Organisational Identity Construction on Social Media Amidst COVID-19: The Case of a Fast-Food Chain in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has profoundly changed the way big brands communicate on social media and it is crucial for them to redefine their identities online for businesses to survive during trying times. This qualitative study examines the discourse strategies adopted by a popular fast-food chain in Malaysia, namely McDonald's, in its postings on a social media platform during the pandemic. Through a hybrid analytical framework consisting of Critical Discourse Analysis and Politeness Theory, 79 postings on Facebook related to COVID-19 have been identified, coded and then examined using thematic analysis. The analysis found that McDonald's adopted colloquialism, code-switching and linguistic politeness as its relational and localization strategies in communicating on Facebook. Further analysis also suggests that the organisation has utilised the social media platform consistently not only to keep the business afloat but also as an opportunity in expressing solidarity with and showing empathy towards Malaysians (for example, through COVID-19 hashtags like #safewithmekdi and #staysafe), creating a positive online organisational identity during the pandemic. This critical discourse study highlights the importance of altruistic values and prosocial behaviour in an organisation and hopes to shed light on the prominent role of linguistic strategies in online communication especially in managing a crisis.

Keywords: *Business communication, critical discourse analysis, linguistic politeness, organisational identity, COVID-19.*

INTRODUCTION

Ever since its arrival in Malaysia in December 2019, COVID-19 has changed the way we lead our lives and this includes the way we communicate with each other, especially on social media platforms. While many businesses, big or small, have been forced to close doors due to the hard impact of COVID-19, social media has been heavily relied upon during these dire circumstances by many businesses to survive. With many economies worldwide going through hard times (OECD, 2020), the need for social distancing was affecting even the best-performing restaurants (Root, 2020), and a possibility of the Malaysian economy heading towards technical recession (Murugiah, 2020) would be absolutely devastating. Therefore, it has been emphasised that businesses should embrace creative marketing strategies by adopting electronic and social media platforms to remain flexible (Mason et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2020).

The utilisation of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic is relatively one of the most effective ways in disseminating reliable information and reaching out to others when most people were forced to stay mainly at home especially during lockdowns or quarantines (Uran et al., 2022). According to Mejova and Kalimeri (2020), Facebook has been deemed as

one of the internet giants that has contributed quite significantly to global advertising. Therefore, it is not surprising for McDonald's Malaysia to rely on Facebook as one of its social media platforms for advertising and marketing purposes. For instance, McDonald's Malaysia has been quite successful in attracting followers and expanding its customer base due to always-on campaigns on their Facebook page leading to millions of app downloads and coupon redemptions. Therefore, the marketing strategy adopted by McDonald's Malaysia through Facebook can be regarded as significantly fruitful so far (Duprey, 2019; Dilip et al., 2021), making McDonald's a valid choice for us to study.

However, with the pandemic being a recent and transformative phenomenon, limited scholarly discourse exists on its influence on business communication, particularly on social media platforms, both during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic era. This is especially relevant within the Malaysian context. In this regard, issues related to discourse strategies utilised on social media platforms to sustain businesses especially in these trying times have also not been given the attention required and therefore, critical discourse studies such as this one should be carried out since it may be able to reveal the complexities behind this unique communication process and suggest the manners in which language can evolve and change in fulfilling the current pressing needs and contextual demands. Not only will it lead to more understanding of these issues further for the field of sociolinguistics, it will also lead us to make sense of the language choices and strategies behind online communication and marketing in businesses, which may suggest an implication of effective discourse towards public health.

We have also selected McDonald's to study not only because the golden arch is known as a house-hold brand in Malaysia, but also because it has been declared as one of the top five organisations in Malaysia that have been identified as having managed the crisis well and putting the customers first. This is following a survey conducted by a market research firm Ipsos, involving over 100 local brands and with 4,000 Malaysians polled for this purpose (Lim, 2021). Unlike other similar popular brands, McDonald's has been the focus for many studies that looked at various aspects of the organisation but primarily because it has managed to not only maintain its brand's global presence but also renew and uplift its identity time and time again in Malaysia and worldwide with its innovative and effective marketing strategies and global expansion plans (Edeh et al., 2021; Rajawat et al., 2020; Mozammel, 2019; Mujtaba & Patel, 2007; Vignali, 2001) and the brand was seen to keep blooming even during the pandemic. However, the language aspects behind McDonald's successful strategies have not been given its deserving attention in these studies. Therefore, we would like to examine the discourse strategies that have been adopted by the organisation in its social media to make it possible not just for the big brand to stay afloat in the challenging times of the pandemic, but also to continue winning the hearts of Malaysian consumers.

In this study, by looking at a unique dataset of Facebook postings by McDonald's Malaysia during the pandemic, we seek to explore these research questions: 1) How is McDonald's Malaysia's online identity constructed in its Facebook postings during the COVID-19 pandemic? and 2) What are the discourse strategies adopted by McDonald's Malaysia in social media during the pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Social Media in Business Communication

There are numerous studies looking at social media as a powerful tool in communicating important information related to COVID-19 (Reddy & Gupta, 2020; González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). However, social media has not only been found to play a prominent role in disseminating health information but also in ensuring the success of a business and one way it can do this is through the development of online presence of a brand (Appel et al., 2020; Antúnez et al., 2021). Mason et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of social media in sustaining businesses and that COVID-19 has forced businesses to understand consumer's social media behaviour and decision-making process as predetermined factors before making their marketing moves. Their findings have implied that social media is seen as to be valuable for businesses in building a good brand image and which can influence consumers' brand perceptions and decision-making quite considerably. Businesses have to now consider whatever opportunities that might work in trying to survive during the pandemic and one potentially promising way to win consumers' trust would be by revitalising their strategies on social media platforms (Omar et al., 2020).

