



The Aristotelian ethos of Muhyiddin Yassin's *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the *ethos* (characteristics of the speaker) of Malaysia's 8th Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin based on the *Prihatin* Economic Stimulus Package Speech delivered during the Movement Control Order imposed by the government to flatten the COVID-19 pandemic curve. This paper is an attempt in analysing the speech delivered by Muhyiddin Yassin through a Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism approach. From the Malay Muslims hegemony depicted as *raison d'être* of the infamous Sheraton Move to proving his credibility as a premier at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is significant to uncover Muhyiddin's three dimensions of goodwill *ethos* through his speech in times where people put high hopes on leaders to weather unprecedented challenges. With the element of goodwill in Aristotelian *ethos*, the orator can increase his positive image by using the dimensions of empathy, understanding and responsiveness in the speech. Based on the rhetorical criticism analysis, the study found that Muhyiddin had predominantly demonstrated empathy via paternalistic values in the speech followed by the dimension of responsiveness. However, the dimension of understanding was the least expressed in the speech. In comparison to the projected effect of the Sheraton Move aftermath, Muhyiddin had managed to salvage his credibility as a premier after this speech. Nevertheless, these appeals were mostly towards the Malay Muslims in comparison to the non-Malay counterparts due to the abundant "Malayophile" expressions used by Muhyiddin. Thus, it is recommended that top notches in organisations during unprecedented times improve the projection of their *ethos* as egalitarian with equal demonstration of empathy, responsiveness and understanding dimensions in their speeches.

Keywords: Rhetoric, neo-Aristotelian, Muhyiddin Yassin, *ethos*, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Muhyiddin Yassin was chosen by the Yang DiPertuan Agong (the King) as the 8th Prime Minister of Malaysia after the controversial Sheraton Move for which he was part of, that triggered the disbandment of the outnumbered ruling political coalition party *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) [Alliance of Hope]. PH had been governing the nation for 22 months after cementing an unprecedented victory in the 2018 election. Muhyiddin was in a unique position. The Sheraton Move was epitomised as a Malay Muslims' fellowship and therefore largely supported by the Malays whereas for the non-Malays, Muhyiddin was the "traitor" who nullified the Malaysian multiracial utopian dream state with its new "illegitimate backdoor government" (Suzuki, 2021; Tan, 2020). As he succeeded the premiership with mixed reception from the multiracial Malaysians (Jaafar & Rahman, 2020), he also had had to lead the country in facing the lethal threat of COVID-19. Nevertheless, despite the political vulnerability, Muhyiddin was credited by scholars as a leader who demonstrated "paternal values" in his liaisons with the people (Jaes, 2021; Wai et al., 2021) which was a contrast to his predecessor. In this vein, it is interesting to see how Muhyiddin's *ethos* prevailed in the aftermath of the Sheraton Move.

On March 27, 2020 as Malaysia was undergoing its first Movement Control Order (MCO), Muhyiddin announced the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package worth RM25 billion as financial assistance to the people. Despite critics calling it as an insufficient initiative (Mark et al., 2021), scholars agreed that Muhyiddin's public image improved favourably after the unveiling of the financial assistance (Saravanamuttu, 2021; Saleem, 2020) particularly with the evident usage of the nickname *abah*, a term of endearment for father that was largely used to address him informally. The change was catapulted by the speech and therefore, it is significant to unveil a politician's demonstration of *ethos* during unique times when faced with two global threats which was COVID-19 and the brittle support from the people due to his controversial appointment as a premier.

Politicians and public orators often use rhetorical devices, namely *ethos* (the characteristics), *pathos* (emotional appeals) and *logos* (logical appeals) to persuade audiences via their speeches. Under the Aristotelian *ethos*, a speaker is deemed credible when he demonstrates a sense of goodwill (Holmes & Parker, 2018) which is segregated into three dimensions, namely empathy, understanding and responsiveness. McCroskey and Teven (1999) defined empathy as identification with someone's feeling, understanding as being sensitive towards someone's ideas or needs whereas responsiveness is the attentive acknowledgement towards someone else's communicative attempts.

