



Strategic communication and the role of food bank organisations in civic activism through social media during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evolving roles of food bank organisations in civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitated through social media. Using a qualitative approach, it analysed 309 social media posts and 15 in-depth interviews with key members of Food Bank Malaysia and Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia. Thematic analysis identified four critical roles food banks played during the pandemic: (1) building bridges among stakeholders, (2) supporting grassroots initiatives, (3) providing innovative CSR solutions, and (4) advocating for civic activism. These roles positioned food banks as central hubs, connecting underprivileged communities, government bodies, grassroots communities, corporations, and NGOs. Strategic communication via social media was key to mobilizing resources, fostering collaboration, and building long-term community resilience. This study addresses a research gap in understanding the role of NGOs in civic activism during the pandemic in Malaysia. By integrating concepts from civic activism and strategic communication, it highlights how NGOs use social media to engage in mutual aid, volunteerism, and organizing efforts. Building on these findings, the study develops a conceptual framework that positions food bank organisations as central coordinators of stakeholder collaboration. This framework provides actionable insights for a wide range of NGOs, including humanitarian aid organisations, disaster relief groups, and public health bodies. These organisations can apply the framework by leveraging social media for civic engagement, fostering partnerships with different stakeholders, and coordinating multi-stakeholder communication strategies, all while enhancing resource-sharing and fostering collective responsibility. By adapting these strategies to various crises—from natural disasters to public health emergencies—NGOs can improve their civic activism efforts both during and after crises. Ultimately, the study offers valuable contributions to theory and practice, advancing the understanding of civic activism and strategic communication in crisis contexts and beyond.

Keywords: **Civic activism, strategic communication, food bank organisation, COVID-19 pandemic, social media**

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened global inequalities, especially in Malaysia, where lockdowns worsened poverty and highlighted the inadequacies of state relief (Daud, 2021; Shah et al., 2020; Yeo, 2021). This crisis spurred grassroots civic activism, with crowdfunding and bottom-up initiatives led by NGOs, corporations, and grassroots communities (Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2020). Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter played a critical role in mobilizing support, for campaigns such as #KitaJagaKita and the Food Bank Campaign (Abbas et al., 2021; Kasmani, 2023; Leong & Rosli, 2021). Food bank organisations became the focal point, leveraging their expertise in community engagement and advocacy to combat food insecurity. They sustained donations, facilitated CSR initiatives, and raised awareness (Abbas et al., 2021; Leong & Rosli, 2021; Shah et al., 2020).

While prior studies have explored stakeholder roles in civic activism (Alipao et al., 2021), there is limited research on how NGOs, specifically in Malaysia, performed civic activism during the pandemic and their interrelationships with stakeholders. Though social media's role in disaster risk reduction and crisis communication is well-documented (Ayub et al., 2022; Grover et al., 2019; Ogie et al., 2022), further research is needed on its impact in transforming civic activism from an organisational perspective. This study addresses this gap by examining the evolving role of food bank NGOs through the lenses of civic activism and strategic communication.

The theoretical framework combines civic activism with social media strategic communication to examine how food bank organisations addressed community issues through mutual aid, solidarity, volunteerism, and practical organising (Laville, 2016; Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2020). Strategic communication in this context helps to investigate the relationships between the organisation and various stakeholders, including volunteers, donors, NGOs, corporations, underprivileged communities, and potential civic activists (Laville, 2016; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2020). By focusing on continuous interaction and communication facilitated by social media platforms, the study explored how food bank organisations engaged in civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Malaysian context.

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine the Food Bank Campaign in Malaysia from an organisational perspective (Hartley, 2004; Yin, 2013). Focusing on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, it combined a close analysis of food bank organisations' posts with employee and volunteer interviews to trace their evolving roles and interactions with stakeholders in performing civic activism during COVID-19 (Kasmani, 2023). The research offers insights into NGOs' strategic communication with diverse stakeholders, their contribution to community engagement and food assistance, and proposes a conceptual framework for understanding food banks' roles within the social media landscape—one that can be adapted by other organisations to strengthen civic activism in times of crisis.