Social media provides a platform for businesses and consumers to communicate and interact at the most intense level (Tam & Kim, 2019). It has been found that social media or online access in general brings forth more possibilities or opportunities compared to conventional platforms, and it continues to redefine the way we communicate (Gündüz, 2017). The content created and shared, whether in the form of images, videos or information is accessible to consumers. Besides, information, personal thoughts, opinions, emotions, and any form of content are now within reach as social media allows public connections between users, whether they are known and unknown to one another, and the sharing on social media is believed to have been enhanced to accommodate the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic many companies and organisations resorted to online platforms in reaching customers and audiences (Syaifullah et al., 2021). It has been found that the use of social media among organisations has grown and is considered as one of their online communication strategies (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017). As discourse is regarded as a speech be it in a form of oral or written text (Klemenova & Ereshchenko, 2020), discourse strategies in social media refer to the strategies used in speech (or written) communication through social networking websites (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017), which is exceedingly prevalent during any crisis. It has also been emphasised that the prominent role of Facebook in connecting people during the pandemic is undeniable (Harris, 2020). Inevitably, it has become a platform which not only gathers people but is also a centre of information. Feeds are updated with latest information related to the virus, ensuring that it rules out its sole role as a common platform and communicates and facilitates better opportunities to build communities.

An average of 92% of companies prefer social media, in particular, Facebook as a tool for marketing strategies (Rodríguez & Fernandez, 2017), which is due to its role in spreading interactive information to users and allowing them to obtain and disseminate details. They added that posts on Facebook will influence the size of the audience, specifically, the measurement of a company's activity on Facebook will determine customers' engagement towards companies. This is confirmed by Kusumastuti and Putritamara (2022) who found that optimising social media engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute towards

companies performing better due to the marketing strategies adopted. There has also been a great focus on how the pandemic has influenced the marketing strategies of organisations to change towards offering more genuine and authentic approaches via social media platforms (He & Harris, 2020; Omar et al., 2020). Therefore, social media platforms such as Facebook play a crucial role in keeping engagement between parties on condition that messages can be delivered and understood.

Online Organisational Identity and What It Means for Businesses
Organisational identity, according to He and Brown (2013), can be understood as a result of communication process and is crucial in determining the organisational identification that can lead towards favourable outcomes and that it is uprooted by many studies adopting theories of hegemonic discourse and social enterprise (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010). It has also been reiterated that organisational identity narratives evolve over time and that the process of identification can bind people together (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; He & Brown, 2013). It has been long understood that the establishment of an identity for an organisation is pivotal to the engagement with consumers. With a variety of social media platforms being identified based on its profile or content, it always goes back to fulfilling the targeted consumers' preferences, which aim for quick, useful, and up-to-date information. As much as social media platforms are designed to have different dimensions of engagements, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers are pushed towards existing and living in the social media world as opposed to the physical one and this phenomenon is called being in the omni-social world. With regards to this, Appel et al. (2020) have identified omni-social presence as one of the themes that has surfaced in recent online environments which they have claimed as carrying a crucial role in determining our social media landscape in the immediate and near future.

It is considered a necessity to diversify the engagement with consumers as it reflects the businesses' ability to manage unconventional circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed by Lim (2021), many businesses have reconsidered their capabilities to stay aligned with its values and at the same time, to address its social purpose. Based on a survey by Ipsos, honesty in communication has been identified as the key element to a good crisis management. In terms of communication, it is important for these businesses to be transparent in the most current and creative ways to address the needs throughout the pandemic. Virtual environment can empower the shared platforms for people to have an aligned mindset by putting aside the formality (Gündüz, 2017).

Businesses have taken tremendous steps to explore the use of social media as part of the strategies to expand their consumer reach. When commitment is reflected on any reachable platform, the businesses are likely to have a straightforward transition and remain relevant. Besides, as established by Gündüz (2017), people need one another to build an identity and experience a sense of assurance. It is because to be attached to a group with similar sentiment is a bond of solidarity, whether in the physical world or virtual communications. Similar to a study on Facebook postings by Antúnez et al. (2021), majority of the businesses which associated COVID-19 pandemic on their posts are able to generate a positive impact on the brand along with its image. Despite the categorization of products, when businesses commiserate the way of conveying ideas and making efforts to contribute to the society, consumers are more confident and inclined to purchase the products. Conclusively, the effort taken to acknowledge the struggles has assisted the trust among consumers and the communities. While all the literature discussed made excellent points and

observations especially on the usefulness of social media for effective business communication and online organisational presence, the lack of empirical evidence concerning these issues from a linguistic or pragmatic point of view especially in managing a crisis (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; He & Brown, 2013; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010) is apparent and therefore should be explored further.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Identity

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), being an established field, has been advocated by Fairclough (1995) with his examination of power and hegemonic discourse, Van Dijk (2008) with his focus on cognitive and social theories and Van Leeuwen (2008) with the representation of social actors and among many others. Ever since its debut in the academic sphere some 30 years ago, it has kept on growing and been well-utilised by many researchers, not only from linguistics or the humanities, but also from other disciplines interested in examining critical discourse. This is due to its interdisciplinary nature in viewing discourse as a social practice and being contextually driven, but which mainly deals with hegemonic discourse, with the questions of hope or hopelessness being the central issue, and catering for both positive (Bartlett, 2009), and oppressive discourse (Stoddart, 2007). A new trajectory of CDA, Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA), has been advocated by Martin (2004), emphasising on highlighting the positive sides of discourse and celebrating success stories that elevate the society rather than scrutinising discriminative discourse at no end, which is rightfully regarded as a progressive idea towards finding better solutions when it comes to addressing hegemonic discourse and its negative implications.

