

Connecting Diversity and Youth Community Service Project: A Semiotic Analysis on Typology of Images Used in Social Media Reporting

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Abstract

Social media semiotic research is an emerging powerful methodology for research and for developing brand communications. This study takes a deep dive into cultural connotations and category codes that ameliorate understanding and reinvigorate communication in society. In this study, we develop an understanding of strategic corporate and public affairs communication about community service projects that have emerged as strategic efforts to interact with society. The significance of social media reporting has been driven by the need to increase Malaysian Drug Prevention Association (PEMADAM Kebangsaan) transparency and accountability concerning social and youth issues. PEMADAM Kebangsaan develops and improves internal culture and social media communication and deploys semiotic metaphors and digital storytelling to create fresh emotional messages for younger generations. Utilizing qualitative research methodology for social media content analysis and semiotic interpretation, this study analyzes the typology of images used in its social media reporting. The change in brand communication creates disruptive innovation by starting public discourses on the role of PEMADAM Kebangsaan in society especially to stay relevant with the younger generations.

Keywords: Semiotic, community service, Social Issues, Environment, Sustainability, Sustainable living.

Introduction

This study is on Malaysian Drug Prevention Association (PEMADAM Kebangsaan), a Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) advocating for preventing drug abuse, alcohol,

cigarettes, inhalants, and HIV/AIDS in Malaysia. It was established on 22nd March 1976 and is under the patronage of the prime minister. PEMADAM Kebangsaan operates through its 181 district offices in Malaysia. The target market for PEMADAM Kebangsaan includes parents, students, university students, youth, women, teachers, and society. With the concept of “live a meaningful life”, PEMADAM Kebangsaan has conducted many programs to fulfill its mission. However, after 47 years of operation, it seems to have lost its spark and this may derail the objective of its establishment.

According to the data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, as of September 2023, there are 13,714 drug addicts in secondary school and 11,586 drug addicts are full-time workers (*Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, n.d*). These alarming statistics involve our future generation as well as our current workforce, which may hurt our nation’s productivity. One of the major challenges for NGOs is ineffective communication and networking (Abiddin et al., 2022). PEMADAM Kebangsaan needs to find a way to tell an impactful narrative of “live a meaningful life” to their target market. Another persistent issue is transparency. Dealing with donations and contributions from the public and private sectors, as well as from the public, it is critical for NGOs like PEMADAM Kebangsaan to be transparent in reporting their activities to increase public trust (Petersson, 2022).

Non-governmental organizations like PEMADAM Kebangsaan need to build relationships with their target market like university students. Engaging in volunteering activities among university students increases engagement and at the same time creates social impact (Brzustewicz, et al., 2022). Volunteering activities support the process of sustainable human development and quality culture (Minarova et al., 2021). As for university students, volunteering builds personal and professional competencies (Peric et al., 2021). PEMADAM Kebangsaan needs to have a presence on social media. Social media prompted volunteers to contribute further online and offline and opened up opportunities for future volunteering participation (Polnigorit et al., 2022). Analyzing PEMADAM Kebangsaan’s social media gives us an understanding of the links between volunteering and social development (Chadwick et al., 2022).

In this study, we will analyze PEMADAM Kebangsaan's social media postings on the beach cleaning activity. This beach cleaning activity is in collaboration with students from Universiti Kuala Lumpur Business School. In this activity, 39 students are volunteering to clean Redang beach in Sekinchan, Selangor from 26th to 27th August 2023. PEMADAM Kebangsaan posted social media content on this volunteering activity. *The objective of this study is to analyze how PEMADAM Kebangsaan deploys semiotic metaphors and digital storytelling to create fresh emotional messages for younger generations.*

Literature Review

The collaboration between NGOs and society can help the level of environmental, social, and economic alleviation (Fontana & Pisalpayut, 2022). Furthermore, collaboration with the local government increases public participation and response to environmental issues (Arantes et al., 2020). However, NGOs, being non-profit organizations, lack funding. The lack of funding forces NGOs to be selective in implementing their program, making them less effective (Sushant & Singhal, 2019). This is where collaboration with corporate sectors can fill in the gap whereby large corporations can set up foundations or financial contributions to the NGOs (Mousavi & Bossink, 2020). Co-branding between NGOs and corporations creates a win-win situation for both entities to achieve their respective objectives (Heinl et al., 2021).