The next section discusses the literature review, followed by the research methodology. The findings and discussion are then elaborated, leading to a conceptual framework of the role of food bank organisations. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolving civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic

Civic activism addresses social, economic, and political issues to drive societal change (Castells, 1997; Touraine, 1977). During the COVID-19 pandemic, it shifted toward grassroots efforts, emphasising mutual aid, solidarity, volunteerism, and organising (Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2019). Solidarity and mutual aid play a vital role in modern movements, especially during economic crises (Gravante & Poma, 2020; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019; Laville, 2016; Templeton et al., 2020; Youngs, 2020).

In this context, food bank organisations emerged as significant civic actors that extended their traditional roles beyond charity and aid distribution. They became communicative bridges that connected volunteers, donors, and communities through both online and offline participation, fostering collaboration and civic engagement. In the context of food bank organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic, civic activism focused on engaging the community directly, mobilizing resources efficiently, and establishing support networks that ensured continuous aid and engagement (Laville, 2016; Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2020).

However, existing literature remains limited in explaining how formal NGOs such as food banks transform from service providers into civic intermediaries that both mediate and mobilise public participation through communication. Most studies focus on operational or humanitarian aspects, while neglecting the communicative processes that sustain collective activism. Therefore, this research aims to fill this theoretical and empirical gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the communicative strategies, digital engagement practices, and collaborative mechanisms through which NGOs perform civic activism. It explores the changing roles and interactions among government entities, grassroots communities, corporations, and NGOs, showing how these collaborations collectively shaped Malaysia's civic activism during the pandemic.

Strategic communication and social media in civic activism

Strategic communication is essential for organisations, serving as the foundation for their establishment and sustainability (Cooren et al., 2011). It balances organisational goals with public concerns, facilitates collaboration, and builds lasting relationships (Cheney et al., 2010; Grunig & Repper, 2008; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011). During the pandemic, social media became vital for civic activism, empowering recipients to become advocates (Ayub et al., 2022). While traditionally top-down (Hallahan et al., 2007), strategic communication has evolved into a participatory and dialogic process where publics contribute to meaning-making and action.

In this transformed environment, social media operated not merely as a dissemination tool but also as an infrastructure of coordination and collaboration. Food bank organisations strategically employed these platforms to maintain transparency, mobilize volunteers, and encourage collective participation, turning followers into active civic partners.

From an organisational perspective, strategic communication helps maintain institutional structures, especially for those benefiting from the status quo (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011). It promotes the organisation's perspective (Ihlen, 2009) and fosters collaboration on shared platforms (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011). By shaping communication

through ongoing interactions, it builds relationships within the organisation, with stakeholders, and the public (Cheney et al., 2010).

Integrating insights from the civic activism theory and strategic communication scholarship, this study investigated how Malaysian food-bank NGOs strategically used social media to perform collaborative civic activism during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research conceptualizes food bank organisations as strategic civic platforms that facilitated multi-stakeholder cooperation through social media. This approach reconceptualizes NGOs not as static aid distributors but as communicative actors that coordinate emotional, material, and social resources to sustain civic engagement. Through this lens, social media becomes both a communication channel and an arena of activism, where transparency, empathy, and collaboration translate into collective civic action.

METHODS

The selected qualitative case study (Hartley, 2004; Yin, 2013) examined the Food Bank Campaign to explore how food bank organisations engaged in civic activism during COVID-19 in Malaysia. Drawing on in-depth interviews and social media data, it analysed the dynamics of civic activism in real-life contexts. Organisations were selected based on active social media use, follower numbers, and engagement levels, with the study focusing on Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia (YYFB) and Food Bank Malaysia (FBM), two leading non-profits that supported the campaign via Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

A total of 309 social media posts were collected, capturing communication strategies from June 30 to December 31, 2021, during the peak of Food Bank campaigns. Content from Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, including shares, comments, and replies, was systematically analysed. The focus on textual content reveals how non-profit food banks navigated social media, highlighting engagement patterns, communication strategies, and responses to community needs during the crisis. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with directors, volunteers, project managers, and communication team members from Food Bank Malaysia and Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia. Constant comparison was used to analyse the transcribed qualitative data and identify trends in the participants' responses (Strauss, 1987).

Given the limited research on NGO roles and strategic communication during the pandemic, this study adopted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is well-suited for examining organisational roles through strategic communication on social media, where predefined coding may miss important data nuances (Schreier, 2012).

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. Two coders independently analysed a 20% sample to refine the codebook, achieving substantial intercoder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus before applying the final coding scheme to the entire dataset.

