethic Statement**

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC), University of Malaya (Reference No. UM.TNC2/UMREC\_2218). For enquiries regarding the ethics approval process at UMREC, contact: [umrec@um.edu.my](mailto:umrec@um.edu.my); Tel: +603-7967 2369; and see the official UM Research Ethics webpage. The researchers disclose their identity and institutional affiliation in the author information page. This research received no external funding.

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