This paper attempts to highlight how elements of goodwill in terms of empathy, understanding and responsiveness in a politician's *ethos* help to alleviate the antipathy among audiences. Therefore, it is interesting to uncover how Muhyiddin used *ethos* in this speech to bolster his public persona and possibly to persuade Malaysians into accepting him as the prime minister of Malaysia after the controversial Sheraton Move.

Problem statement

Persuasion is a device integrated in speeches and politicians often rely on it to convince the audiences. By utilising *ethos*, politicians try to invite their audiences into believing that they are morally virtuous (Charteris-Black, 2011). Due to the Sheraton Move, Muhyiddin's image was marred but after he delivered the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech, people began to address him as a father-figure, *abah*, which in short reflected the people's changed affinity towards him. According to Charteris-Black (2011), audiences are persuaded if the orator's rhetorical device is a success. The speech then became a social media

viral sensation as Malaysians were instantaneously captivated by Muhyiddin's "paternal warmth" which exuded from the speech (Adreena, 2020). It is evident that Muhyiddin demonstrated a sense of goodwill through the speech and therefore the need to analyse the rhetorical device from the aspects of empathy, understanding and responsiveness that were used to persuade the people as proposed by McCroskey and Teven (1999).

Scholars found that by highlighting their *ethos* through speeches, global politicians are able to cement their credibility in the eyes of the targeted public. For example, then American President Barack Obama's successful implementation of *ethos* in his speeches exuded the persona as a knowledgeable leader when he talked about his political policies (Raissouni, 2020; Reyes, 2014) whereas Canada's Justin Trudeau was seen as a compassionate premier towards issues regarding refugees (Murdocca, 2020), while Germany's Angela Merkel was touted as a far-sighted egalitarian in the Palestine-Israel conflict (Mir, 2020). Hence, the implementation of *ethos* is apparent as a valve to legitimise their words through the personification of the politicians' characters. Hence, to magnify this "curated authenticity" (Browse, 2020) to be felt by their audience, *ethos* is an essential persuasion device to be integrated in speeches, particularly of politicians. Microscopically in Malaysia, studies on *ethos* from the perspective of Neo-Aristotelian analysis is scarce as scholars are predominantly interested in discussing other rhetorical devices such as *logos* and *pathos* as well as other tenets of the Five Canons of Rhetoric, namely *dispositio* (organisation of speeches) and *elocutio* (style of speech). For example, a study on the *logos* implemented in the speeches of five Malaysian prime ministers, namely Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Mahathir and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was conducted but *ethos* was not discussed (Ahmad, 2018). Two other studies did recognise Tun Mahathir's *ethos* as a progressive Malay Muslim visionary (Alkhirbash et al., 2014; Ahmad, 2010) but the discussions were merely peripheral since *ethos* was not the main objective for both studies. Jasman and Kassim (2014) did a study on Najib Razak's application of metaphors as his rhetorical device without any discussion on his *ethos* whereas in 2020, a comparative study using a historical approach on the verbal rhetoric between Tun Mahathir and Najib Razak concluded that the former's *ethos* played a pivotal role in solidifying the longevity of his political career (Fatmawati et al., 2020). On the other hand, other authors remarked that renowned Malaysian politicians such as Anwar Ibrahim (Allers, 2017) and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi via *Islam Hadhari* (Ali, 2016) attempted to implement the "global Islamic *ethos*" to boost their public popularity but the discussions were not from the lens of Aristotelian rhetorical analysis.

As mentioned, there have been numerous studies conducted to understand *ethos* in the western politicians' speeches but no attempts to decipher from the lens of Aristotelian rhetorical analysis amongst the Malaysian political speeches, especially on the goodwill *ethos*' dimensions, namely empathy, understanding and responsiveness. Therefore, this paper introduces a novel approach to understanding the *ethos* of a Malaysian political figure in a contemporary local setting where persuasion can be implemented to salvage the aftermath of a political turbulence.