A considerable number of studies with CDA as its core framework examine the issue of power and identity (Van Dijk, 2008). There are a variety of specifications on how CDA is recognised and associated with a society, whether in written or spoken form. It is further explained that in the formation of an identity, the use of language and the geographical aspect are interrelated with one another, in constructing an established direction (Alméciga & Yesid, 2013). When a group of people or a community utilise language to convey content in a context, in return, it opens up possibilities for them to achieve common interests. Similar view was reiterated by Zotzmann and O'Regan (2016) in terms of the use of language, which is perceived on how it is used to reflect on a situation and the resources it is associated with and that it is nearly impossible for individuals to associate themselves with a meaningless identity. Despite differences through individual preferences, these people seek for tangibility and through linguistic, culture, economy and other elements, they are likely to have access to their identification.

CDA is a critical approach linking both theory and methodology together and is therefore very useful in analysing organisational identity (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010). It leads to more complex representations of interactions and with the ability of individuals to gain perpetual information, CDA helps to straighten the relationship between reality and the representation of fact and fiction. Indeed, it is agreed that CDA is necessary in order to analyse a society, either looking at individuals or organisations, specifically in relation to its discourse of daily practices. As justified by Azizan et al. (2020), who adopted both CDA and PDA in their study focusing on the Malaysian context, people rely on one another, and they are mostly inclined to be part of a collective society in materialising positive changes by examining the relation between positive discourse approaches and linguistic strategies and its effectiveness to materialise the power to make a difference. This study is therefore aligned with other similar critical discourse studies as it is not solely to understand the role of language in

communication but to also have a solid ground in uplifting the desired goal among people and to initiate positive changes in a society through an examination of business online communication, which is the gap in the literature this study tries to address.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Process of Inclusion

This qualitative case study approach was carried out by looking at 79 entries on Facebook posted by the official account of McDonald's Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic (from January 2020 until July 2021). This account is labelled as public and therefore, the ethical consideration has been catered for as no consent is necessary since the public data is there to be extracted and analysed by researchers (Franz et al., 2019), and we have also taken the liberty to treat it as it is without any intervention from our part. We also ensured that the integrity of the data and our objectivity towards it were maintained and safeguarded throughout the research process. After potential entries were identified, the whole original texts were then manually extracted (Franz et al., 2019), copied and then pasted in a Google document for easy perusal and close scrutiny.

We also based our inclusion of data in terms of the following criteria: 1) The postings identified were posted on McDonald's Malaysia Facebook page during the pandemic (between January 2020 to July 2021), 2) The postings must be or contain words or phrases related to COVID-19 either directly or indirectly, 3) Only the texts of the postings will be considered for analysis including the hashtags.

Sampling Method and Data Selection Process

McDonald's is a well-known and popular fast-food chain. In Malaysia, despite having fewer outlets than other popular fast-food chains such as Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), McDonald's has a stronger social media presence. On Facebook, McDonald's holds the highest number of likes among fast-food restaurants in Malaysia, with 89 million compared to KFC's 59 million likes, thus making it an appropriate platform to obtain postings to examine. Additionally, the brand's frequent activity and huge following on Facebook also makes McDonald's an ideal case to study (Edeh et al., 2021) as well as for examining discourse strategies adopted by a popular fast-food chain in Malaysia during the pandemic.

Through a purposive sampling method which includes keying in keywords related to COVID-19 (e.g. McDonald's, COVID-19, MCO) and going through the postings generated from the official McDonald's Malaysia fan Facebook page, mcdonaldsmalaysia, potential postings for analysis (both in English and Malay) were then identified. Identifying the Facebook postings was carried out through keyword search and we have utilised Facepager, a software that allows users to extract data from social media platforms. However, to enable it to extract data from a particular page or profile of a social media platform, the unique ID of the page must be identified and used as one of the inputs for the software to process. The user can then customise the items for Facepager to retrieve from the social media platforms, such as postings, number of likes and reactions to the postings, and comments. This is very useful since it can help researchers in deciding and retrieving the kind of data that might be the most appropriate for their study. These were the important steps carried out and the customised data was then successfully retrieved for our analysis. The steps of the data extraction are as follows:
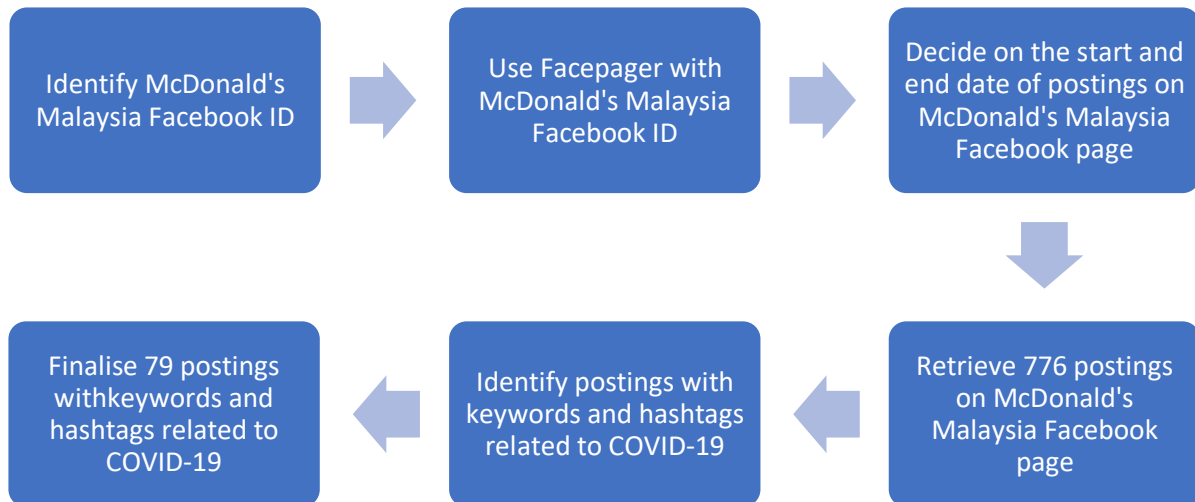
Figure 1: The process of posting retrieval from McDonald's Malaysia Facebook page