There is no formal education on how to run an NGO in Malaysia and studies found that the Malaysian universities' curriculum did not emphasize social needs (Fahimirad et al., 2019). University students represent youth populations with the potential to develop a sustainable and diversified economy (Miller, 2020). University students' involvement in NGO activities is one way to educate university students to be involved in NGO activities and social enterprises (Jeong & Kim, 2021; Quaglio et al., 2022). Through participation in NGO activities, university students can develop competency in sustainable business practices (Terron-Lopez et al., 2020). NGO offers the students an opportunity to solve real-life issues while applying what they learned in lectures (Surya & Nupur., 2023).

NGOs need to tell a good narrative to give meaning to their social cause (Utekhin et al., 2021) as it could be used to effectively practice their social work (Grudulaite & Zemaitaityte, 2022). A good narrative is a narrative that resonates with the society that the NGOs are serving (Lokot et al., 2022). An effective narrative can shape and influence the public's opinion on issues advanced by the NGOs (O'Loughlin, 2014; Schade et al., 2022). However, many of the volunteers in NGOs are not properly trained in narrating their work to the public (Pariag-Maraye et al., 2023). NGOs need to reimagine their narrative strategies to remain relevant and financially sustainable (Kadfak et al., 2023). What NGOs can do is involve participation from the public in social work and get the latter to tell their stories to the rest of the members of the public (Baker & Dredge, 2019).

One of the problems is that NGOs do not meet the society every day. Hence, digital narratives in social media compensate for the lack of interactivity between NGOs and society (Zhao et al., 2023). Digital narratives in video form have become vital mediums for reporting news to the masses (Huei-Chun, 2022). Narratives in social media are more engaging and powerful in creating societal impact (Bellini, 2022). A researcher can understand the NGOs' volunteer experience better by analyzing the narratives in social media (Cercato et al., 2022). The persuasiveness of digital narratives is prevalent in a cross-sectional between social activism, politics, and cultural discourse (Basaraba et al., 2021).

Speaking of cultural discourse, this study focuses on semiotic signs of PEMADAM Kebangsaan's digital narratives. Language makes sense of the images shown in social media (Meier, 2022). Digital narrative creates the meaning of engaging experience with society (Taupin, 2019). Digital narratives are sociocultural, perspectival, and interactional discursive nodes co-produced by the NGOs' volunteers and the social media platforms (Laskaridou et al., 2022). The connection between visual design, narratives, and socio-cultural consumption, we can analyze the NGO's digital strategies (Cassone, 2021). By analyzing social media content, this study can develop an understanding of PEMADAM Kebangsaan's thinking process in constructing digital narratives.

It is pertinent for social media content to balance text and hypertext in delivering messages to the public (Tenca, 2018). A combination of text and images is an interaction of various semiotic codes producing meanings to the text and images (Kozlova & Kremneva, 2022). Interpretation of signs, text, and visual-verbal images can be used to analyze social media content discourses as special semiotic systems (Lavrova et al., 2022). Images are process-semiotic defined as a sensory perceptible form that mediates proxy relations between humans and between humans and larger societal issues (Ivakhiv, 2019). By analyzing the typology of signs in social media content, we can elucidate the specific language mechanism of interaction and influence on social media followers (Fedorova, 2019). Semiotic research on social media should focus on the cultural meaning of the narratives form in the context of contemporary popular culture (Harasimowics, 2021).

Methodology

A social media content analysis and semiotic interpretation were used in this research that adopted a qualitative approach. The data were collected through audio-visual materials and supported with relevant information and analyzed the typology of images used in its social media reporting. Social media semiotic research is an emerging powerful methodology for research and for developing brand communications.