Research questions

Based on the problem statement, there are three research questions in this paper that come under the umbrella of Aristotelian goodwill *ethos*:

- (1) How did Muhyiddin Yassin demonstrate goodwill in terms of empathy in his *Prihatin* Economic Stimulus Package speech?
- (2) How did Muhyiddin Yassin demonstrate goodwill in terms of understanding in his *Prihatin* Economic Stimulus Package speech?

- (3) How did Muhyiddin Yassin demonstrate goodwill in terms of responsiveness in his *Prihatin* Economic Stimulus Package speech?

Theoretical frameworks

This paper uses The Classical Rhetorical Theory (McCroskey, 2015; Khor et al., 2013) or commonly known as the Five Canons of Rhetoric (Borchers & Hundley, 2018). Derived from Aristotle and popularised by Roman scholars such as Cicero and Quintillianus, The Classical Rhetorical Theory was revived in the 1920s by Wilcheln as Neo-Aristotelian which encompasses five “canons” a speaker could use to persuade his audience, namely *inventio* (origination of ideas), *dispositio* (organisation of ideas), *elocutio* (style of ideas), *memoria* (memorization of ideas) and *pronuntiatio* (delivery of the ideas). On the other hand, the three Aristotelian *pisteis* or rhetorical devices used as means of persuasion: *ethos* (characteristics), *pathos* (emotional appeals) and *logos* (logical appeals) are included under *inventio*. Hence, this paper seeks to analyse Muhyiddin’s ethos by using Neo-Aristotelian as its theoretical framework.

Ethos is one of the three types of appeals proposed by Aristotle when a public orator aspires to persuade his audiences. It is the characteristic of a speaker that is emanated throughout the speech and comprises qualities that attract audiences to the speaker. Often, these are virtues that make the speaker seem credible to the audiences throughout the oratory sessions. Murthy and Ghosal (2014) suggested that *ethos* is the audience’s perception of the speaker’s credibility on the subjects in the speeches that are delivered to them while McCroskey dubbed *ethos* as the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a receiver (McCroskey, 2015). In addition, *Eunoia* in *ethos*—goodwill is found to be prevalent in the communicative interaction helmed by leaders and public orators to enhance the impression of sincerity in the eyes of their targeted audience (Baumlin & Scisco, 2018; Porter, 2017; Evans, 2011).

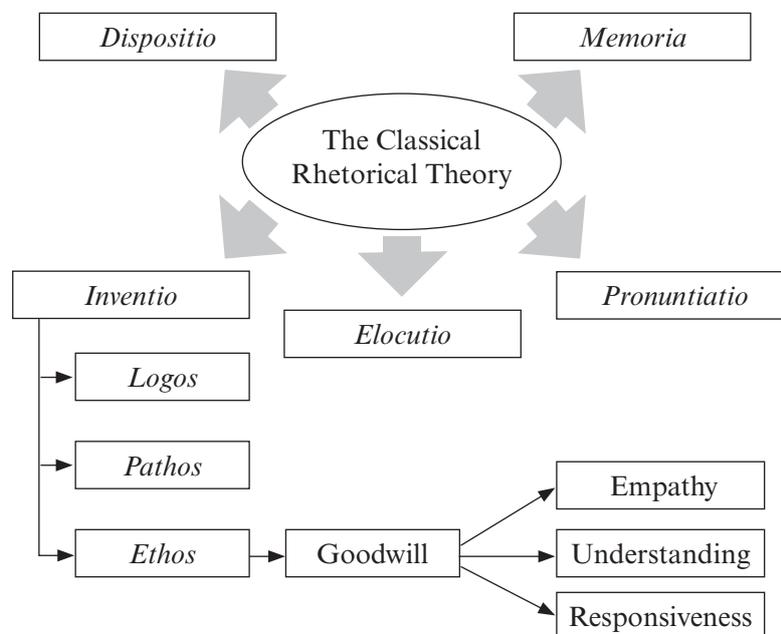


Figure 1. Theoretical framework on the rhetorical analysis of Muhyiddin’s *ethos* in the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech

Despite the various interpretations, scholars are in mutual agreement that *ethos* is the impression created by the speaker in which he is illustrated as a person who would predominantly embody traits of goodwill. According to McCroskey and Teven (1999), goodwill can be categorised into empathy, understanding and responsiveness. Based on Figure 1, Muhyiddin's goodwill will be analysed from these three dimensions by using The Classical Rhetorical Theory as the framework that underpins the analysis of *ethos* in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

This research adapts the Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism as the method to analyse Muhyiddin Yassin's *Prihatin* Economic Stimulus Package speech. To date, several studies have been conducted using this methodology to analyse speeches delivered by Malaysian rhetors (Ramli et al., 2019; Khor et al., 2013; Ahmad, 2005). Rhetorical criticism is a method used to analyse speeches where an artifact (speech) with its own unit of analyses is criticised in a purposeful and systematic manner. Borchers and Hundley (2018) asserted that rhetorical criticism is a methodology which uncovers the dominant persuasive devices embedded in the subject of the analysis, namely the artifacts. Hence, rhetorical criticism is an analysis that gives meaning to the speeches studied per se. To increase uniformity in the process of criticism, Foss (2017) suggests several steps to be taken into consideration when rhetorical criticism is carried out (Figure 2).

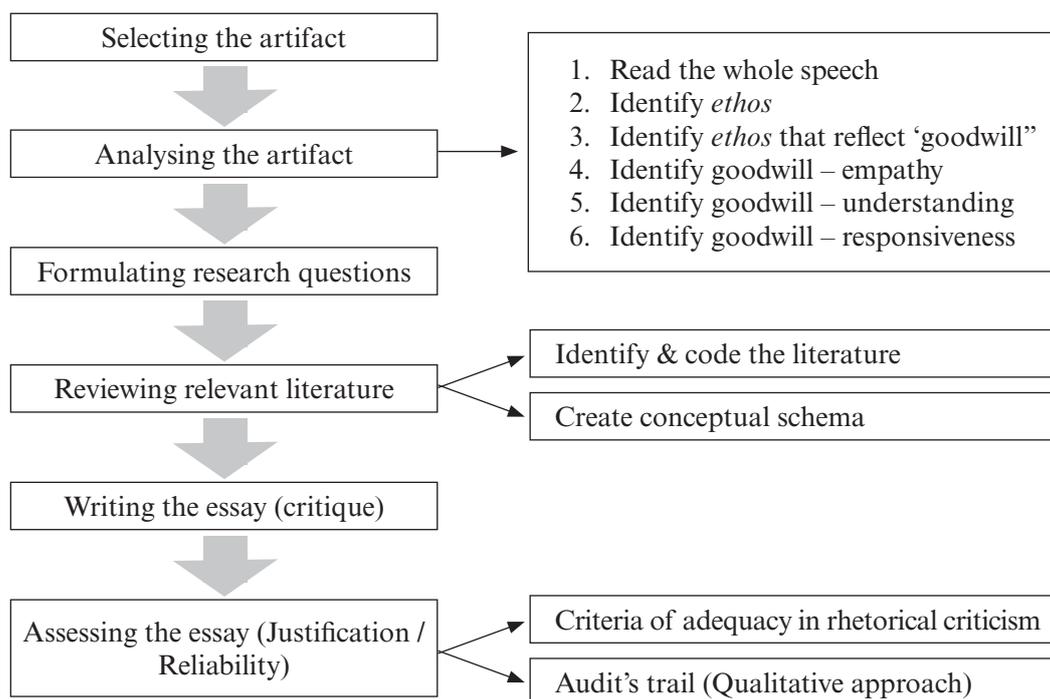


Figure 2. The systematic flow in rhetorical criticism analysing Muhyiddin's *ethos* in the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech

Selecting the artifact

The *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech was chosen as the artifact as it was the speech delivered during the rhetorical situation anchored by two exigences, which were the aftermath of the Sheraton Move as well as the upsurge state of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysing the artifact

The speech was read sixth times as per suggested by Ahmad (2018) to ensure the congruence of the researcher's understanding. First, it was read to capture the whole essence of the texts and context of the speech. Second, to identify the presence of *ethos*. Third, to identify the *ethos* perspective of goodwill. The fourth time was to identify goodwill that embodies the element of empathy. The fifth time was to identify goodwill that embodies the element of understanding. And finally, the sixth reading was to identify goodwill that embodies the element of responsiveness in the speech. The full English transcript of the speech was obtained from *The Edge Market's* article excerpt that could be assessed at <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/muhyiddins-speech-prihatin-rakyat-economic-stimulus-package>. Coding was then implemented via the conventional way where excerpts from the speech relevant to the three codes were highlighted using three separate colours and kept recorded in a coding sheet.

Formulating research questions

Based on the unit of analyses, the *exigence* or rhetorical situation, the research questions were formulated to underpin the subsequent rhetorical criticism. Since this paper aims to understand Muhyiddin's layers of *ethos* demonstrated in the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech, the three dimensions of *ethos*, namely empathy, understanding and responsiveness were identified as the unit of analyses.

Reviewing relevant literature

This step consists of two phases. Firstly, literature that was relevant to the paper was identified and coded from the artifact as well as the research questions. From this, literature on the importance of *ethos* and its three dimensions was picked to support the subsequent essay or criticism. In addition, literature on past rhetorical analyses of other Malaysian Prime Ministers and how Muhyiddin differs from his predecessors was also included to underpin the analysis of *ethos* in this paper. Secondly, the coded literature was arranged in a conceptual schema where all the literature reviews were connected to one another in a systematic theoretical framework as shown in Figure 1.

Writing the essay (critique)

Writing the criticism encompasses several systematic criteria where the criticism must be synchronised with the research questions. Foss (2017) suggests several steps to underpin a congruent rhetorical criticism:

1. Introduction on the unit of analysis and method
2. Report on the artifact —descriptive and interpretive insights
3. Justification of the report

Assessing the essay (Justification / Reliability)

Scholars suggest several ways to increase the reliability of a rhetorical criticism. For example, Foss (2017) suggests Criteria of Adequacy which encapsulates four tenets, which are justification of researcher's claim, legible presentation of the findings, coherence with theoretical framework and ability to be incorporated into other perspectives. Since rhetorical criticism is qualitative research, there are also scholars who implement an audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Nevertheless, there are also scholars who adapt the quantified Holti's Intercoder Reliability Technique to increase the reliability of their findings (Neuendorf, 2017).

For this paper, Foss' Criteria of Adequacy and audit trail were used to increase the reliability of the findings. All four tenets of Foss' Criteria of Adequacy were followed

systematically throughout the process of critic. As for the audit trail, researchers kept log reports on each progress of the analysis and triangulated the reliability through members' checks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Goodwill is to emanate benevolence with good intention for others. By using the classical approach of Neo-Aristotelian as the method, it is interesting to find that empathy is the most predominant dimension of goodwill portrayed in Muhyiddin's speech although through the verbatim contents of the speech, responsiveness was evident through the conception of all 28 financial aids wrapped in the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package worth RM250 billion catered towards different segments of Malaysia's population. On the other hand, understanding is identified as a peripheral goodwill element in the speech.

Numerous international studies show that exhibiting empathy as the *ethos* in communication related to COVID-19 pandemic engenders positive effects for both the speaker and the audiences (Offerdal et al., 2021; Pienaar et al, 2021). Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult as the pandemic is unprecedented and what used to be negligible political malfunctions now come under the public's microscopic surveillance. By demonstrating empathy as his goodwill *ethos* via the speech, Muhyiddin enjoyed a subsequent improved image because of his apt usage of rhetorical devices, which bears an uncanny similarity to Croatian's Minister of Health, Vili Beroš who took over the position at the beginning of the pandemic but enjoyed an incredible boost of image credibility due to his demonstration of empathy publicly (Kišiček, 2021).