To carry out the study, the software was used to retrieve 776 Facebook postings from the official McDonald's Malaysia page dated from 1st January 2020 till 26th July 2021. Then, the postings were further filtered based on keywords related to COVID-19, which consists of 122 unique words such as COVID-19, MCO, frontliners and cashless. To ensure an accurate filtration process, we tried to be as comprehensive as possible when deciding on the COVID-19 related keywords. Additionally, hashtags, which turn words or phrases into clickable links in posts, were also used in identifying COVID-19 related postings. For this study, hashtags appeared in both Malay and English, for instance, #*KitaJagaKita* (wetakecareofeachother) and #staysafe, which were identified as well. Finally, 79 postings were identified as the most appropriate ones in addressing the research questions and to be examined for this study, and they were found to be posted between 19 March 2020 to 26 July 2021.

Out of 776 postings posted by McDonald's Malaysia from January 2020 until July 2021 (about a year and seven months of COVID-19 period), 79 postings have been identified and filtered as being COVID-19 related, which makes 10.2% out of the overall postings throughout that period. We also considered the features of postings that were the most appropriate for this study through the keyword search process. Hence, other postings that did not make the cut are mostly pure advertisements, announcements and repetitions of product or service sharing by McDonald's Malaysia that did not have any relations either directly or indirectly to the situation of COVID-19, and these therefore, made them irrelevant in addressing our research questions.

Thematic Analysis

We have decided to use thematic analysis in dealing with the dataset acquired particularly in assisting us in the coding process and finding the themes of the postings. Each dataset provides the analytical corpus for the basis of analysis. The second stage involves part of the process of content assessment (Rossolatos, 2014) where the data was carefully reviewed. They were then grouped according to general and specific themes that may be the most apparent in the representation of the data, as well as in catering towards answering the research questions. We adopted Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis in dealing and analysing the data. The six steps as outlined by them are as follows: 1) Familiarisation, 2) Developing initials, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Thematic review, 5) Thematic definition, 6) Write-up.

The Analytical Framework
In this small-scale qualitative case study, we have adopted Critical Discourse Analysis and Politeness Theory as our hybrid analytical framework and positioned it within the broad sociocultural contexts. Taking Fairclough's (1995) notion of power within and behind discourse in hegemonic texts as a social practice, the micro and macro analyses of the data have been carried out. We followed Bartlett's (2009) approach of positive discourse analysis or PDA (which we regard as being under the umbrella of CDA) which champions positive discourse that works as a solution rather than scrutinising oppressive discourse at no end). Bartlett (2009) also employed Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) established by Halliday (1978) with its concerns of meaning through three types of metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual, which idea was followed by this study as well. We also adopted Bourdieu's (1991) idea of habitus and symbolic power (with soft power and unique social dispositions on the norms, values, and attitude). In terms of the Politeness Theory, we followed Holmes and Stubbe's (2003) stance on looking at power relations and politeness devices through a pragmatic approach in accomplishing communicative goals, but in this case, in business and electronic contexts of an organisation braving the perils of war against a pandemic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Occurrences of Facebook Postings Related To COVID-19 By McDonald's Malaysia
We have looked at specific times during the months (1 - 14, 15 - end of month), which have contributed to the number of COVID-19 related postings by McDonald's Malaysia. The chart below demonstrates the movements of the postings throughout the study period:
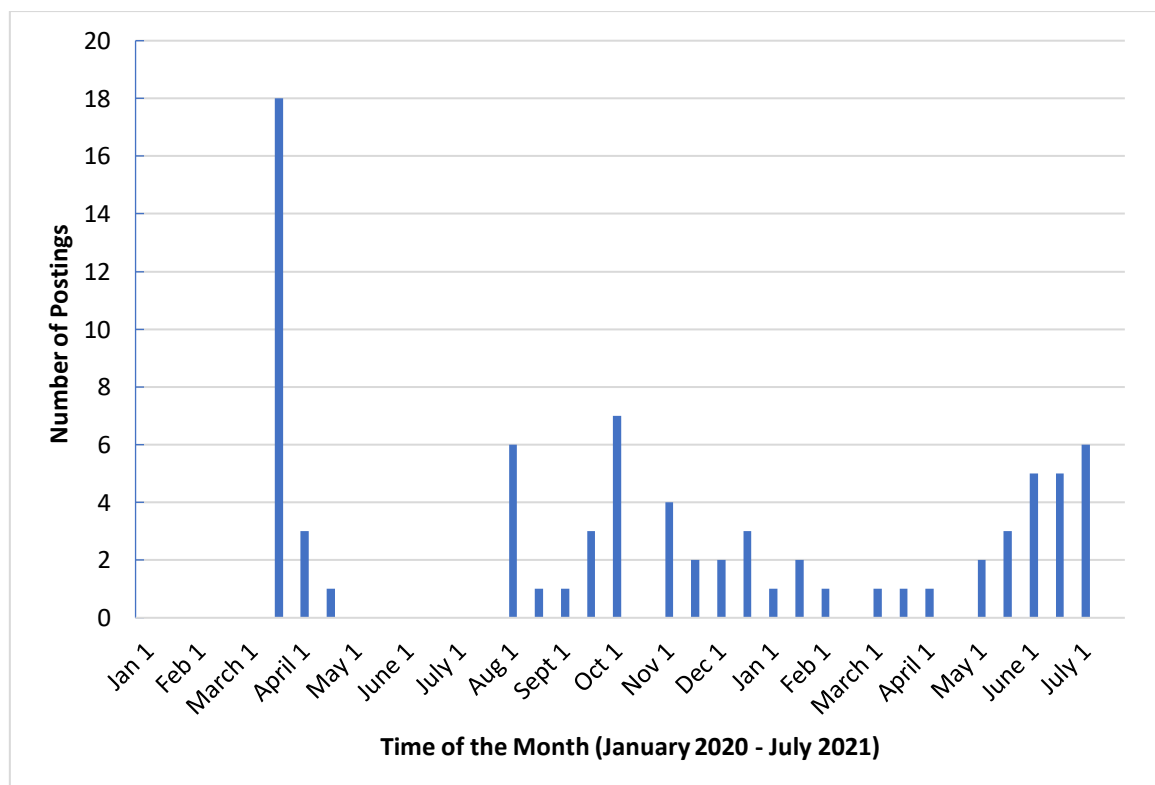