NVivo software facilitated data organisation, while reflexive memoing and triangulation between interviews and social media data enhanced validity and analytical transparency.

FINDINGS

During the pandemic, food bank organisations in Malaysia played a key role in addressing socio-economic challenges, using social media to reach their target audience, build trust, and engage stakeholders (He & Harris, 2020; Pleyers, 2020). Social media platforms enabled food banks to share information, coordinate resources, and strengthen community engagement, transforming their roles in civic activism (Laville, 2016; Youngs, 2020). The interaction between food banks and stakeholders evolved through social media, significantly altering their civic activism roles (Castells, 2007), as will be discussed in further detail.

In this context, the study synthesised examples and concepts from the collected social media posts into four categories, highlighting the evolving roles of food bank organisations during the pandemic through social media: (1) building synergistic bridges among different stakeholders in civic activism, (2) supporting grassroots community-driven initiatives, (3) providing new CSR solutions, and (4) advocating for civic activism. To provide an understanding of the prevalence of these themes within different social media platforms, Table 1 illustrates the distribution of qualitative codes across each social media platform, highlighting the prevalence of the identified themes. These thematic categories generalise individual examples into broader categories, encapsulating overlapping and related trends in the material. Each of these themes will be analysed and illustrated using relevant examples from the datasets in following sections.

Table 1. Coding of themes

	Total	YYFB Facebook	YYFB Twitter	YYFB Instagram	FBM Facebook
Building synergistic bridges for different stakeholders in civic activism	76	36	18	15	7
Supporting grassroots community-driven initiatives	101	39	14	18	30
Providing new CSR solutions	92	37	30	19	6
Advocating civic activism	121	45	54	12	10

Note. YYFB – Yayasan Food Bank and FBM – Food Bank Malaysia

Building synergistic bridges for different stakeholders in civic activism

Food bank NGOs played a key role during the pandemic by building synergistic bridges amongst stakeholders in civic activism. They used hashtags like #wecandothistogether, and #kitajagakita to foster unity and collaboration, reinforcing a sense of shared responsibility. Similarly, hashtags like #stopfoodwaste connected activists with shared goals, encouraging a unified response. This strategic use of social media amplified the reach and impact of their advocacy by spreading messages to like-minded groups. Additionally, food bank organisations addressed the pandemic's impact by emphasizing shared experiences and calling for mutual support. Through inclusive language and community engagement, they reinforced a collective identity, strengthening bonds among volunteers and partners, further driving collaboration and support efforts.

...facing the pandemic together. Let's support each other on this journey...
(YYFB, Facebook post, July 30, 2021)

Food bank organisations also draw on national pride to unite diverse stakeholders. Using language and hashtags such as #weareonenation, they celebrate shared identity and goals. For example, a post for the 58th Malaysia Day reminded followers that, despite challenges, Malaysians share one spirit and purpose, while comments stressed that donations were given regardless of race or skin colour, underscoring community unity.

Happy 58th Malaysia Day! In the face of challenges, we remain united. We are one nation with one goal and one Malaysia.

(YYFB, Facebook post, September 16, 2021)

...the presence of applicants who complained of running out of stock of kitchen items from various layers of society regardless of race and skin colour.

(FBM, Facebook post, December 19, 2021)

By reinforcing a shared identity, food bank organisations bring together diverse stakeholders and create a cohesive, collaborative environment that strengthens civic activism. This synthesis is evident in their partnerships with other NGOs; drawing on local authorities' data on B40 communities, they adopt a collaborative distribution approach, work with groups such as KAWAN, and engage volunteers who know local contexts, including Orang Asli areas. These coordinated efforts highlight their key role in bridging gaps and reaching marginalised communities.

... Collaborating with residential associations, community village heads, and associations for urban poor in places like PPR in the Klang Valley, the organisation gathers data to pinpoint families in need ...

(YYFB, 1)

...Government agencies and NGOs like Smart and Malaysian Jariah Friends collaborate, reinforcing our commitment to collective well-being.

(YYFB, Instagram post, October 21, 2021)

Social media posts further illustrate the close partnerships between food bank organisations and other NGOs, often featuring mutual acknowledgements and shared content that highlight joint initiatives with partners such as Al Baasith Negeri Sembilan and MRA Perak. These posts increase the visibility of collaborative efforts and signal a strong collective commitment to civic activism. Interviews reinforced this picture; one interviewee explained that partnerships with other NGOs allow the food bank organisation to maintain a consolidated database of beneficiaries and supplies across multiple food banks, reducing duplication of aid and improving operational efficiency. By synthesising resources, data, and expertise from diverse NGOs, the food bank organisation is able to perform more effective civic activism and better assist those in need during the pandemic.