Goodwill – Empathy

Empathy is the ability to make the audiences feel as if the speaker understands what it feels like to be in their shoes. As the COVID-19 MCO 1.0 commenced, people who were dependent on daily services such as fishermen, farmers, trishaw operators or night market traders were significantly affected as financial activities were put on halt. This was evident in lines 23–25 where Muhyiddin demonstrated empathy and therefore offered a 3-month suspension on takaful and insurance premiums to alleviate their financial burdens:

Meanwhile, family takaful and insurance companies will offer a 3-month suspension on premiums by contributors whose source of income is affected by the pandemic (Lines 23–25).

In line 58, Muhyiddin Yassin then used the word *vulnerable* to highlight the delicate state of the elderly and young Malaysians who took refuge in shelters as well as those who were disabled, homeless and the aborigines. The word reflected his empathy towards them and served as emphasis that these “vulnerable groups” were not forgotten in this new government led by him:

It is the same for the vulnerable groups such as the elderly and children in shelters, the disabled, the homeless and the aborigines (Line 58).

Another act of empathy was demonstrated when Muhyiddin Yassin explained that the government will not charge any tax penalties up to RM1,500 per member towards pre-retirement withdrawals from account B of Private Retirement Scheme (PRS) investors:

Accordingly, the Government allows pre-retirement withdrawals from account B up to RM1,500 per member without any tax penalties between April and December 2020 (Lines 72–73).

Under the Wage Subsidy Programme, Muhyiddin Yassin stated in lines 119–122 that the government will assist employers who were experiencing a 50% decrease in income and employees who were earning less than RM4,000 per month by providing a salary of RM600 per month to every employee for 3 months. Clearly, Muhyiddin emanated empathy towards all Malaysians regardless of their professional hierarchy in the society:

In this difficult situation, I do not wish to see workers being retrenched and lose their income. Through this programme, the Government will provide salary of RM600 per month to every employee for 3 months. This programme is dedicated to workers earning less than RM4,000 and employers experiencing more than 50% decrease in their income since 1 January 2020 (Lines 119–122).

Another instance where Muhyiddin demonstrated his empathy is apparent in lines 127–128. In this content of the speech, he was addressing the plight faced by e-hailing drivers during the MCO. By using the words *to ease their burden*, Muhyiddin injected the sense of an empathetic leader who cares about the people and as the premier of the nation, he recognised the problem and was willing to offer an instant solution to help these e-hailing drivers sustain their necessities for life:

To ease their burden, the Government will provide a one-off cash assistance of RM500 to 120,000 e-hailing drivers with a total allocation of RM60 million (Lines 127–128).

It is also worth noting that Muhyiddin had repeated the word *concern* four times throughout the entire speech including *I am concerned* used in Lines 74–75 and Line 159. By using this word, there is a sense of personal care towards the public and in times where lives were cut to basic needs, people were in dire need for a compassionate leader they could rely on and was concerned about them:

The Prihatin package manifests the Government's concern for the welfare and well-being of the rakyat (Lines 236–237).

As announced yesterday, to express our concern and care for the plight of the people... (Line 246).

From the above excerpts found in the speech, it is evident that Muhyiddin demonstrated a sense of empathy as his goodwill. In times of turbulence, people often seek leaders who can empathise with their situation and Muhyiddin knew that it was a golden opportunity to win the hearts of the people. In March 2020, Malaysia was in a fragile state experiencing both the threats of COVID-19 as well as political instability. Muhyiddin realised that non-Malays were not in favour of him due to the Sheraton Move and therefore, an intervention strategy was needed to counter the altercation. By carefully applying empathetic words such as *vulnerable*, *concern* and *to ease their burden* in the speech, Muhyiddin's paternalistic values were enhanced during the speech delivery and that aspired to create a sense of communal bond between him and the people. This

is in sync with findings that show Malaysians prefer to adopt humane orientation and compassionate in their styles of leadership due to the sense of collectivism embedded in the society (Hashim, 2019; Alazzani et al., 2017; Cheah et al., 2014).

