

# Rhetorical Appeals Used by The New Generation of Malaysian Politicians in Their Social Media Communication

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## Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the rhetorical appeals used by the new generation of Malaysian politicians in their social media communication. Drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical appeal theory, two (2) research questions were posited: (a) What were the different communicative practices used in the media posts of the selected new generation of Malaysian politicians? and (b) Which type of rhetorical appeals was most commonly used among the selected politicians? The data for the study were collected from the target politicians' social media platforms related to the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis dated from the 17th of December 2021 to the 10th of January 2022. This study revolved around five (5) politicians categorised as the new generation of Malaysian politicians: Syed Saddiq [P1], Hannah Yeoh [P2], Fahmi Fadzil [P3], Amirudin Shari [P4], and Kasthuri Patto [P5]. The data were analysed thematically and classified based on Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. Eight (8) sub-themes emerged from the data analysis. It was found that each politician had utilised different communicative practices depending on the objectives of his or her appeals. However, the highest number of rhetorical appeals used among all the politicians combined, was *logos*. This study contributes to the literature on social media and politics related to persuasive strategies used by politicians and political communication.

**Keywords:** Rhetorical Appeals, Communicative Practices, Social Media Interaction, New Generation of Politician, Language of Persuasion

## Introduction

Social media serves as a powerful instrument for social interactions. Numerous international and socio-economic contexts reported that social media users spend a significant proportion of their time on social media (Meel & Vishwakarma, 2020), driving the contemporary, participatory and user-driven online culture. It was reported that 86% of Malaysian are active social media users, with a penetration rate as high as 89% on Facebook and 75% on Instagram

(Statista, 2021). Given the significance of social media in modern society, many individuals and organisations use these platforms to reach their target audiences and persuade users in order to achieve their goals. For instance, most-followed social media users, known as social media influencers, post marketed content to persuade and influence consumer purchase intention towards certain brands (Hudders et al., 2020).

Politicians have also jumped on the bandwagon by utilizing the social media to reach out to the public and disseminate political contents. For example, over 4,500 United States (U.S) political members, consisting of Congress members, state officials and governors, use social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (Pew Research Centre, 2020). These platforms enable political candidates to engage with voters, reach out and influence the general public (Stier et al., 2018). These politicians have been utilising different linguistic strategies on their social media platforms to appeal to public opinion (Fanani et al., 2020). Persuasive language is used to reinforce, shape, or even change the audience's views by utilising the language resources that appeal to the audience. For example, during the United States of America presidential election in 2008, Barack Obama utilised digital technology on various networking platforms and launched a powerful, persuasive strategy to lead in the race during the election, raising awareness and financial support for his campaign (Enli, 2017).

Many studies have been conducted on rhetorical appeals used by politician on days leading to the general election (Fanani et al., 2020; Enli, 2017). Meanwhile, other scholars (e.g., Rossini et al., 2018; Yoo & Zúñiga, 2019) have been more interested on broader patterns of political persuasion and communicative strategies in the social mediascape and looked beyond the period of campaigns and general elections to better understand the nuances of politicians' communicative practices in digital means. The motivation for conducting this study was to examine the different communicative practices utilized by a few selected Malaysian politicians dubbed as 'the new generation of politicians' beyond the election period. Their social media communication on a specific issue which was the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis in December 2021 was the subject of this study. The flood crisis went viral on the internet and these politicians were among those who had been actively posting updates on the issue on their social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during the crisis.

### **Research Objectives**

This research was carried out to explore the persuasive strategies and rhetorical appeals used by a few selected Malaysian politicians on social media to influence public opinion. Politicians often use social media platforms to persuade the general public by applying techniques that stimulate public reactions. The posts are strategically curated to strengthen the exposure and reinforce their image in the public sphere.

Hence, the objectives of the current studies are

- a) To analysed the different communicative practices used in the media posts of the new generation of Malaysian politicians.
- b) To determine which type of rhetorical appeals was most commonly used among the selected politicians.

To address the research objectives, two research questions were formulated:

- a) What were the different communicative practices used in the media posts of the new generation of Malaysian politicians?
- b) Which type of rhetorical appeals was most commonly used among the selected Malaysian politicians?