...Distinguishing itself from regular food banks, this specialized Food Bank requires a systematic approach. The database contains beneficiary names and tracks the assistance provided by various NGO organisations, ensuring that the support teams make a meaningful impact multiple times.

(YYFB, 3)

Food bank organisations actively engage grassroots communities, including donors and the underprivileged, by facilitating community food banks through sustained collaborations with corporations and individuals. For example, a six-month partnership led to the establishment of a community food bank in Kuala Tahan, Pahang, providing accessible food provisions through a grassroots-driven model. As noted by the chairman, even overseas donors contacted the organisation to contribute funds, while the organisation managed food procurement on their behalf. By acting as an intermediary that links local communities with distant donors and institutional partners, the food bank organisation builds a wider support network and reinforces its role in civic activism.

...launching a community food bank in Kuala Tahan – a bridge between donors and those in need. (YYFB, Facebook post, September 21, 2021)

...the community collaborates with us to monitor and register families. We provide a one-day training session for the community to learn how to monitor operations, seek donations from local sources such as supermarkets and factories, and improve their ability to assist effectively...
(YYFB, 5)

To connect different stakeholders with corporations, food bank organisations engage in collaborative endeavours aimed at rescuing surplus food from manufacturers, wholesalers, hypermarkets, and hotels for distribution to B40 communities. Social media posts demonstrate the organisation's role in connecting corporations with the underprivileged. Additionally, interviews revealed that corporations often approach food bank organisations to develop CSR programs tailored to reach and understand the needs of the underprivileged. These interactions underscore the food bank organisation's crucial role in bridging the gap between corporations and those in need.

We rescue surplus food from the manufacturer, wholesaler, hypermarket and hotel industry; sort and redistribute it to the identified targeted B40 communities. (YYFB, Facebook post, September 3, 2021)

Another dimension of food bank organisations' synthesis efforts is their role in linking the governmental sector with other stakeholders. Social media posts on initiatives such as the "Zero Hunger" mission in Kemaman, Terengganu—conducted with Perkim, NADMA, and SMART—highlight collective state-civil society efforts to address hunger at the grassroots level. Posts featuring events like the launch of National Preparedness Month 2021 and the organisation's advocacy for the Food Donors Protection Act (2020) further demonstrate its close ties with government actors. These collaborations, grounded in pre-existing connections and trust, underscore the organisation's capacity to mobilise government support for NGO and community initiatives.

...Yayasan advocated for the government to pass the food donors protection act in 2020, which was successfully endorsed in February of that year...
(YYFB, 1)

During the pandemic, food bank organisations played a crucial role in fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, demonstrating the transformative potential of civic activism. By connecting donors, grassroots communities, governments, NGOs, and recipients, they effectively addressed the complex challenges posed by the global crisis. This synthesis of efforts not only provided immediate relief, but also strengthened the framework for sustained civic engagement and community resilience.

Supporting grassroots community-driven initiatives

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, food bank organisations have emerged as a dynamic force, championing and facilitating grassroots civic activism. Their active engagement is demonstrated through shares, likes, and expressions of appreciation on social media, underscoring the growing interest in civic initiatives facilitated by these organisations. One of the most notable examples is the initiation of the “Retail Food Bank” (*Food Bank Runcit*), prompted by community requests through social media platforms. The food bank organisation observed that the underprivileged, particularly single fathers and families, sought help through their social media channels. In response, they established the “Retail Food Bank” to cater to these individual needs, showcasing the organisation’s adaptability in addressing specific community requests and using social media as a platform for grassroots civic activism. One interviewee explained that the food bank organisation sustained grassroots civic activism during COVID-19 by organizing the “Retail Food Bank.” This initiative provided essential items to those affected by the pandemic, supported by local communities, and driven by requests received through social media. Donations from grassroots contributors directly fed into the “Retail Food Bank”, facilitating grassroots civic activism.

