Semiotic Analysis of Three QSR Instagram Posts During COVID-19 Outbreak

Nazima Versay Kudus*, Che Nooryohana Zulkifli and Noraziah Mohd Amin

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Pulau Pinang, 13500 Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted various aspects of human life, and this includes the economy. Therefore, businesses must address their survival promptly by implementing more aggressive and creative marketing methods that use social media platforms. Although touted as Malaysia's top three quick service restaurants (QSR), the pandemic also affected KFC, McDonald's, and Pizza Hut. Therefore, this research was conducted to investigate the advertisement language of these three brands' Instagram posts. The paper intends first to study how text producers use linguistic and non-linguistic representations to position their businesses amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, it aims to explain how specific language use, image, and style can bring about meaning to customers of the position of the brands during these trying times. The theory that underpins this paper is M. A. K. Halliday's Social Semiotic Theory of Language (1978). Semiotic analysis was employed as an analytic tool due to its ability to foreground aspects that may not be noticeable in plain reading. The data for this study was collected from the Instagram pages of the three brands during the period of the first Movement Control Order (MCO) exercised in Malaysia from March 18 to May 3, 2020.

Keywords: Branding strategies, COVID-19, Instagram advertising, QSR, semiotics

INTRODUCTION

The size of the global market for quick-service restaurants (QSR) has been steadily growing year after year. The sector's value was approximately 875.26 billion U.S. dollars in 2019, up from 862.58 billion U.S. dollars the previous year (Lock, 2021a). However, the sector was expected to shrink

in 2020 due to the global stay-at-home regulations imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus or COVID-19 (Lock, 2021a). It is corroborated by Kim et al. (2005) and Tse et al. (2006), who assert that natural and manufactured disasters frequently impacted businesses prior to the pandemic. Fast-food restaurants suffered a detrimental impact from COVID-19, with most operating at less than 20% capacity, resulting in severe financial losses. While many restaurants were in dire financial straits, many individuals were laid off unexpectedly (Nhamo et al., 2020). Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the overall income of the QSR industry in the United States plummeted to 239 billion U.S. dollars in 2020 from 273 U.S. billion dollars in 2019 (Lock, 2021b).

Following the Movement Control Order issuing, the Malaysian government ordered fast-food businesses to cease dining operations. The outlets are only allowed to operate their businesses via drive-through and takeaway counters (Daim, 2020). Although no specific data is available regarding the amount lost in the fast-food industry during the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia's economy is said to be losing RM2.4 billion daily (Mohd Yassin, 2021). Therefore, research is critical to understand better how the fast-food business is dealing with the pandemic threat. This idea resulted in the implementation of the present study. As the present research identified and analysed the content of fast-food Instagram advertisement posts and how the posts were presented in relation to COVID-19,

it is also imperative to discover and extract the meanings of the linguistic and graphic elements utilised in the advertisements.

Changes in Business Practices During COVID-19 Pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on numerous businesses around the world is evident, and it has altered many aspects of how people live, behave, and carry out their daily activities. Living in fear of a pandemic has created multiple barriers in businesses, especially in the aviation, tourism, retail, and food industries (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Many people have lost their jobs because of the outbreak. Bartik et al. (2020) have confirmed that many small businesses have experienced severe disruption and shut down operations. In another study, it was found that without proper measures to minimise the effects of the COVID-19 economic crisis, 42% of the recent abrupt unemployment in the United States could result in permanent job loss (Barrero et al., 2020).

However, despite massive closures in many business operations, blatant changes are expected to emerge in the online world. After more than a year of facing the pandemic, online industries such as online communication, entertainment, education, and shopping are all seeing extraordinary growth (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). They have asserted that as more time is spent at home, people's consumption patterns have evolved, with an increase in demand for takeout, snacks, alcohol, and cleaning supplies. Other growing industries include

healthcare, pharmaceuticals, herbs and vitamins. This change of practice proves that certain businesses could thrive despite operating in a pandemic outbreak and continue to develop dynamically if effective countermeasures are taken promptly.

Instagram as a Platform for Advertising

Instagram has a massive influence on people's everyday life. Instagram is a communicative platform that allows businesses to engage with essential stakeholders, such as present and potential customers (Casaló et al., 2017). Besides, it is a portable and visual arena where businesses may promote their products and services at a minimal cost while having a strong persuasive impact. According to Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono (2019), users are exposed to a plethora of visual content when they use Instagram, including images uploaded by other users and product information offered by merchants. Instagram users, therefore, are overwhelmed with information by only looking at posted photographs. As a result, to effectively draw interest from the users, marketers must produce advertisements that can capture and hold customers' attention long enough for them to comprehend the advertisements cognitively before moving on to other images. (Kusumasondjaja & Tjiptono, 2019).