### **New Generation of Politician**

The term 'new generation of politicians' in this study is used to refer to young politicians who seem to be potentially influential political forces that reshape the political realm (Towler et al., 2019; Zummo et al., 2020). These breed of politicians are keen in reforming the existing system or institution (Olsen, 2018). In Malaysia, the new generation of politicians are often the ones who draw closer attention to the issues of corruption, cronyism, and nepotism (Kamaruddin & Rogers, 2020).

### **Rhetorical Appeals**

Rhetoric is a means to persuade the audience through speech, language, and stylistic techniques (La Torre et al., 2020). Using the three Aristotelian rhetoric forms of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, scholars argued that persuasion relies on a rhetorical strategy "starting with *pathos*, followed by *logos*, and ending with the *ethos*" (p.3) as a process to shape common beliefs and persuade an audience for different purposes in various ways. *Ethos*, in general, focuses on appealing to the readers' belief system to convince them and change their thinking (Saaty, 2020). The appeals using *ethos* are generally framed by establishing the credibility of the communicator. For instance, politicians seek to attract and appeal to voters by establishing and improving their credibility and reputation. Next, *pathos* is described as the appeal to elicit and trigger audiences' emotions (Hill, 2019). Saaty (2020) affirmed that *pathos* is a rhetorical device that an individual uses to invoke the audience's feelings, and places the audience into the right frame of mind to be receptive to a message. In the use of *pathos* for political purposes on social media, these posts present emotional and motivational appeals. On the other hand, *logos* refers to the appeals of reasons and facts (Mshvenieradze, 2013). For instance, Isai et al (2020) stressed that *logos* uses logic, justification, argumentation, and evidence. In a political context, posts categorised in this type of appeal present facts and evidence to support the politicians' claims.

### **Communicative Practices and Social Media Platform**

Communicative practice is a form of interaction between two or more individuals. Social media sites are interactive communication systems that enable internet users to create, communicate and exchange content with one another across platforms (Swani & Milne, 2017). In understanding the association between politics and social media use, Rossini et al (2018) conducted a study on the contents politicians put up on different online platforms. It was found that candidates are inclined to use Twitter as a site to post persuasive content as well as negative political attacks on their opponents. In contrast, Facebook, is used to curate posts more on personal traits.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted Zhang and Wildermuth's (2009) qualitative content analysis approach, which is a research method for the subjective interpretation of text data content through the systematic classification process of coding and detecting themes or patterns. The results of the study were then presented quantitatively using frequency count.

### **Data for the Study**

The data for the study were Facebook posts and Twitter tweets posted by five (5) selected Malaysian politicians. The researcher used purposive sampling for this study as proposed by Campbell et al (2020), since this method is best suited to meet the study objectives. This study

revolved around five (5) politicians dubbed as the new generation of Malaysian politicians. The politicians selected for the study were Syed Saddiq who was labelled as [P1], Hannah Yeoh was labelled as [P2], while Fahmi Fadzil, Amirudin Shari and Kasthuri Patto were labelled as [P3], [P4] and [P5] respectively. The politicians were selected based on the specified requirements which were: (a) being keen on reformation, (b) being critical of the government and societal issues, and (c) having social media platforms.

To better understand the communicative practices of these politicians in relation to Aristotle's mode of persuasion, research data were collected from the politicians' open Facebook and Twitter pages. The researcher went online and selectively collected relevant Facebook and Twitter posts on a specific issue which was the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis. Taman Sri Muda, a residential area in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, experienced the worst flash flood in December 2021. Many residents lost their homes and even lives as parts of the residential area were inundated in flood waters as deep as four metres. The incident caught the local government off guard and caused an uproar among the public for the lack of coordination in the rescue efforts during the crisis. Facebook and Twitter posts put up by the selected politicians dated from the 17th of December 2021 to the 10th of January 2022 were used for the study. The selected posts were those which contains reasonable evidence of calls for more government accountability on the issue. The data collection procedure is shown in the *Figure 1*.



Figure 1: Process of Data Collection and Data Analysis

### Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was adopted for the study. The first phase of data analysis involved sorting the identified posts and tweets according to a criteria set for the study. These posts were then coded and the main themes were identified in relation to *ethos, pathos and logos*. The emerging sub-themes from the main themes were then identified.