The selection of the unit of analysis for the study was based on a deep dive into cultural connotations and category codes that ameliorate understanding and reinvigorate communication in society. In this study, researchers develop an understanding of strategic corporate and public affairs communication about community service projects that have emerged as strategic efforts to interact with society. Snowball sampling was also carried out when participants introduced their friends to the study through social media. Ultimately, the sample comprised those who were able and willing to provide the necessary information on the issues under study as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) for purposive sampling strategy in qualitative research.

Initial data analysis was done immediately after the first interview. Various categories and themes were identified before the second audio-visual analysis was conducted. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), data were collected until saturation point or data redundancy was achieved. A social media content analysis and semiotic interpretation were examined several times to capture the features of the images. The data were further analyzed through coding and categorizing of themes using a content analysis approach.

Trustworthiness is a concept for determining whether this study is valid and reliable and whether the study sets out to investigate what it is supposed to. This study consisted of four main aspects, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), validity can be achieved by making a comparison between the descriptions and explanations, and whether these explanations fit the description perfectly. Validity is a hallmark of qualitative research, determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, participant, or reader (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, validity was achieved using an audit trail and peer examination. An audit trail refers to the steps adopted by the researcher at every stage of data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The unit of analysis is subsequently contacted for clarification of facts of findings. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), peer examination was also used to obtain feedback and consultation from several subject matter experts to verify data analysis and interpretation.

Findings and Discussion

Culturally, Malaysians love to spend their time at the beach. Some are for recreation with family and friends, and some are just to enjoy the view of sunrise or sunset. However, dirty beaches are eye sore, and sharp objects such as broken glasses are dangerous for children. Hence, it is pertinent to keep our beach clean. PEMADAM Kebangsaan had initiated beach cleaning activities. The volunteers for this activity are UniKL Business School students. For this study, we are analyzing PEMADAM Kebangsaan TikTok content on beach cleaning activities with UniKL Business School students at Sekinchan, Selangor to promote their community service activities. This beach cleaning activity involved 49 university students who acted as volunteers for PEMADAM Kebangsaan from 26-27 August 2023. The duration of the video is sixty (60) seconds. The video featured three (3) university students who talked about what is PEMADAM, its history, vision, and past and future activities.