...The underprivileged ask for help through our social media, so we made the Food Bank Runcit to help them. (YYFB, 2)

The food bank organisations’ success in supporting grassroots civic activism is further evidenced through the establishment of seven community food banks. This model empowers local communities and fosters self-sufficiency. Interviews with founders and managers highlight the organisation’s serious commitment to provisioning these community food banks, not only by providing necessary resources but also by offering training for sustainability. Training sessions empower communities to seek donations locally and operate independently after the initial 3 to 6 months, with ongoing consultation ensuring long-term sustainability. Such efforts indicate that their support for grassroots activism goes beyond short-term relief during the pandemic, sustaining their ability to maintain long-term activism by facilitating them with skills and networks.

...The Food Banking system is crucial for organisations like Food Bank community. In the Food Bank community, requests are made by the community members, lasting for a period of 3-6 months, and there is a systematic stock management with both stock in and stock out procedures... (YYFB, 3)

...We provide a one-day training session for the community to learn how to monitor operations, seek donations from local sources such as supermarkets and factories, and improve their ability to assist effectively...
(YYFB, 3)

...After the initial 3 to 6 months, communities can operate independently, having gained the necessary skills. The organisation continues to offer consultation, allowing the community to sustain its operations for up to a year. This approach promotes self-sufficiency and empowerment within the community...
(YYFB, 3)

The grassroots-initiated programme *Dance for Food 2021* illustrates how food bank organisations support community well-being and empowerment. By mobilising youth and diverse groups such as e-hailing and taxi drivers to address immediate needs, the initiative fostered compassion and shared responsibility. It shows how community-driven efforts, when backed by the food bank organisation, can broaden civic activism by enabling ordinary citizens to contribute to local relief.

...the Dance for Food 2021 project dances its way to success! Young hearts unite to support pandemic-affected communities...
(FBM, Facebook post, September 3, 2021)

Amidst this landscape, the food bank organisation's role as the supporting force for grassroots community-driven initiatives and a catalyst for grassroots civic activism during the pandemic showcases its dedication to community well-being. Through adaptive initiatives, social media engagement, a structured food banking system, and a commitment to sustainability, the organisation has become a central force in fostering empowerment and compassion within diverse grassroots communities. Through these various initiatives, food bank organisations demonstrate their vital role in supporting and sustaining grassroots civic activism, empowering local communities to become self-sufficient and resilient in the long term.

Providing new CSR solutions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, food bank organisations emerged as key designers of new CSR solutions for corporations facing surplus products and heightened expectations for social responsibility. They co-created tailored programmes—such as “Box of Hope,” “Avenue K’indness Food Bank,” “Komunitikitacimb,” and the “Dunkin Food Bank Hotmeals Program”—that simultaneously addressed hunger, reduced waste, and strengthened corporate branding. These initiatives combined online and offline donation channels, including RM10-per-purchase schemes with partners like Ticino Paris and Radiant Cares, as well as “Buy & Donate” campaigns such as Ayam Penyet Best’s RM1 nasi lemak, embedding charitable giving into everyday consumer behaviour. Social media promotion foregrounded adaptability, transparency, and visible impact, while successful collaborations with international brands such as Xiaomi underscored the credibility and scalability of these CSR models. Together, these programmes illustrate how food bank

organisations translated corporate needs and public expectations into innovative CSR solutions that advanced both civic activism and corporate responsibility.

...Xiaomi partnered with Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia to donate food and other essentials to 600 families in need. Xiaomi, one of the world's leading technology giants, recently wrapped up its corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaign in Malaysia. (YYFB, Facebook post, November 22, 2021)

...today we and Dunkin' made The Food Bank Hotmeals Program a success by taking care of orphans at Nur Hati orphanage & Aaseh orphanage ... (YYFB, Facebook Post, November 12, 2021)

Ticino Paris collaborates with YFBM to donate RM10 for every online perfume purchase on the website ... (YYFB, Facebook post, July 15, 2021)

Radiant Cares is collaborating with us where every RM10 will be donated to us for every purchase made in Radiant Cares webstore! ... (YYFB, Facebook post, July 13 2021)

The changing role of food bank organisations as new CSR program providers during the pandemic was also emphasized in interviews. The inception of these CSR programs by the NGO occurred during the pandemic, tailored to the specific circumstances and needs of corporations. These CSR programs are structured into two main categories: targeted initiatives and universal approaches. This strategic division underscores an approach aimed at accommodating diverse requirements from both the corporate sector and the communities they serve. The interview emphasized how this tailored strategy ensures that corporate objectives are aligned with the multifaceted needs of communities, thereby enhancing effectiveness and impact.