Since its introduction, according to Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono (2019), Instagram has made the food business one of the most visible industries on social media. Johnson (2015) also argues that food is currently one of the most popular items advertised on Instagram. Rummo et al. (2020) propose that food and beverage companies use Instagram to upload photos with captions as part of their branding communication plan to gain more followers. When a new follower is added to an account, other connected users will be able to access brand-related photos, messages, and descriptions, as well as postings from their relatives and friends in their social networking circle. Therefore, it is evident that Instagram, with its features, can offer a product more exposure for marketing purposes.

Problem Statement

According to Taylor (2020), the need to immediately adjust to the shifting circumstances is crucial to those in the advertising and marketing industry in reaction to the pandemic's enormous impact on businesses. Mason et al. (2021) verify that in terms of product validation, consumers' natural ability to contact their social influencers has been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, social media platforms enable customers to communicate with a larger number of people without having to interact with them physically (Mason et al., 2021). It is because digital media is less affected than other forms of media since individuals who are quarantined could have more time to access the internet at home (Taylor, 2020). The ideas above seem to imply that the utilisation of social media for advertising products is vital during the pandemic to cater to consumers' needs. Thus, the present

study intends to discover how three QSR brands which are McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut (limited to franchises in Malaysia only), advertise their products and services on Instagram by looking at linguistic and visual presentations in relation to the COVID-19 crisis as well as the new norms. According to Statista's (Statista Research Department, 2021) publication titled, "Malaysia-visited fast-food restaurants 2018," the top three most visited fast-food restaurants in Malaysia in 2018 were KFC (82.81%), McDonald's (81.34%), and Pizza Hut (57.18%). Due to the data's recent nature, these three QSR restaurants were included in this analysis fast-food Besides, in terms of the availability and prevalence of these fast-food restaurants on Instagram, the data displayed by Starngage ("Top 1000 food & drink", n.d.) in the list entitled, "Top 1000 food & drink Instagram influencers in Malaysia in 2021" show that McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut are also among the top 60 food influencers on Instagram in Malaysia.

According to Taylor (2020), there will certainly be a higher emphasis on advertisements that make use of emotional appeals during the pandemic. As a result, additional research into the role of emotion in the processing of advertisements and the effectiveness of emotional appeals is required (Taylor, 2020). The present study aims at discovering such aspects of product advertising of the three fast-food brands mentioned earlier to respond to this proposal. DiResta et al. (2020) claim that when addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, brands must be courteous, use intelligent marketing, and be sensitive to their customers' conditions. Consumers are expected to return if brands can acknowledge the pandemic crisis well while reflecting good values. It can be achieved by utilising marketing campaigns and scheduled content timeframes and reviewing the language and images used in commercials and marketing materials, including awareness of consumers' heightened anxiety during this time (DiResta et al., 2020). However, it is unclear how the incorporation of linguistic styles and visuals in the advertisements of the products of these three QSR brands, namely, McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut, was executed on the brands' Malaysian Instagram accounts during the pandemic. DiResta et al. pose this question in their discussion of marketing strategies during the COVID-19 period; "How do we currently promote our product or service in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis in a way that resonates with consumers?" (2020, para. 6). The present study was conducted to answer this question, with a limitation of focusing on the three fast-food brands mentioned previously. To our knowledge, no study has focused on these three businesses targeting Malaysian customers in terms of their language and visual messages in their advertisements addressing both their products and COVID-19 on Instagram. Thus, the execution of the present study is hoped to address the literature gap issue in the Malaysian context.