Figure 2: Number of postings according to specific time of the month during COVID-19 in Malaysia

Figure 2 shows that the highest occurrences happened during the beginning of the first Movement Control Order (MCO), which took place mainly from mid-March towards the end of the month (15-31 March 2020), with 18 postings being posted on Facebook in that short period of time. Arguably, this is a sign of McDonald's Malaysia initialising and launching its marketing strategies through social media as a coping or mitigating strategy, foreseeing and reacting to the troubled times ahead. The next significant occurrences with seven postings happened during the duration of 1-14 October 2020. This is followed by six postings respectively for the duration of 1-14 August and 1-14 July 2021.

All significant occurrences of postings above happened during MCO periods, and therefore, led McDonald's Malaysia to blast more postings related to COVID-19 during those periods. This is arguably carried out as an opportunity for both marketing as well as expressing solidarity through advice or empathetic messages, and this therefore, has created the omni-social presence in social media (Appel et al., 2020), which is beneficial for McDonald's Malaysia in constructing a positive online identity. This also suggests altruistic values carried by McDonald's Malaysia in reacting to recent developments or impacts of COVID-19 in Malaysia and taking it as part of its social responsibilities since its powerful voice (which is an example of an authoritative or overt power display in terms of power relations) can in one way or another, be able to help and influence Malaysians in dealing with COVID-19 and battling the effects of it on their lives.

Themes and Characteristics of Postings
After examining the 79 Facebook postings by McDonald's Malaysia during COVID-19 through the thematic analysis, the findings on the themes and categories of postings analysed are illustrated in the table below:

Table 1: Themes and characteristics of McDonald's Malaysia Facebook postings during COVID-19

Theme of postings	Number of occurrences	General characteristics of themes in the postings
Advertisement	24	Marketing/Promotion/Profit
Advice	30	Safety/Precautions/Rules/Awareness/Reminder/Care
Solidarity	40	Patriotism/Support/Awareness/Togetherness/In-group/Collective spirit/Community/Responsibility
Announcement	44	Informing/Sharing/News/Events/Appreciation/Commit-ment/Priority/Transparency/Charity/Community
Appreciation	25	Informing/Sharing/News/Events/Appreciation/Commit-ment/Priority/Transparency/Charity/Empathy/Social responsibility/Community
CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)	16	Community/Social responsibility/Effort/Charity/Empathy

Table 1 summarises the themes that were employed by McDonald's Malaysia in the 79 postings related to COVID-19. The thematic analysis that has been carried out led us to six main themes that we have identified as follows: 1) Advertisement, 2) Advice, 3) Solidarity, 4)

Announcement, 5) Appreciation and 6) CSR. The most prominent theme is the announcements, which shows that McDonald's tried to communicate as frequently and as effectively as it could with its customers through Facebook. This is mainly to ensure that the customers will be informed of the changes of operations or services by McDonald's at a certain time due to different developments of COVID-19 situation as well as to adhere to and execute the safety measures set by Malaysian government and the authority. The second most prominent theme is solidarity which again emphasises McDonald's altruistic and prosocial values that are being reflected mainly through collective expressions indicating patriotism, togetherness and support for fellow Malaysians (Azizan et al., 2020). The third main theme is advice, which implies huge concerns and a sense of responsibility of McDonald's Malaysia for everyone to take all the precautionary measures to ensure safety. The three primary themes showcased here by McDonald's Malaysia reflect its online identity as putting the customers first, which is very much aligned with the results of the survey by Ipsos that highlighted honesty and sincerity in communication in dealing with the crisis as a crucial factor for making McDonald's stand out more significantly compared to its competitors (Lim, 2021).

Languages Used in the Postings
McDonald's Malaysia has adopted only two languages in the 79 postings: English and Malay, with English being used in 41 postings and is the most dominant here, and with Malay being adopted 31 times. Arguably, English appears to be the preferred choice by McDonald's Malaysia in communicating via Facebook as it is the language of preference among digital communities and which is globally employed by a lot of big companies and organisations in their advertisements and communication. However, the use of Malay in the postings has also been shown to be quite significant, which means that McDonald's Malaysia tries to create a balance between the two languages used since using both languages will be regarded as McDonald's Malaysia's effort in being more inclusive towards addressing Malaysians' diverse socioeconomic, multiracial and multicultural backgrounds. This also suggests that McDonald's Malaysia understands and acknowledges the importance of both English (as a global means of online communication and a second language in Malaysia) and Malay (as Malaysia's official or first language) as the two languages that are mainly used in Malaysia and embraces them as part of its online identity.