### Results

Table 1

*Total number of Facebook Posts and Tweets*

Politician	Number of Facebook and Twitter Posts During the Study Period
Syed Saddiq [1]	20
Hannah Yeoh [2]	6
Fahmi Fadzil [3]	3
Amirudin Shari [4]	40
Kasthuri Patto [5]	5

Seventy-four (74) Facebook posts and Tweeter 'tweets' were collected for this study. Table 1 shows the total number of posts for each politician. Based on Table 1, it can be seen that

Amirudin Shari (P4) being the Menteri Besar at the time of study, put up the highest number of related posts during the study period, which was forty (40) posts altogether. It was followed by Syed Saddiq (P1) who put up twenty (20) related posts. The rest of the politicians, Hannah Yeoh (P2), Fahmi Fadzil (P3) and Kasthuri Patto (P5) put up a lower number of related posts which were 6, 3 and 5 posts respectively.

### Themes and Sub-themes

The politicians' communicative practices in their Facebook and Tweeter posts were classified based on the use of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* in their persuasive attempts. Thus, *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* were considered as the main themes. Meanwhile, sub-themes that emerged from *ethos* were: (a) Humanitarian Activities, (b) Personal Accomplishment, (c) Story and (d) Future Plans, while the sub-themes which emerged from *pathos* were (e) Emotional Appeal and (f) Motivational Appeal, and finally the sub-themes which emerged from *logos* were (g) Facts and Figures, and (h) Rational Reasoning. Table 2 summarises the sub-themes which emerged from data analysis.

Table 2

*Sub-themes that emerged from data analysis*

Themes	Sub-themes			
Ethos	a) Humanitarian Activities	b) Personal Accomplishment	c) Story	d) Future Plans
Pathos	a) Emotional Appeals	b) Motivational Appeals		
Logos	a) Facts & Figures	b) Rational Reasoning		

### Findings

Examples of the use of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* found in the politicians' Facebook and Twitter posts will be discussed in the following section. Some of the posts and tweets were in Malay, thus, they were translated into English. The excerpts were taken directly from the politician's social media sites and had not been edited or paraphrased.

#### The Use of *Ethos* to Portray Credibility

During the period of the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis, the politicians posted updates of their humanitarian activities in response to the crisis. For example, Syed Saddiq [1] informed the general public from time to time about his activities in response to the situation.

*"Saya singgah beli barang-barang keperluan untuk mangsa banjir. Saya akan masuk balik kawasan Sri Muda untuk sampaikan barang-barang keperluan untuk mangsa banjir."* (P1/POST12/T/19-12)

Translation: "I stopped by to buy necessities for the flood victims. I will go back to the Sri Muda area to deliver the necessary items to the flood victims."

In the excerpt, the politician used the word "*saya*" which means "I" to portray that he personally dealt with the issue and highlighted his timely response to the plight of Taman Sri Muda flood victims. Another example of *ethos* was a post by Amirudin Shari [4] highlighting his achievement as a government minister who led the search and rescue activities. This is to portray that he was efficient in dealing with the crisis.

*“Setakat pagi ini seramai 300 org penduduk di kawasan Sri Muda telah berjaya diselamatkan dan dipindahkan ke pusat penempatan sementara...”*

P4/POST25/T/19-12

Translation: “As of this morning 300 residents from Sri Muda area have been successfully rescued and moved to the temporary shelter...”

Common occurrences of *ethos* can also be seen through stories being posted by these politicians. It is believed politicians used this persuasive appeal in the hope of building a connection with the public. Hence, based on a post by Syed Saddiq [P1], he tried to depict the story of hard work by both his team and the public to emphasise good camaraderie.

*“Kami pergi rumah ke rumah untuk bantu. Semangat mereka luar biasa. Hilang rasa penat bila jumpa mereka.”* P1/POST14/T/20-12

Translation: “We went from home to home to help. Their spirit is extraordinary. Our tiredness disappeared when we met them. ”

In addition, it was also found that the use of stories can be one of the persuasive elements as it portrays credibility when informing the public about a situation. Another example was a post made by Hannah Yeoh [2]. She related her rescue effort by detailing the incident as a narrative.