Research Objectives

This study aims to contribute to an academic tradition of advertising discourse analysis by examining the Instagram advertisements of three QSR businesses, namely KFC, McDonald's, and Pizza Hut, during the first deployment of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia. Condensed meanings related to the representation of these brands offered by the advertisements were examined. Semiotic analysis was employed using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) principles for the study of texts and images contained in the businesses' Instagram advertisements and their corresponding captions. Semiotics is the study of signs, while semiotic analysis studies how signs are made, communicated, and organised into languages or codes (Childs & Fowler, 2006). In our study of Instagram posts, images and captions (i.e., language) are studied to see how they operate in society. The analysis mainly focuses on how these brands used their marketing strategies during the first MCO owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. Hence, this study's objective is to explore how the three selected QSR brands represented their business images and services through different visuals, graphics, and language patterns in their Instagram advertisements during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Moreover, in alliance with this research objective, the study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. How did the three selected QSR brands represent their business images and services in their Instagram advertisements during the COVID-19 global pandemic?
2. How did the three selected QSR brands to use visuals and graphics in their Instagram advertisements during the COVID-19 global pandemic?
3. What language patterns were employed by the three selected QSR brands in their Instagram advertisements during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There may be other studies conducted on linguistic and graphic features of the three QSRs' advertisements (e.g., Bragg et al., 2020; Guidry et al., 2015; Salleh et al., 2015; Vassallo et al., 2018), but the best knowledge of the researchers, there is little research performed specifically to analyse these QSRs' advertisements during the MCO where there were restrictions imposed on restaurant operators. According to Lai et al. (2020), restaurants and cafes around the country were hit hard by the news of the lockdown, with stringent rules prohibiting customers from dining. However, the National Security Council (2020, as cited in Lai et al., 2020) believe that such businesses may still be permitted to operate, but solely for the purpose of fulfilling takeout orders or deliveries. Thus, the present study's uniqueness is evident, considering the MCO period when the advertisements were posted on Instagram compared to the previous normal time when food operators were not affected by the

COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, most recent studies of QSRs in relation to COVID-19 only highlight the issues of dietary habits in terms of fast-food consumption (e.g., Bohlouli et al., 2021; Husain & Ashkanani, 2020; Sidor & Rzymski, 2020) rather than investigating the presentations of the fast-food itself in the advertisements. More studies should be executed on the part of the QSR businesses, particularly on how they strategize their product representations to address COVID-19 and the "new normal" that comes with it.

The study of semiotics is becoming increasingly prominent in analysing advertisements on social media due to the technological affordances that the users rampantly employ. Marketers have resorted to social media, particularly during COVID-19, to raise awareness of their services and products and form relationships with users. As a result of social media's ability to engage users in affective communication (KhosraviNik, 2018), advertising and marketing activities become more relatable and interpersonal. With such tools, the messages could be interpreted objectively due to the emotive connection between marketers and users. COVID-19 is still around, and many new behaviours, advertisements' signs and visuals have been adopted to respond to the changes as part of a concerted effort to make everyone feel at ease. In other words, under any circumstances, the business operates as usual. It is evident in Starr et al. (2021) that even though the pandemic has caused global pandemonium, businesses should

move on in spreading positivity. The action of 'living with ease in the pandemic era' has been propagated in Singapore through advertisements to materialise the bond marketers would like to have with the people in combating and surviving COVID-19 collectively. Some commercials in Singapore have included uplifting taglines, visuals and signs that incorporate affective messaging aimed at reducing pandemic fear and anxiety. However, there is still a scarcity of literature on this topic, particularly when it comes to how visuals and signs are utilised in social media marketing to participate in emotive communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this study could enrich the body of knowledge in such discourse, especially on fast-food advertisements on social media during the outbreak.

METHOD

Theoretical Approach

This research is a qualitative study that focuses on text and visual analysis. We chose Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as our framework to account for aspects of language and visuals. Since language is a medium of communication, its roles and functions are deemed essential to build and sustain relationships between society members. According to Halliday, as cited by O'Donnell (2017), SFL is used to determine how language is represented to produce and build numerous discourses around us rather than how it is processed in the speaker's mind. Thus, language becomes

a tool to deliver messages and engender more new discourses on top of the existing ones.

In the *Introduction of Language as Social Semiotics*, Halliday (1978) concurs that "language is a social fact", a statement earlier made by Ferdinand de Saussure. Halliday explains that it is so because "language arises in the life of the individual through an ongoing exchange with meanings with significant others" (1978, p. 1). He explains this through the process of children's language development; when children learn, they are not simply learning things around them but also construing the reality around them through language. Thus, social reality is a semiotic construct. Ledin and Machin (2018) viewed Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed in 1978, as a grand theory in understanding language functions. It has three broad metafunctions, namely Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual. These three language metafunctions define how language works in our environment. According to Rashid and Jameel (2017), ideational is the relationship between the process, the participants, and the circumstances. It clarifies the relationship between the external and internal world of our experience. In other words, because of 'who is doing what to whom?' the speaker's experience is deemed vital in the function of ideational (Rashid & Jameel, 2017; Richardson, 2017). The ideational function involves an English transitivity system linked to six key components: material, mental, relational, verbal, existential, and behavioural. The interpersonal function emphasises the speaker's relationship with the audience in that he expresses his attitude and judgement to influence others' attitudes. The last one is textual, and it deals with text production and information flow in a text. It emphasises the relevance of the message and the relationship between the language and its surroundings. Simply expressed, a textual function is linked to the linguistic world and the context of the situation. This theory is essential to scaffold the entire concept of understanding language in specific situations with specific participants and processes in this study. Therefore, it is justifiable to use this theory in analysing the linguistic representations in the advertisements of the three selected QSR brands in the present study.