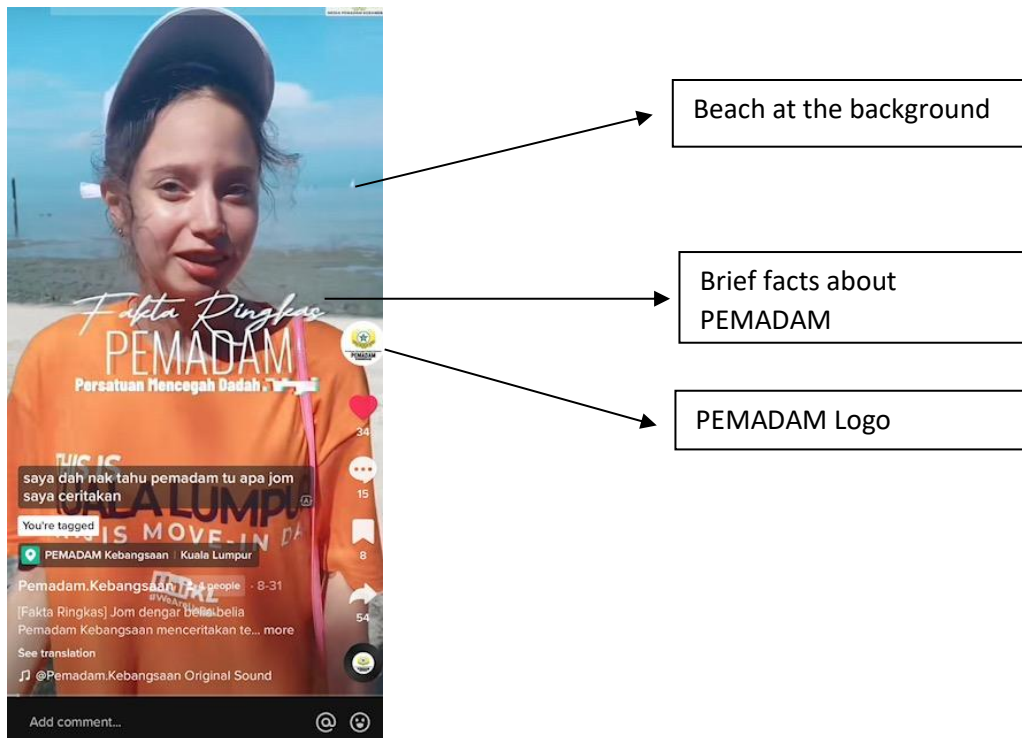


Figure 1

The first part of the video started with the title “Fakta Ringkas PEMADAM” or “Brief Facts on PEMADAM”. The shortened name “PEMADAM” was used instead of PEMADAM Kebangsaan to make it easier to remember. Society normally uses the shortened name “PEMADAM”, and it is culturally understood that PEMADAM refers to the NGO that advocates against drug abuse. The video intends to introduce PEMADAM Kebangsaan to its target market, which is the youth (Yusuf Ismaila et al., 2022). Digital marketing in social media has more effect on the youth section of society. These university students acted as young peer influencers to other youth to achieve highly productive results (Shuey et al., 2022). University students represent the youth in Malaysia which can influence other youth to join PEMADAM Kebangsaan. Hence, university students were prominently shown in the video to talk about PEMADAM Kebangsaan.

The rural beach as one of the image typologies in this study was used as background as it is a beach cleaning activity. Rural beaches such as Sekinchan, Selangor recorded the most litter that requires immediate and extensive management actions to improve their environmental status (Assensio-Montesinos et al., 2021). Most of the litter found on the beach is grouped into seven typologies (Greenpeace Malaysia, 2021). The most common type of plastic found on the beach is polyethylene terephthalate (type 1) such as mineral water bottles and food packaging. The typology and the magnitude of plastics in the Sekinchan area suggest a combination of sources that primarily include dumping from rivers and water canals, and direct activities on the beach. Beach litter is a serious social issue because it hurts the environment and tourism sector, especially in the Sekinchan area (Isnain & Mutaqin, 2023). Moreover, the video gave an authentic image of young people, beaches, and music, as immediate, intimate, and optimistic messages about the future of PEMADAM Kebangsaan (Radenkovic Susic et al., 2022).