...the CSR program initiated by NGO started during pandemics.... During the pandemic, the company start to reach us to give money. It's a way to perform their CSR. So the connection start during pandemic and we sustain now to maintain the connection. (YYFB, 7)

...we need to hear from the company idea first for the CSR program. So if they say they want their money to be used in the education, the organisation will design the program to meet their intention. (YYFB, 7)

In sum, the NGO transformed its role to become a CSR program provider during the pandemic, addressing the needs of both corporations and the underprivileged. By introducing innovative and adaptable CSR models, the NGO reshaped corporate philanthropy, promoting sustained impact and systemic change. These efforts have fostered collaboration and collective action, significantly contributing to civic activism and demonstrating the power of strategic CSR programs in driving social good.

Advocating civic activism

During the pandemic, food bank organisations leveraged shared hardships to promote civic activism via social media. Hashtags like #share, #makeadifference, and #FoodBankHeroes fostered engagement, encouraging individuals to share stories of positive change and participate in advocacy. Posts urged participants to amplify the message by sharing content, with activists often expressing appreciation and further spreading the cause across various platforms. Motivational calls, such as “we need you now!” inspired collective action, encouraging Malaysians to become food bank heroes and contribute to civic activism.

...let's change the world together. We need you now! Become our #Food Bankheroes by contributing to initiatives like the 64th Merdeka tour program... (YYFB, Facebook post, September 6, 2021)

...please LIKE and SHARE so more Local and Oversea friends will come to support our activities. (FBM, Facebook post, December 30, 2021)

The food bank organisation's outreach and education efforts highlight its role as a catalyst for civic activism. Collaborating with media outlets like IKIM News and Hot FM, the organisation used broadcasts and educational initiatives to promote food banking and inspire community-driven change. Through social media, they not only distributed supplies but also advocated for food bank initiatives, covering topics like sustainability, food waste reduction, and support for the underprivileged. For example, on the International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste, they raised awareness about reducing food waste to create lasting, positive impacts.

... one of the Yayasan Food Bank Malaysia's key objectives is to help the underprivileged with access to food supplies to reduce the cost of living. Through this, we are also able to reduce food waste and help ease and lessen the cost of living of the underprivileged Malaysians.... (YYFB, Facebook post, November 26, 2021)

a day where food loss & food waste matters! This year we celebrate the first ever observance of the International Day of Awareness of food loss and waste... (YYFB, Facebook post, October 26, 2021)

By using social media to foster a sense of shared identity and purpose, food bank organisations effectively advocated for civic activism. Their strategic use of hashtags and motivational content not only increased engagement but also inspired collective action, highlighting the powerful role of social media in driving positive societal change.

FOOD BANK ORGANISATIONS AS CENTRAL HUBS FOR CIVIC ACTIVISM THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a robust response from various sectors of society to address the resulting socio-economic challenges. In this context, this paper

demonstrates the evolving roles of food bank NGO organisations during the pandemic, highlighting four distinct roles: (1) Building synergistic bridges for different stakeholders, (2) Supporting grassroots community-driven initiatives, (3) Providing new CSR solutions, and (4) Advocating for civic activism. These four evolving roles demonstrate how food bank NGOs became central hubs for civic activism during the pandemic through social media.

By facilitating collaboration, resource distribution, and civic engagement, they played a transformative role. The concluding discussion presents a framework that positions food bank organisations as central hubs, primarily through social media, in coordinating civic activism during the pandemic. By connecting grassroots communities, corporations, government bodies, NGOs, and underprivileged groups, food banks synthesised stakeholder efforts to tackle the global crisis. This framework highlights the critical role of food banks in advocating for civic engagement, fostering collaboration, and leveraging social media to sustain activism during the pandemic.