Methodological Approach

Apart from linguistic analysis, the present study also employed semiotic analysis to examine signs and symbols that appear in the Instagram advertisements studied. Semiotics refers to the signs, symbols, and signification constructs of the social reality of culture. In other words, the interaction between language and semiotics makes up culture. Semiotic analysis is an in-depth examination of the unconscious cultural patterns that affect consumer behaviour and responses to textual messages and images. These consider sociocultural setting, interlocutors involved (addresser-addressee), and whether the message is verbal and visual and sociolinguistic parameters.

As mentioned in the previous section, i.e., Theoretical Approach, Halliday's (1978) SFL is chosen as this study's main framework in multimodality analysis. However, Halliday has proposed more flexibility, and language should not be viewed as a monolithic function of grammar. According to Halliday (1978, as cited in Ledin & Machin, 2020), language is creatively created by the users, who are usually influenced by their background and culture in a particular society. To put it another way, Halliday argues that language is more than just a means of communication; it must also hold meanings and values that reflect the unique conditions of each community. Therefore, in this study, this framework guides our analysis in determining the function of language (both text and visuals) in two ways; firstly, how language makes meanings through advertisements and, secondly, how the brands build and maintain the relationships with their audience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To study advertisements, Berger (1986) recommends the analysis of mood, design, the relationship between images, spaces, background, plot, language used, typeface, item advertised, aesthetic decisions and attitudes reflected by the advertisements. These suggestions are suitable, whether traditional or new media such as Instagram posts. Kress and Leeuwen (1996, 2001, as cited in Ledin & Machin, 2020) also point out that analysing language frequently requires more than just text. Today, the signs and visuals that accompany the text are irreducible in the age of technology,

and they provide significant meaning to the overall construction of language. In this light, it has been demonstrated that our communication strategy has evolved and reflects our world's realities. In this study, the visuals tend to overpower the text. According to Ledin and Machin (2020), advertisements frequently represent more than simply the idea of "selling items" because they can also suggest other functions such as giving commands and making rhymes to create and sustain relationships with the audience. Thus, the entire system of language could be interpreted beyond its intended purpose by looking at signs, images, texts, and illustrations and how they are combined and positioned, as it has the power to create relationships and representations that construct the life of the entire community in each context.

Data Collection

Advertisements posted by the top three QSRs in Malaysia were collected throughout the first Movement Control Order in Malaysia (MCO), which was implemented from 18 March to 3 May 2020. During the MCO, all advertisements were retrieved from the restaurants' Malaysian Instagram accounts, which mostly focused on their activities in accordance with all applicable laws. However, we also discovered that the brands did not publish a post every day over the timeframe, resulting in a variation in the number of advertisements for each brand. Therefore, the analysis was made on 54 advertisements: 19 from Pizza Hut, 18 from KFC and 17 from McDonald's.

Sampling

Brand and COVID-19. The first COVID-19 case in Malaysia was detected on January 25, 2020 (Elengoe, 2020). As the number of cases increased, Malaysia implemented a Movement Control Order (MCO) to control the disease; the first phase was from March 18 to 31, 2020.

On March 18, 2020, KFC advertised a series of ten posts in a day. All posts were related to standard operating procedures observed by the company in relation to food ordering and delivery and practices of good hygiene. KFC used self-order kiosks, online orders, and drive-through methods as their new ordering practice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The delivery protocols involved contactless delivery and taped takeaway bags. In addition, sanitisation of self-order kiosks, delivery bags and hands, and health check-ups for crew members and KFC despatch riders were practices of good hygiene exercised by the brand.