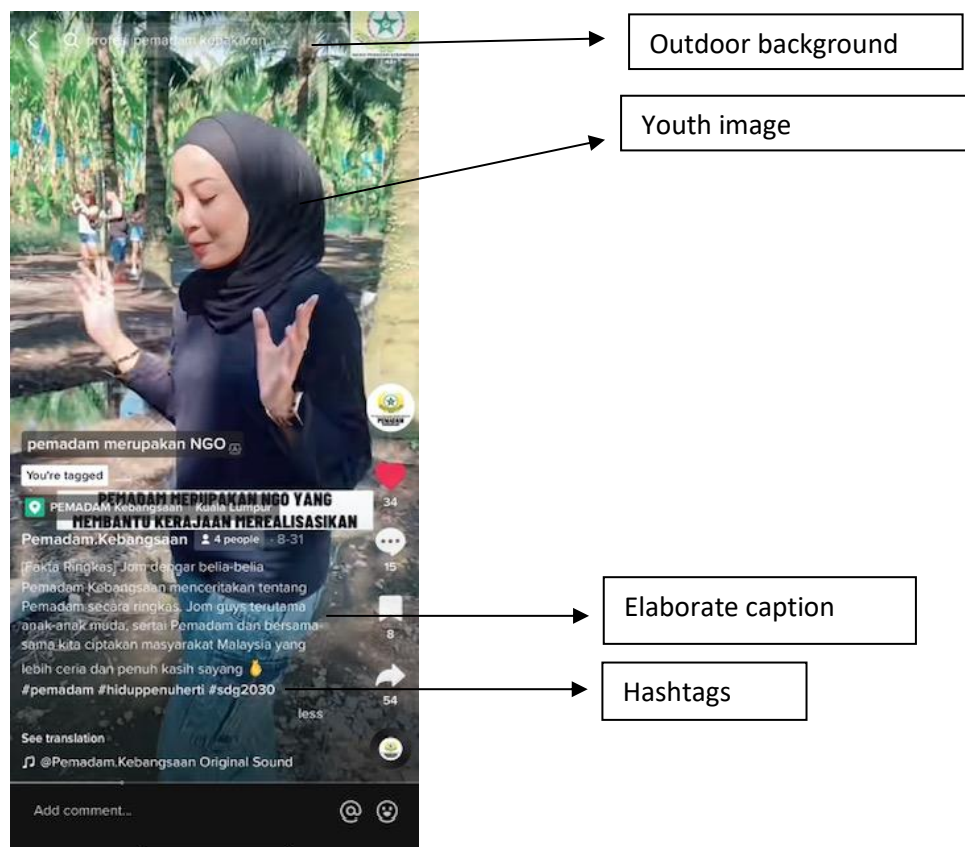


Figure 2

In the second part of the video, the content shows another university student in a different location. The scene was purposely chosen as an outdoor location. The idea is to convey a message to the young audience that PEMADAM Kebangsaan is “outdoorsy”, and it is “hip” to join PEMADAM Kebangsaan as they are environmentally conscious. The outdoor activity is a 180-degree shift from PEMADAM Kebangsaan previous activities which used to focus on talks and seminars which can be dreary and dull for the younger generations. To escape from stereotyping, PEMADAM Kebangsaan wants to freshen up its image. To be seen as “outdoorsy” and “hip” is the message that PEMADAM Kebangsaan wants to convey in its effort to capture the attention and imagination of younger generations. Identifying and connecting with the younger audience with a strong personalized message will help PEMADAM Kebangsaan to create an emotional connection with the younger generations (Lin, & Roberts, 2018).

The video uses an elaborate caption to emphasize what the university student is saying in that video. Captions play an important part in capturing audiences' reactions to social media images (Davies et al., 2020). The captions were written in a mix of formal and casual manner. The word “Jom dengar...” or “let’s hear about...” are a bit casual. However, the word “sertai Pemadam dan bersama-sama kita ciptakan masyarakat Malaysia yang lebih ceria dan penuh kasih sayang” or “let’s join Pemadam and together we will create a happy and loving Malaysians” is a bit formal to younger audience. It may not be able to attract the younger generation as the younger generation uses casual language style to convey their message on social media (Purba et al., 2021).

PEMADAM Kebangsaan is leveraging hashtags as a promotion tool (Jamil et al., 2019). The hashtag “hidup penuherti” or “live a meaningful life” is one of PEMADAM Kebangsaan’s taglines and can be found on their website. Using the same tagline in social media hashtags can popularize the taglines. Social media users use hashtags to search and identify posts relating to similar topics (Rao et al., 2022).

Like-minded social media users will show solidarity with the cause by using the same hashtags (Ayu et al., 2022) and this is how hashtag usage can increase engagement with the audience (Kumar et al., 2022). Hashtags increase activism and the role of PEMADAM Kebangsaan in TikTok in raising awareness of social and environmental movements (Hassan, 2018; Storer et al., 2020). “Hidup Penuh Erti” is a powerful message. The message advocates the society to live a healthy and meaningful life. The idea is when someone is busy doing beneficial activities such as community service work, outdoor activities, or sports, they will automatically lead a healthy life.