Bilingualism and Code-switching
In the remaining postings, McDonald's Malaysia adopted both languages by the use of bilingualism (4 postings) and code-switching (3 postings), which shows McDonald's Malaysia as trying to create more inclusivity and relationality in terms of reaching out to its target customers of various backgrounds and foreseeing that not all the customers are Malaysians. Furthermore, the use of bilingualism and code-switching has just emphasised this observation further since both discourse strategies are also aimed at achieving inclusivity and relationality, which helps in minimising the power distance between the brand and the customers, and this increases the opportunity for McDonald's Malaysia to influence Malaysians to react positively towards its marketing strategies and COVID-19 related messages. Even more so, bilingualism used by McDonald's Malaysia seems to be more formal and professional, which is directed towards the general public regardless of their background, whilst the use of code-switching as a relational strategy may be meant to also offer inclusivity and the ability to reach younger

demographics. Considering that it is how language in advertising has evolved in recent days, this therefore suggests effectiveness and good acceptance by the target or specifically local audience (Rimi, 2019), and which was also found by Saputra (2018) in his research on code-switching in Honda advertisements in Indonesian context. The summary of the language used in the postings can be seen in the table below:

Table 2: *Language used in the postings by McDonald's Malaysia during COVID-19*

Language/ style adopted	Number and frequencies	Examples	Category/Function of posting
English	41 (51.9%)	Stay safe in our restaurants by keeping your mask on when you're not eating. #SafewithMekdi	Advice (Pragmatics/Speech acts/With direct directive/Booster in staying safe with McDonald's/Solidarity)
Malay	31 (39.2%)	Khusus kepada semua wira-wira negara: McDonald's Malaysia mengucapkan jutaan terima kasih kerana bertungkus lumus bekerja sepanjang masa demi kesihatan dan kesejahteraan rakyat Malaysia. Jasamu sentiasa dikenang… #KitaBoleh Translated version: *Dedicated to the nation's heroes: McDonald's Malaysia says thank you for your hard work for the sake of the community's health and welfare. #WeCan*	Special announcement (Expressions of appreciation/Thanking (speech act)/Addressed to all frontliners for their hardships and contributions/Words of encouragement/Empathy/Solidarity)
Bilingualism	4 (5.1%)	Pelanggan yang Dihormati, Semua restoran McDonald's Malaysia di Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya dan Selangor kini dibuka dari jam 7 pagi hingga 10 malam. Terima kasih diatas sokongan anda dan sentiasa jaga diri. Dear Valued Guests, All McDonald's Malaysia restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Selangor will now be open from 7 am to 10 pm. Thank you for your support and please continue to stay safe!	Public Announcement (Formal/Informative/Translation/Opening times/Customer-tailored/Inclusivity/Polite address/Thanking customers/Advice/Solidarity)

| Code-switching | 3 (3.8%) | Although tak boleh close to each other, kita boleh stand together! Whatever the challenge, when Malaysians unite as one, #KitaBoleh Translated version: *Although we cannot be close to each other, we can stand together! Whatever the challenge, when Malaysians unite as one, #WeCan* | Advice (Empathy/Colloquialism/Informality/Laid back/Call for action/Patriotism/Togetherness/Collective pronouns 'we'/Inclusivity/Unity/Fighting spirit/Solidarity) |

The Use of Hashtags in the Postings as a Discourse Strategy

Out of 79 postings analysed, 30 postings are without hashtags, which means that 49 postings are written with hashtags. This suggests that McDonald's Malaysia has utilised hashtags as a discourse strategy very significantly in its postings during the pandemic. This is in line with hashtag campaigns being launched by many big labels as part of their marketing strategies, which is meant to be proliferated by consumers as well as aiming at achieving viral reach (Laestadius & Wahl, 2017). However, in McDonald's Malaysia's context, the hashtag campaigns' objectives are twofold, which are directed not only for marketing purposes, but also for expressing solidarity with fellow Malaysians since the hashtags are mainly signs of showing safety as their priority and a sense of togetherness with the use of the collective pronoun '*kita*' (we). Therefore, the extensive utilisations of two hashtags by McDonald's Malaysia during the pandemic, which are '#SafeWithMekdi' (a special hashtag created after COVID-19 emerged) with 24 occurrences and '#*KitaBoleh*' (WeCan) with 21 occurrences respectively, have arguably been quite opportunely carried out in its efforts in attracting and retaining consumers' trust during these troubled times. Yurchenko and Ugolnikova (2021) describe this kind of hashtags as being recognizable and personalized in starting a trend especially in advertising campaigns.

Arguably, with the high usage of '#SafeWithMekdi' hashtag in the postings during COVID-19, it appears to be McDonald's Malaysia's signature hashtag which has created an omnipresence on the social media and its unique and positive online identity. Other hashtags adopted, such as #*KitaJagaKita* (WeTakeCareofEachOther) and #StaySafe, also carry similar elements in expressing solidarity and empathy which highlight the priority of McDonald's Malaysia in using its authoritative voice in illustrating altruistic and prosocial behaviour by doing its part in fighting the pandemic together with other fellow Malaysians. Similar observations have been highlighted by Sheldon et al. (2020) in terms of the use of inspirational hashtags as carrying a collective spirit and that significant utilizations of hashtags help to demonstrate cultural values associated with power distance.