McDonald's Malaysia advertised their business on Instagram regarding the MCO four days after March 18, 2020, the first day of the MCO. After that, a series of related posts were issued over one week on March 22, 2020 (Sunday), March 26, 2020 (Thursday), March 28, 2020 (Saturday), March 29, 2020 (Sunday) and March 30, 2020 (Monday). Following that, it stopped highlighting the MCO and COVID-19 in its posts and focused on its regular advertising of food and drinks and its operating hours, apart from Ramadan.

Pizza Hut's postings related to COVID-19 and MCO started only on March 27, 2020, during the third MCO phase, which fell between March 29 to May 3, 2020. The advertisements on MCO were posted among the posts on Ramadan until May 1, 2020.

Each brand announced its occupational safety operations related to COVID 19 and the MCO at different times. Among them, KFC was the earliest, on the first day of the phase of MCO. McDonald's began on the fourth day of the first phase, while Pizza Hut was the last to post.

ANALYSIS

Replication of Hashtag Signs

McDonald's launched a succession of #KitaBoleh themes emulating the tagline in the video campaign aired on Malaysian television featuring Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yasin and other politicians making a nationwide call to inform the public of the need to fight COVID-19 (Figure 1). In addition, this brand utilised and adapted the #KitaBoleh tagline in its series of advertising. #KitaBoleh is believed to be inspired by *Malaysia Boleh,* a phrase coined by Tun Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, to encourage Malaysian athletes to participate in international events. McDonald's adaptations of #KitaBoleh were '#KitaBoleh kongsi rezeki' (We can share sustenance), '#KitaBoleh memikul cabaran in bersama-sama' (We can take this challenge together) and '#KitaBoleh video call je' (We can just

Figure 1. Replication of hashtag signs (McDonald's)

video call). "Walaupun kita tak boleh dekat #KitaBoleh berjuang bersama" literally means if we cannot be near, we still can fight together. These repeated uses of hashtag slogans were posted alongside their brand products.

KFC employed the #StaySafe in its advertisements. #StaySafe is a common expression conveyed during the pandemic wishing and advising other people to be safe and to take care of themselves. #HappyKatRumah, Pizza Hut's choice of the hashtag was an adaptation of #DudukRumah, the government's call to stay at home as a preventive measure to protect Malaysians and their families from infections (Figure 2).

These stylistic adaptations and adoption of hashtag signs exhibit commercial business support of the national agenda where both
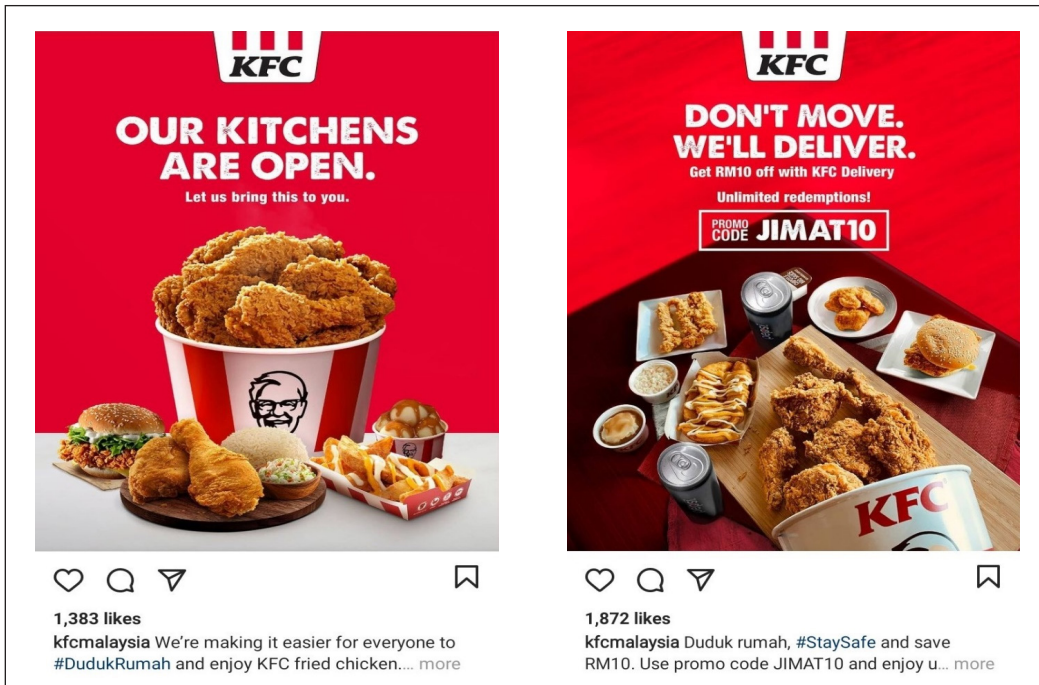