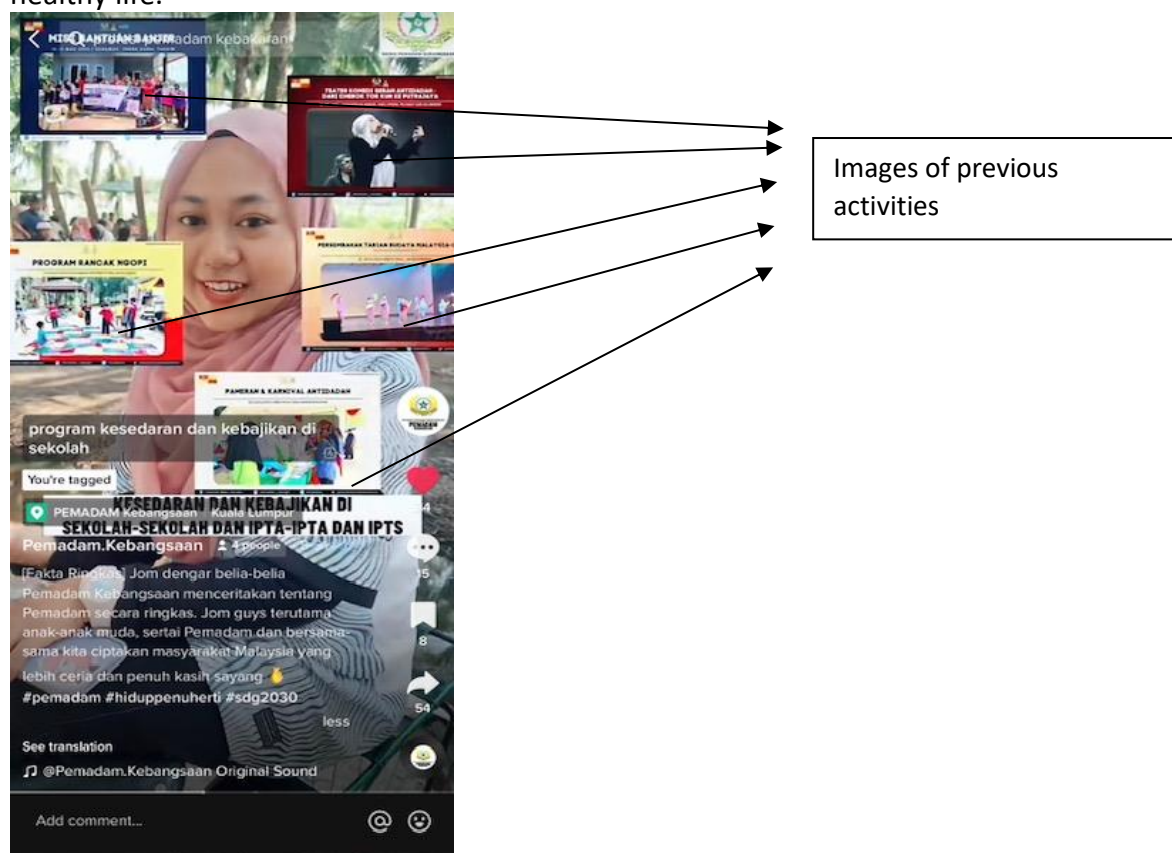


Figure 3

The third part of the video shows another university student. The student explained to the audience PEMADAM previous activities. The explanation was accompanied by images of the activities. A combination of statements and images makes optimal use of human cognition: visual and verbal processing to allow for dual coding and enhanced memory resulting in better remembering of the information (Wang et al., 2019; Sahiti & Stamp 2022). In less than sixty seconds, PEMADAM Kebangsaan needs to convey as much as possible the information about its activities. The displays of the previous activities build positive personality images (Jin et al., 2022). In addition, statements followed by images influence positive attitudes toward the subject matter (Masngut & Mohamad, 2021). The combination of images and statements

from the university students was intended to influence the public's positive attitudes towards PEMADAM Kebangsaan.

Applications

This study shows that semiotic metaphors can bridge the emotional connection between brands and younger consumers. Younger consumers are attracted to stories that evoke emotions and create a sense of connection. Storytelling through social media can be used to craft a compelling narratives that highlights the brand's values, mission and vision, and how the brand impact the consumer's life. In this study, TikTok was effectively used to convey the brand's narrative.