*“By the time I left at about 430pm, my team was very tired. I also needed to rest. 2 out of my 3 kayaks suffered some damage on the undercarriage as we got stuck at some of the sharp fences...”* P2/POST3/F/20-12

Her narrative was meant to portray her credibility as a politician. Her detailed account of the rescue efforts proved that she was actually there at the scene working side by side with her team members.

### **Building Trustworthiness With Future Plans**

Trustworthiness is a valuable component in politics. Based on the analysis, it can be seen that Hannah Yeoh [2] built trustworthiness with the general public by providing information on plans to mitigate the risk of future crises through the use of phrases like “*urgent actions by Government to help flood victims*”. Regardless of the issue being discussed, an audience is more likely to be convinced by someone they trust. Hannah Yeoh [2] also posted the following updates:

*“Press conference in Parliament today on urgent actions by Government to help flood victims: (1) paid leave for flood victims to clean up home, (2) waive water bill and electricity bill, (3) announce financial assistance and how to apply, (4) use SMS MKN correctly, (5) military assistance for rescue mission”* (P2/POST1/F/20-12)

The post was meant to convince the public that she was aware of what needed at the ground where the victims were suffering and in dire need of assistance especially from the government. Thus, the post was a way of convincing the public that she was on their side, and she was in parliament as their representative.



**Pathos Used as Emotional and Motivational Appeal**

*Pathos* affects the emotions of the audience. In this study, *pathos* was used in a variety of ways, which include its use as emotional and motivational appeals. Syed Saddiq [1] managed to draw the public's sympathy by posting multiple public apologies.

*"Saya minta maaf sangat. Memang banyak DM yang saya terima untuk bantu kawasan Taman Sri Muda Shah Alam. Team MUDA ada di sana." (P1/POST4/T/19-12)*

Translation: "I am very sorry. I did receive many DM to help Taman Sri Muda Shah Alam. Team MUDA is there (to help)."

He used the words like "*Saya minta maaf sangat*" which means "I am very sorry" posted across his social media platforms to show remorse and shame for the government's shortcoming and late response to the plight of the flood victims during the tragedy. His humble apology was meant to appeal to public's emotion by showing his sincerity and empathy. Meanwhile, Fahmi Fadzil [3] used *pathos* as a strategy to appeal to the audience by highlighting the weakness of the government ministers in addressing the flood crisis. For instance, he described the sufferings of the flood victims vividly, while sarcastically criticizing some ministers who went for vacation during the flood crisis.

*"Time banjir, rakyat hilang rumah, hilang harta, hilang nyawa ni ada Menteri yang tengah bercuti rupanya." (P3/POST1/F/24-12)*

Translation: "During the flood, people lost their homes, properties and lives but it seems there are ministers who are on vacation."

Another example was a post by Kasthuri Patto [5] in which she highlighted the number of casualties during the tragedy in Taman Sri Muda to gain the public's sympathy towards the victims while stirring up public's outrage by highlighting the ministers' incompetency.

*"Yesterday a convoy of Ministers went to Sri Muda. What did you bring with you? How did it feel meeting families hungry, cold & stranded? Today a volunteer died. 9 ppl died. Let that sink in." (P5/POST5/T/21-12)*

**Describing Situations to Maximise Emotion and Motivation**

In relation to Aristotle's *pathos*, persuasion with the use of emotions as a strategy can also create an action when the audience is moved by the context. Based on the findings, it was found that Syed Saddiq [1] often utilised *pathos* in his appeal to the public to take action and provide aid to the flood victims.

*"Ada yang sampai menjerit kerana lapar, penat & marah (Translation: Some of the victims are screaming due to hunger, fatigue and anger). I am sorry. I wish I could do more. Do help them out at maribantu.my/banjir" (P1/POST9/T/20-12)*

*"Masih ada dalam 38 manga banjir yang sedang menunggu tempat di Pusat Perlindungan Sementara. Bantu mana yang boleh." (P1/POST17/T/19-12)*

Translation: "There are still 38 flood victims who are waiting for placement at the Temporary Shelter. Help in whatever way possible."