Another empathetic point to be highlighted is that Muhyiddin made a pledge to deduct two-month salary of the ministers and his as a contribution to the COVID-19 Fund. This implies Muhyiddin's empathy towards the people. He knew that with COVID-19, a swift constructive intervention was needed to show the people that his participation in the Sheraton Move was not a personal take but was instead, for the people. Although reduction in salary was not a novel intervention strategy as it was already implemented during Mahathir's first premiership and Abdullah's times, the inclusion of that "empathetic consent" in the speech created the illusion that Muhyiddin was all for the people. This was echoed by scholars who found that Muhyiddin's leadership image improved along the consistent financial aids which were inevitably initiated by the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package (Abdul Latif & Ying, 2020). Undeniably, the people felt that Muhyiddin was a father figure for them whom they could rely on during the rainy period. This is best explained by McCroskey (2015) who contended that audiences feel a positive vibe when they see the speaker who is also the referent power as someone relatable.

Goodwill – Understanding

Understanding is the acknowledgement of the other person's plight. Muhyiddin demonstrated understanding when he tried to convince the people that he understood the people's anxiety during MCO 1.0 by repetitively using the words, *I understand* in lines 36 and 134:

I understand during this calamity that we are experiencing now, most of you are financially affected (Line 36).

I understand that the corporate sector is also affected with the current situation (Line 194).

Muhyiddin also expressed his understanding by addressing the dilemma faced by the frontliners in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the middle-class civil servants. He emphasised that the government recognised the sacrifices and understood the dire situation:

... working tirelessly under stress and enormous pressure. Nevertheless, they continue to battle against this great challenge. Recognising their sacrifices, the Government will increase... (Lines 28–31).

... Recognising their contribution, the Government will provide a one-off cash assistance of RM500... (Lines 104–106).

Muhyiddin demonstrated understanding when he stated that the government did not overlook the frontliners' "tireless work under stress and enormous pressure". He knew that in this pandemic, it was important for the people to see that the government appreciated the frontliners. By acknowledging to the public this appreciation, Muhyiddin once again displayed the paternalistic value card of a "caring father who understands the plights of his children". This embodiment of *ethos* is in sync with the essence of *budi* in Malay culture where concern towards others is the focal point in communicative interactions

(Ramli, 2013) and this explains Muhyiddin's improved image after the speech. However, it is unlikely that non-Malays gravitated towards Muhyiddin the same way as their Malay counterparts. To include the RM500 one-off cash assistance for the predominantly Malay civil servants may seem like another "affirmative decision" by a Malay nationalist and on top of that, most of the non-Malays voted for PH in 2018 and therefore, were still disappointed by the unexpected Sheraton Move (Ostwald & Oliver, 2020).

Goodwill – Responsiveness

Responsiveness is the ability to act to cater to the other party's request. Descriptively, all the 28 financial aids enlisted in the speech were facades of responsiveness. For example, in lines 152–154, Muhyiddin responded to the affected SME businesses to show to the people that his government was helping entrepreneurs:

Providing additional funds of RM500 million under the Micro Credit Scheme, to a total of RM700 million for soft loans... 2% interest rate with no collateral... Maximum financing amount is also increased from RM50,000 to RM75,000 for each entrepreneur... (lines 152–154).

Next, he also exhibited responsiveness towards the people in lines 176–181 by introducing a 6-month moratorium and other financial leniency to ease their financial plight:

... to offer a 6-month moratorium, conversion of credit card balance to term loans and restructuring of corporate loans. This measure is important to enable the companies to continue to be able to retain employment and immediately... (lines 176–181).