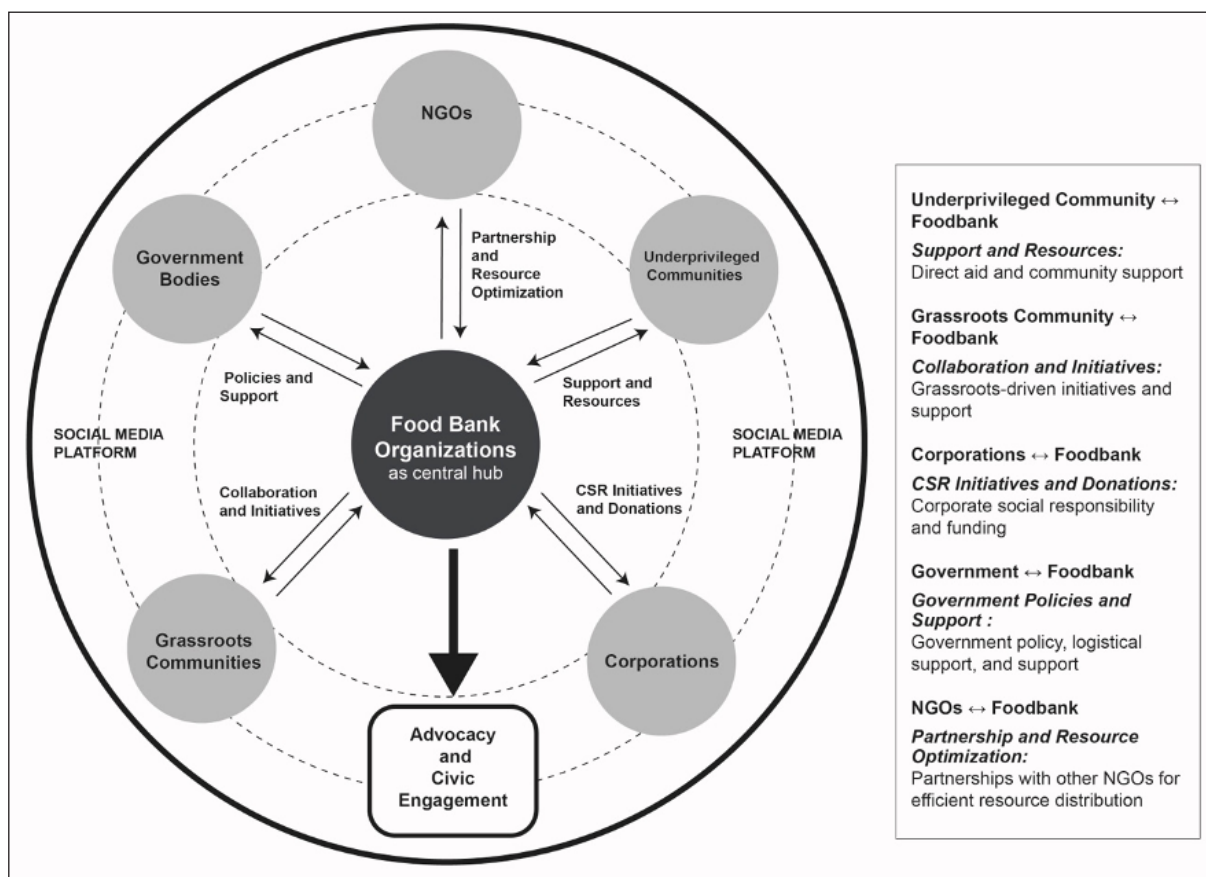


Figure 1. Food bank organisation as central hub for stakeholders' collaboration

Figure 1 illustrates the food bank organisation as the central hub during COVID-19, connecting stakeholders via social media. At its core is the food bank, coordinating civic activism and linking grassroots communities, corporations, government, NGOs, and underprivileged communities. The food bank facilitates collaboration and resource sharing among these stakeholders, enhancing synergy within the network.

Grassroots-driven initiatives and support

Food bank organisations empower grassroots communities by offering training, resources, and support. Initiatives like “Retail Food Bank” demonstrate their adaptability to specific needs (Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2020). For instance, the #Food BankRuncit campaign gained traction on Facebook and Instagram, where posts featuring local volunteers and family recipients invited users to contribute daily essentials through quick-donation links. The campaign hashtag generated community-led reposts and local business partnerships, illustrating how digital storytelling directly mobilized grassroots support and strengthened civic participation. Through social media, NGOs connect grassroots civic activists with underprivileged communities and donors, fostering self-sufficiency and resilience. Ongoing training and consultation ensure long-term sustainability, while linking these communities with corporations and NGOs for additional funding and resources (Laville, 2016).