Looking at the hashtags related to COVID-19 and the high occurrences in the postings, we also analysed each hashtag further in terms of the general goals and intents by McDonald's Malaysia. The table below lists down COVID-19 related hashtags used in its Facebook postings as of 19 March 2020 until 26 July 2021 together with its category or function:

Table 3: The utilisation of hashtags in McDonald's Malaysia Facebook postings during COVID-19

Hashtag related to COVID-19	Number and Frequencies	Category/Function of hashtag
#SafeWithMekdi	24 (38.1%)	Advice/Safety/Direct directive 'Safe' (booster)/Speech act/Colloquialism/Togetherness (with preposition 'with')/Solidarity
#KitaBoleh (we can)	21 (33.3%)	Collectivity (collective pronoun 'we')/Togetherness/Call or invitation for action (speech act)/Fighting spirit/Patriotism/Solidarity
#KitaJagaKita (we take care of each other)	4 (6.4%)	Collectivity (collective pronoun 'we' mentioned twice, double booster)/Togetherness/Reminder/Advice/ Safety/Care/Awareness/Empathy/Patriotism/ Solidarity
#komunitiatmcdandrmhc (Ronald McDonald's house charities)	3 (4.8%)	Community/Charity/Sharing/Commitment/Awareness/Help/Empathy
#StaySafe	2 (3.2%)	Reminder/Advice/Safety/Awareness/Direct directive 'stay' (booster)/Speech act/Empathy/Prayer/Social distancing etc (SOP)/Solidarity
#LekluMcDBelanja (relax McD's treat)	2 (3.2%)	Special recognition to food riders/Appreciation/Treat/Colloquialism/ Reminder/Empathy/Charity
#TerimaKasihRider (thank you rider)	2 (3.2%)	Special recognition to food riders/Appreciation/Thanking (speech act)/Empathy/Charity
#sentiasajagadiri (always take care)	1 (1.6%)	Reminder/Advice/Safety/Awareness/Direct directive 'take care' with adverb 'always' as modifier (double booster)/Speech act/Empathy/Prayer/Social distancing etc (SOP)/Solidarity
#GoCashless	1 (1.6%)	Advice/Safety measure/Awareness/Direct directive 'go' (booster)/Speech act/Minimising contact/Safe and easy alternative to cash
#programkomunitimcdonalds (programmecommunitymcdonalds)	1 (1.6%)	Sense of community/Charity/Sharing/ Commitment/Help/Empathy
#RiderKu (my rider)	1 (1.6%)	Special address/Personal (with personal and possessive pronoun 'ku' (my)/Closeness/Appreciation/Empathy
#DudukRumah (stay home)	1 (1.6%)	Reminder/Advice/Safety/Awareness/Direct directive 'duduk' (booster)/Speech act/Empathy/Social distancing etc (SOP)/Solidarity

Other Discourse Strategies Adopted in the Postings
After further analysis (at micro level), we attempted to delve further into examining the discourse strategies employed by McDonald's Malaysia by looking at the choices of words and phrases in writing the 79 postings. The main discourse strategies that are found in the postings are identified as *colloquialism*, *code-switching*, *politeness devices*, *pragmatic devices*, *collective markers,* and *discourse markers*.

The use of the discourse strategies in the postings together with their types and functions are demonstrated in the following table:

Table 4: Discourse strategies employed by McDonald's in COVID-19 related postings

Discourse strategies	Examples	Type/Function of the discourse strategies
Colloquial expressions	*Leklu (relax), ...* *Order je (just order)* ...	Informal/Laidback/Trendy/Slang/ Abbreviation/Phonological/Language change/Inclusivity
Code-switching strategies	*Lagi-lagi* when you are too caught up with working from home and no time to *masak*. *Especially when you are too caught up with working from home and no time to cook.*	Intrasentential code-switching/Colloquialism/Language change/Humour/Inclusivity
Politeness devices	Dear valued guests, ... Please continue to stay safe...	Hedging in minimising the force/Booster in enhancing the force/Relational strategy
Pragmatic devices	Stay safe, ... Thank you ... Don't stay hungry...	Speech acts, Direct directive (booster)/Thanking/Direct directive with a negation/Calling for consideration and action
Collective markers	Let's..., We..., ...us, Our...	Plural imperative (cohortative), Collective or plural pronouns indicating togetherness/Solidarity
Discourse markers	Although..., However, ...	Conjunction, Conjunctive adverb in suggesting suitable action to be taken

After further analysis of the discourse strategies adopted in the postings, the following observations have been highlighted as being the main strategies in the context of online communication in the marketing approaches recognized and embraced by McDonald's Malaysia in dealing with the pandemic:

Localization Strategies
Mostly apparent in the hashtags, colloquialism is one of the discourse strategies utilised by McDonald's Malaysia in its Facebook postings, which involves informal, casual and laid-back conversational approach to language, and is considered as hip or trendy, and especially appealing to the young as the main target customers. Colloquialism and code-switching adopted here can both be regarded as McDonald's Malaysia's approaches towards embracing localization (i.e. through the use of *Mekdi* and *leklu*) as part of their local online identity, which was also found in studies reporting the use of localization by international organizations in their business communication, marketing or advertising. Bashir and Aldaihani

(2017) described social media platforms as mainly used informally to inform publics about promotions, marketing and information proliferation, and that social media can extend organizational reach to the public while acting as a tool to adopt the current popular styles. Rodríguez (2016) reported that localizing strategies involve advertising translation by adopting the local culture. The localization strategies adopted here have appeared as quite successful for McDonald's Malaysia in establishing the brand further in its globalization efforts. Arguably, embracing localization as one of the strategies has not only emphasized the organization's online identity, but also its globalization identity as can also be seen for McDonald's in other countries (Mylonakis & Evripiotis, 2016). Therefore, localization and globalization are two elements that are found to be inevitable especially in the contexts of international business expansions (Kaul, 2011). A study by Vignali (2001) has also found that McDonald's has gone 'glocal' by embracing globalization and internationalization by adopting their 'think global, act local' strategies (Ohmae, 1989), which idea has been expanded and utilised quite successfully.