As mentioned, all 28 financial aids in the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech were descriptively symbols of responsiveness. However, it is important to interpretively consider the probability for these financial aids to materialise or vice versa so as to legitimise whether these financial aids are really the manifestation of responsiveness because most political promises are known to be far-fetched. An *ethos*' dimension that is related to being practical was Muhyiddin's quality of responsiveness deeply attached to the realisation of these proposals. Although the mainstream media applauded the proposals projected in the speech, it was noted that scholars and independent economists were not so enthusiastic with the plan (Baharuddin, 2021; Lim et al., 2021; Yi, 2020; Syed Azman et al, 2020) as the financial aids were deemed insufficient and only catered for short-term reliefs. Since *ethos* is the characteristic of the speaker emanating through the speech, we could not ignore this unfavourable feedback from the experts as a failure to materialise the financial aids carries the potential to tarnish Muhyiddin's credibility as a leader.

For example, the financial assistance for the SMEs in lines 152–154 sounded attractive along with the presented quantified proposal. However, scholars found it was not practical due to the diversified spectrum of SMEs businesses. In hindsight, the 6-month moratorium as per lines 176–181 was largely welcomed as substantial although experts delved into the re-structuring of the loans along with additional charges affected by the moratorium in which people would eventually pay more than the original amount (Shaharuddin, 2020). Hence, it is best to sum that responsiveness is a secondary goodwill *ethos* exuded in Muhyiddin's speech in comparison to the more prevalent quality of empathy.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to unearth Muhyiddin's goodwill *ethos* from its three dimensions of empathy, understanding and responsiveness by using the *Prihatin* (Care) Economic Stimulus Package speech as the artifact. Through the Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism, the study found that empathy is the most apparent quality of *ethos* in Muhyiddin's speech. As a new Prime Minister appointed from a controversial circumstance, he knew that this speech was the opportunity to improve his public appeal by showing his humane side to win the hearts of the people. He realised that in the face of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysians would not appreciate a patronising leader but an empathetic paternal persona.

The incorporation of personified element in a Malaysian orator's political endeavours has proven to be an effective approach to increase one's charm in the eyes of the public (Shafizan, 2019). Although the *ethos* quality of responsiveness was evident with the proposed 28 financial aids, there were mixed feedback from the experts on the practicality of the proposals. As a seasoned politician, Muhyiddin knew that ambitious political manifestos are ubiquitous and therefore, it was most important for him to unleash first the proposals to appease the public as well as to increase his responsiveness *ethos*. However, since responsiveness is a practical-based goodwill element with the effect to emerge full-fledged only after the materialisation of the financial aids, it is best to dub Muhyiddin's responsiveness as secondary in comparison to the predominant quality of empathy.

Understanding emerged as the least significant goodwill *ethos* dimension in Muhyiddin's speech. Although Muhyiddin attempted to use his paternalistic charm to emanate the quality of understanding in the speech, it was not a wholesome success especially amongst the non-Malays due to the Malayophile expressions that he used to convey the *ethos* of understanding.

From these findings, it was clear that empathy was Muhyiddin's predominant goodwill *ethos* that emanated from the speech. Past research on prominent international political figures such as Barack Obama and Angela Merkel indicates that empathy in communication is potential in elevating the politicians' image in the eyes of the public (Burnier, 2021; Yorke, 2017).

As most of the existing rhetorical analyses on *ethos* focus predominantly on international political figures and furthermore, not many have attempted to decipher these three dimensions of goodwill. The COVID-19 pandemic is a unique rhetorical situation in which leaders are expected to rise up to meet the people's expectations. Therefore, it is recommended for leaders of organisations in these unprecedented times to project themselves as an egalitarian to increase their *ethos* appeals to the diversified subordinates by demonstrating equal dimensions of empathy, responsiveness, and empathy in their speeches. This paper manages to reveal insights on Muhyiddin's characteristics when he took over the premiership while both battling a global pandemic as well as to win the hearts of Malaysians. Although Muhyiddin stepped down on August 16, 2021, this paper serves as testament of his *ethos* virtues as the 8th Prime Minister of Malaysia.

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