Corporations’ social responsibility and funding

Collaborations with corporations during the pandemic have led to the development of innovative corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, highlighting the core evolving roles of food bank organisations during this period. Food bank organisations have tailored these programs to meet the specific needs of communities and align with corporate objectives. Examples such as the “Box of Hope” and “Dunkin Food Bank Hotmeals” programs exemplify how CSR efforts can be integrated into the broader framework of civic activism. On social media, the #BoxOfHope campaign encouraged followers to sponsor meal boxes via tagged donation posts, while the #HotMealsForAll posts on Instagram stories showed real-time food deliveries to orphanages, prompting immediate viewer responses and peer-to-peer sharing. These digital touchpoints turned CSR promotion into participatory activism, merging brand visibility with community aid. The use of online platforms for donations and the promotion of these initiatives through social media enhance visibility and engagement, showcasing the tangible outcomes of corporate collaboration (He & Harris, 2020; Nalbantoğlu, 2018). Furthermore, food bank organisations link corporations with grassroots communities and NGOs, enabling a more cohesive and impactful CSR approach.

Government policies and support

Government support is vital for the sustainability and effectiveness of food bank initiatives. To publicise policy support, the #ZeroHungerMission initiative, launched jointly with NADMA and the Ministry of Domestic Trade, used infographics and behind-the-scenes videos on Facebook to demonstrate transparent food distribution. The posts attracted high engagement and comments praising the government and NGO collaboration, enhancing institutional credibility and civic trust. Food bank organisations have successfully collaborated with government bodies to secure policy support, logistical assistance, and funding, which are key to legitimising and scaling operations. The findings show that food bank organisations have influenced policy to promote and protect food donations. Their established relationships with the government have positioned them at the centre of efforts to address food insecurity, facilitating collaboration between government bodies and other stakeholders to ensure a unified approach (Youngs, 2020).

NGO partnership and resource optimization

Food bank organisations, positioned at the centre of the civic activism network, utilise social media to coordinate efforts among various NGOs. Partnerships with other NGOs allow food banks to tap into local insights and volunteer networks, enhancing their outreach to marginalised communities. The consolidation of beneficiary data and shared databases prevents duplication of aid, optimising resource allocation and impact (Pleyers, 2020; Youngs, 2020). This collaborative approach not only enhances the efficiency of aid distribution but also strengthens the collective efforts of civic activism. Additionally, food bank organisations help NGOs connect with corporations and government bodies, facilitating a more integrated and comprehensive support system. A collaborative campaign under the hashtag #TogetherWeFeed, co-organised with NGOs such as KAWAN and Malaysian Jariah Friends, showcased joint food-distribution efforts through shared photo albums and tagged acknowledgments across multiple pages. This cross-posting strategy broadened reach and symbolised collective civic action beyond organisational boundaries.

Underprivileged communities' aid support

The primary beneficiaries of food bank initiatives are underprivileged communities, who are directly impacted by the support provided. Programs like the “Retail Food Bank” (*Food Bank Runcit*) were established in response to specific requests from underprivileged individuals, showcasing the organisation’s responsiveness and adaptability. By providing essential items and support, food banks help alleviate the immediate challenges faced by these communities, fostering a sense of hope and solidarity during the pandemic. Food bank organisations also connect underprivileged communities with other stakeholders, such as NGOs and government programs, to ensure comprehensive support and assistance reaching even the most marginalised underprivileged communities (Laville, 2016; Youngs, 2020). Social-media posts under the campaign #CommunityFood BankStories featured short videos of beneficiaries expressing gratitude, which humanised the relief effort and generated empathetic audience responses. These stories were widely shared, reinforcing the sense of solidarity and motivating continued donations even after lockdown restrictions eased.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that food bank organisations act as central hubs that link donors, grassroots communities, corporations, government agencies, NGOs, and underprivileged groups. Through the strategic use of social media, they moved beyond short-term relief during the pandemic to foster empathy, trust, and longer-term civic engagement and resilience.

Theoretically, the findings extend crisis communication and civic activism scholarship by portraying NGOs as strategic civic platforms that turn communication into coordinated collective action. Practically, the study highlights that effective crisis response relies not only on information dissemination, but on real-time transparency, emotionally resonant storytelling, and collaborative initiatives that give communities a sense of collective ownership. Future research could use comparative and longitudinal

designs to examine how these communication roles vary across contexts and how they evolve post-crisis, particularly in institutionalising community resilience and public trust.

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