Semiotic metaphors is an effective tools to create memorable and impactful brand messages. In this study, PEMADAM Kebangsaan use the semiotic metaphors such as "Hidup penuh Erti" that promotes healthy, active and meaningful lifestyles. This metaphors not only conveys PEMADAM Kebangsaan's value but also build the emotional connections with the younger generations. Brands can use similar approach in using semiotic metaphor that convey its values to resonate and emotionally connect with the younger consumers.

Younger consumers wants to be appreciated and at the same time value authenticity. Brands can share personal stories experience to convey its values through social media. By involving younger generations as volunteers, PEMADAM Kebangsaan able to create immersive experience to its target market. These young volunteers will share their experience in social media, creating an authentic user-generated contents of PEMADAM Kebangsaan's activities. Brands should focus on creating emotional intelligence by understanding and being emphatic with the emotions and concerns of the younger consumers. Volunteering events involving the university students is best place for PEMADAM Kebangsaan to listen to the younger generation's pain point and emotional triggers.

Younger consumers are used to consuming information and news through multiple social media platforms. It is a good strategy for brands to adopt multimodal approach to storytelling. Incorporating different format such as videos, images, text, emoticons, and hashtags as applied by PEMADAM Kebangsaan in its TikTok posting to engage with the target consumers is an effective strategy. This study shows that younger consumers attracted to humor and playfulness in marketing. Hence, brands should be playful in its digital storytelling to convey its brand's personality.

Conclusions

This study focuses on university students volunteering for PEMADAM Kebangsaan which offers community service activities, where the students can assist in environmental restoration. The activities involve canal cleaning and visits to various tourist attractions. The site of the community service activity is in Sekinchan, Selangor. This area is unique as it consists of padi fields and coastal areas. Most tourists will stay at homestays in the middle of Padi fields for its unique experience. The coastal areas are not so popular with local tourists as the beach is not as attractive due to erosions and litter. However, its coastal areas did offer a unique product called "Mentarang" a species of seashells. Sekinchan provides a suitable setup for community service activities for university students. It is highly accessible by road, and it is just one and a half hours from Kuala Lumpur.

The location and the community service activity to clean the beach are not that hard for first-time university student volunteers. PEMADAM Kebangsaan must be aware of its perceived images to match its volunteers' expectations and needs. We need to consider the volunteer's

feelings and values (Orser, 2020). There are six types of volunteer motivations: social, protective, self-enhancement, career building, understanding social issues, and value expressive (Buttler, 2021). Although it is a community service activity, PEMADAM Kebangsaan needs to inject an element of 'fun' and 'coolness' into the said activity. Volunteering is not just about doing the public good but also be seen as a fun activity (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022). The combination of community service and fun reinforces one another in social capital building (Naish, 2015).

Conceptual and empirical typologies made up of the convergence of personal and social characteristics of younger generations have similarities and differences in the image perception of an NGO. According to the university students who volunteered for this activity, community service means preserving the environment and having fun. Based on our observation in this study, the students find that volunteering means being able to be part of something greater. The students were able to communicate with the locals in building social, cultural, and linguistic networks. Volunteers bridge PEMADAM and the local community and attract the younger generations to visit Sekinchan and join PEMADAM Kebangsaan's activities in the future. Community service provides knowledge and social skills to university students, job opportunities, an understanding of local cultures, and a platform for the students to make new friends and have fun learning.

Results from the analysis of the image typology of this study suggest that a positive PEMADAM Kebangsaan image can enhance the younger generations' satisfaction and loyalty. Taking priority to encourage university students to engage in activities that can lead to a healthy and meaningful life can prevent these university students from drug abuse. These activities also enable PEMADAM Kebangsaan to identify future talents for its growth and survival. This study can identify the complexities in implementing youth-friendly community projects and learn how similar future projects may be able to involve youth effectively. Digital storytelling is applied for diverse purposes that include community development (Musfira et al., 2022). The result reveals opportunities for peer-to-peer digital storytelling that can trigger the younger generation's desire to express their individuality through personal descriptions and suggest the drivers that affect PEMADAM Kebangsaan's reputation.

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