The choice of words in both posts can invoke a sense of motivation among the audience to help the victims. During the crisis, the flood victims' struggles were placed at the centre of the messages to maximise the impact on public's emotions, and thus, motivate them to take action.

### Logos as a Persuasive Appeal

*Logos* is an appeal based on logic or facts. In other words, *logos* use facts and evidence to persuade a reader to see the validity of the argument. For instance, Amirudin Shari [4] presented the statistics of his rescue efforts. He also provided detailed updates with regard to the assistance given by the government as well as the numbers of aid allocated for the victims of Taman Sri Muda flood crisis.

*"Kemaskini 9.50 pagi, 31 Disember 2021 : Sebanyak 180 lori pembersihan @KDEBWaste sedang berada di Taman Sri Muda. Dijangkakan 200 lori pembersihan akan digerakkan ke Taman Sri Muda hari ini bagi mengeluarkan sampah-sampah dari kediaman dan jalan." (P4/POST8/F/31-12)*

Translation: "Update 9.50a.m, 31 December 2021: A total of 180 sanitation lorries @KDEBWaste are at Taman Sri Muda. 200 sanitation lorries are expected to be deployed to Taman Sri Muda today to remove the wastes from the affected homes and roads.

Similar findings can be seen in posts published by Syed Saddiq [1] in which he transparently posted the amount of donation received for the flood victims. He also pointed out that an audit would be conducted to ensure transparency.

*"UPDATE 02.19pm: RM306,834.00! Setiap ringgit & sen HANYA untuk tujuan misi banjir seluruh negara. AUDIT akan dibuat & dikongsi kepada semua." (P1/POST1/F/19-12)*

Translation: "UPDATE 02.19pm: RM306,834.00! Each ringgit and sen ONLY for the purpose of helping flood victims all over the country. An AUDIT will be conducted and the outcome will be shared with everybody."

### Adopting Rational Reasoning to Persuade

The fact that these new generation of Malaysian politicians dared to question the government's inaction during the tragedy strongly planted their credibility among the audience. In the excerpt below, Syed Saddiq [P1] highlighted the government's failure in taking timely actions. He provided rational reasoning by drawing a parallel between the government's response to the flood crisis and another government-sponsored programme which was heavily promoted.

*"Ya Allah!!! Dah 24jam tapi masih tiada update dari @MKNJPM. Mana SMS blasting? Mana whole-of-nation coordination? Bila buat Expo Keluarga Malaysia besar besaran boleh pula spam SMS Rakyat kita sedang penat, sakit & lapar. Show leadership please." (P1/POST16/T/19-12)*

Translation: " Ya Allah!!! It has been 24 hours but there is still no update from @MKNJPM. Where is the SMS blasting? Where is the whole-of-nation



coordination? During Expo Keluarga Malaysia there were major spamming of SMS. Our people are tired, sick and hungry. Show leadership please.”

Hannah Yeoh [P2] also drew the public’s attention to the fact that although Malaysia is known for owning a submarine, the government failed to provide boats for the rescue mission during the tragedy.

“A nation known for submarine purchase but cannot deploy rescue boats fast enough to save citizens” (P2/POST5/F/20-12)

### Difference in Communicative Practices

During the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis, it was found that different politicians adopted different rhetorical appeals in conveying their messages to the audience. Table 2 summarises the frequency of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* being utilised by the five politicians.

Table 3

#### Communicative Practices of the New Generation of Malaysian Politicians

Politician	Rhetorical Appeal Found in the Politicians’ Social Media Posts		
	Ethos	Pathos	Logos
Syed Saddiq	8	9	6
Hannah Yeoh	1	3	2
Fahmi Fadzil	1	2	-
Amirudin Shari	7	1	32
Kasthuri Patto	1	2	2

Based on Table 3 it can be seen that the most common rhetorical appeal used was *logos*. The politicians prefer to use facts and rational reasoning to convince the audience and to make their points.