Conversational and Politeness Strategies
Other discourse strategies employed are politeness and pragmatic devices that have a close connection to one another in terms of the goals and nature of the strategies, which include speech acts, hedges, boosters, and humour. These also demonstrate a strong utilisation of conversational strategies through politeness approaches in the postings, which have been shown as significantly adopted in business communication (Kuzhevskaya, 2019). In this study, using politeness and conversational approaches that are strongly imitating the local cultural stylistics and values have been found to create a positive image for McDonald's Malaysia. This is in line with Li et al. (2020) who have also found that businesses adopting cultural politeness in their communicative approach were able to gain positive brand evaluations from the customers. The choice of words and expressions that mark positive politeness and pragmatic approaches in the postings, for instance, in terms of McDonald's Malaysia's attempt in achieving the overall positive goals (addressing positive face values of both McDonald's Malaysia and the intended customers) has also appeared to be thoroughly calculated, and this move tends to be aligned with Kuzhevskaya's (2019) finding that companies' decisions in adopting positive politeness are quite common now, and therefore signal a positive development for the use of linguistic strategies in business communication.

Inclusive and Relational Strategies
The discourse strategies employed, which appear to be discursive in nature, signal inclusivity, accessibility and relationality that McDonald's Malaysia is trying to create and achieve by minimising the power distance between McDonald's Malaysia as the authoritative voice and the customers, in its Facebook postings in relation to dealing with COVID-19. Relational qualities in communicative approaches adopted by digital platforms are deemed as significantly helpful in fostering relationships (Calcagni et al., 2019) and in this case, it has implied its usefulness in assisting positive marketing. This aligns with Edeh et al. (2021) that McDonald's strategies involve projecting inclusive and relational qualities towards customer satisfaction as their focus and priority, relaying related and friendly persona to engage with their loyal customers in their effort to maintain brand loyalty.

Expressions of Solidarity and Empathy

Expressions of solidarity are apparent throughout the postings with the use of collective pronouns like 'we' or 'us' and plural imperative 'Let's' indicating togetherness and in-group identity markers (Brown & Levinson, 2014). Similar findings can be found in Azizan et al. (2020) that expressions of power and solidarity are conveyed through the utilisation of collective pronouns and linguistic markers, which implies positive impacts towards the society. Arguably, by adopting these discursive strategies, McDonald's Malaysia is constructing its localized online identity here as being not just in the position of power, but one with empathy and sense of solidarity, carrying altruistic values and responsible prosocial behaviour (Lim, 2021), that is meant to bridge the gap between the organisation and its customers in achieving its globalization goals (Vignali, 2001; He & Harris, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most international businesses adopted a professional approach in engaging with the public and promoting their business through social media platforms (Saad & Badran, 2017). However, this study has highlighted some strategic measures implemented by McDonald's Malaysia through Facebook in staying ahead during the pandemic. It is found that McDonald's Malaysia's decision to move to social media has enabled the organisation to not just market products via network but also not to heavily rely on facilities and infrastructures which proportionate with the COVID-19 situations as people are forced to mainly stay at home and with restricted working conditions, and this aligns with the findings in Chatterjee and Kar (2020). Therefore, moving forward to post-pandemic era, future researchers may further consider the impact of facilitating conditions in business growth especially in crisis management. This study also highlighted the main themes and discourse strategies that have led to a deeper understanding of online identity construction, which in this case is discursive in nature and materialised through the adoption of very significant conversational and pragmatic approaches. The positive discourse strategies as manufactured in the identity construction through hashtags, colloquialism, code-switching, pragmatic devices and politeness tools have contributed to successful communication for a profitable business as well as in dealing with the pandemic. The localization strategies embraced by McDonald's Malaysia through colloquialism are quite prominent and the inclusive and relational strategies adopted through the expressions of solidarity and empathy in contributing to McDonald's Malaysia's online identity construction are very apparent in the postings during the COVID-19 pandemic and have been shown as having the ability to create an omnipresence with positive impacts and awareness not only for businesses to flourish but also in establishing and maintaining relationships with the stakeholders.

While the economy continues to slowly catch up after the brutal hit due to the pandemic circumstances, many businesses struggle with finding the right formula to keep things running and prospering towards a positive direction. Therefore, the study shows that in this post-pandemic era, embracing honesty, altruistic values and prosocial behaviour in their communication can be the answer and is highly recommended for businesses, either big or small, and should be integrated as much as possible into the corporate ideology and culture. This should be carried out by incorporating innovative marketing and communication strategies via clever wordplay and purposeful language adoption on digital platforms as well as physical infrastructures. Future research should look further into the role of pragmatic and politeness strategies and examine discursive constructions of online identity in different

aspects of business communication, be it on social media or other digital platforms. More studies should also look further into the role and adoption of elements of language in online platforms in ensuring effective marketing and globalisation strategies in other organisations. Most importantly, this critical discourse study does not only show how language evolves according to contextual needs and communicative demands, but also suggests that the role of symbolic power relations as it emerges from the linguistic choices is crucial in forming a positive online identity of a corporation that can be favourable for the economy and people's well-being, especially in a collective society like Malaysia, in rising against dire situations.

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