### Discussion

The first research question of the study is: *What were the different communicative practices used in the media posts of the new generation of Malaysian politicians?* As outlined in the findings, the politicians used either *logos*, *pathos* or *ethos* to appeal to the audience for financial assistance, to communicate with the audience about the government’s lack of action and rationality, and more. The study revealed that these politicians used rational reasoning or *logos* most in their attempts to persuade the general public. According to Lewis and Weigert (2012), cognitive trust is built on rational reasoning. Hence, when the message is understood with clarity and purposes, it gives a sense of trustworthiness and credibility reflected on the politician. These results resonated with past studies conducted by Stucki and Seger (2018) which concluded that backing arguments with evidence increases their trustworthiness. The study found that *ethos* was the second most common appeal adopted by the new generation of Malaysian politicians in their social media posts during the Taman

Sri Muda flood crisis. According to Varpio (2018), *ethos* is a personal appeal that speaks of the writer's character, reliability, and trustworthiness. It demonstrates the sender's authority and credibility. In the study, the politicians adopted *ethos* in portraying credibility in the context of their humanitarian activities, personal accomplishments and stories. Stucki et al. (2018) provided an in-depth analysis of Wisse's (1989) work in which *ethos* has two variants in rhetoric: (a) the speaker's reliability in suggesting that he will tell the truth and (b) the quality of the speaker in winning the sympathy of the hearers. As politicians are public figures, it is important for them to showcase their involvement in any events. The use of *ethos* would further establish their credibility, leading to these politicians being perceived as trustworthy by the audience, which is a central aspect of this rhetorical appeal.

The selected politicians in the study used *pathos* to appeal to the audience's emotion. In certain circumstances, emotional appeal can be more effective at persuading the audience than a rational message. This is achieved by triggering the human senses and providing self-satisfaction to the readers (Saylor, 2019). Politicians would construct their messages to generate more emotional reactions. It was evident in the study that the politicians had used the flood victims' situations or sufferings to further invoke the audience's emotions which would subsequently create a motivational appeal. This finding is similar to Bronstein et al. (2018)'s study in which politicians used *pathos* to post information in areas such as economy, society and security issues to create an effective alliance with the public.

One other major finding based on the data analysis was that Amirudin Shari [P4] posted more on the progress being made after the crisis as compared to other politicians. The explanation for these disparities is that as the national Member of Parliament and the then Menteri Besar of Selangor, he had more official work on which he could report to the general public. The finding resonates that of Kelm's (2020) who concluded that there are differences in the amount of broadcast information among politicians depending on their positions in the government.

Next, the study revealed that each politician has different communicative practices based on the objectives of the communicative acts. For instance, it is revealed that Syed Saddiq [P1] used more *ethos* in his posts across his social media platforms during the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis. Whereas Hannah Yeoh [P2], Amirudin Shari [P4] and Kasthuri Pato [P5] used more *logos*. Last but not least, it is also found that Fahmi Fadzil [P3] adopted more *pathos* in his social media posts to achieve his persuasive aims.

Finally, the second research question which was; a) *Which type of rhetorical appeals was most commonly used among the selected Malaysian politicians?* Based on Table 2, it was found that the most commonly used rhetorical appeal in the posts by these politicians was *logos*. During the study period, forty-two (42) posts had used *logos*, eighteen (18) posts had utilised *ethos* while seventeen (17) posts had used *pathos* rhetorical appeals.

## Conclusion

It can be concluded based on the findings that the politicians' rhetorical appeal as well as the differences in their communicative practices depend on their persuasive aims and their position in the ruling government. Additionally, while the distinction of these communicative practices seems apparent on the surface, establishing the boundaries between *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* could be tricky as they overlap and co-exist throughout the persuasive acts. This implies that the speaker may express their thoughts in favour of rational arguments while at the same time invoke the audience's emotion (Cockcroft et al., 2014, Romanova & Sminova, 2019).

### Study Limitation and Future Research

This study has a few limitations that can be improved in future research. The impact of the use of rhetorical appeals by the new generation of Malaysian politician such as *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, during the Taman Sri Muda flood crisis on the readers was interpreted by the researchers themselves. Therefore, it is recommended for future research, the general public's opinion and response could be included in the data collection so that the effects of the persuasive appeals can be analysed from the perspective of the general public. In addition, the current study only looked at the texts in the posts without considering whether the posts were accompanied by pictures or videos. Therefore, it is recommended that the aspect of vividness in the communicative acts should also be considered in future research.

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