Figure 2. Replication of hashtags signs (KFC)

parties stand together in the face of adversity. Saxton et al. (2015) described hashtags as the use of pound sign (#) to create random and massive participation in the online community. It has become influential because when hashtags are used with online advocacy activities, movements may expand naturally among like-minded individuals and groups and virally to other social media users. Moreover, in many social movements and marketing circumstances, the hashtag helps the organisation organise messages, make them simpler to discover, and connect them to existing knowledge and action groups (Saxton et al., 2015).

Choice of Image and Graphics Patterns

Three sets of related images were employed in Pizza Hut's Instagram posts. First, there were five images of real employees of Pizza Hut at work (Figure 3). In one image, a pizzaiolo named Sethulingam was shown preparing a pizza. He wore a facemask, a barrier to assist in preventing respiratory droplets from travelling into the air when talking, in addition to the typical personal hygiene practises in the kitchen, such as wearing a disposable kitchen hair-net and a pair of clear plastic gloves. Other real-life staff represented in the posts were Muad, the team member and Adib, Fatin and Ridwan, the delivery riders. These pictures of staff in different poses showed a new method of doing business amidst the MCO. All staff were named, depicting the brand's recognition of its unsung heroes. Based on these efforts also demonstrates the company's dedication to being authentic and honest by using employee-centred advertising to maintain its image while also interacting with customers.

Another set of images displayed the practice of social distancing adopted by the company- open palm hand gestures and split a pizza. It can be deduced that the literal explanation of the former refers to sanitised
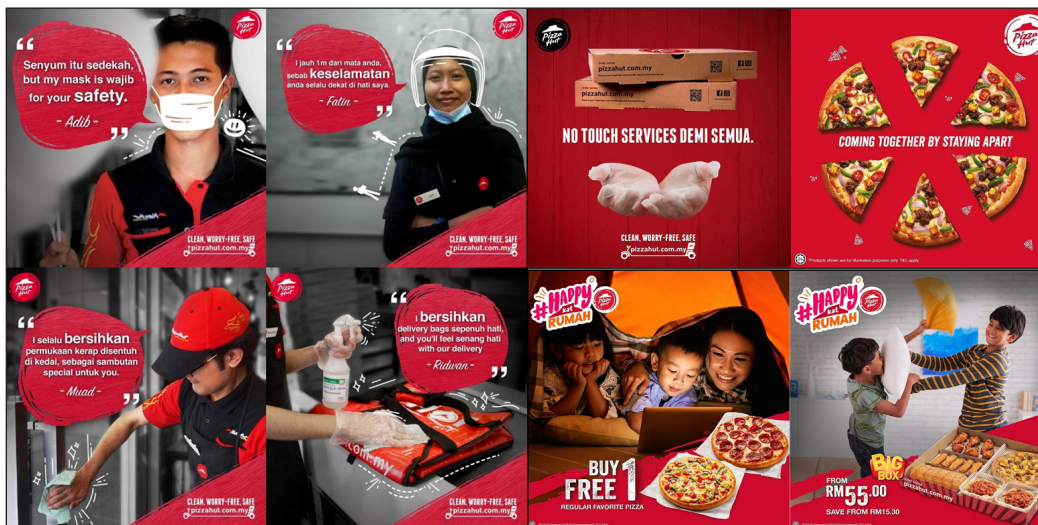

Figure 3. Choice of image and graphic patterns (Pizza Hut)

hands, while its symbolic meaning alludes to hospitality in rendering services in the new reality. The split pizza image, and the caption *Coming Together by Staying Apart* connote physical distancing. The third image set illustrated the excitement and fun of remaining at home and eating pizza, with one picture depicting children and their mother camping in the living room and the other showing youngsters joyously throwing pillows at each other. Both activities seem to correlate having pizza with happiness.

KFC posted vector images of ten standard operating procedures on March 18, 2020 (Figure 4). Vector graphics were easily sized and customised using computer software as creating ten advertisements using human models can be costly and time-consuming. All images came with captions underneath. Similarly, McDonald's one-week posts that comprised six advertisements related to COVID-19 were also computer generated (Figure 1). McDonald's captions needed to be read with the accompanying images.
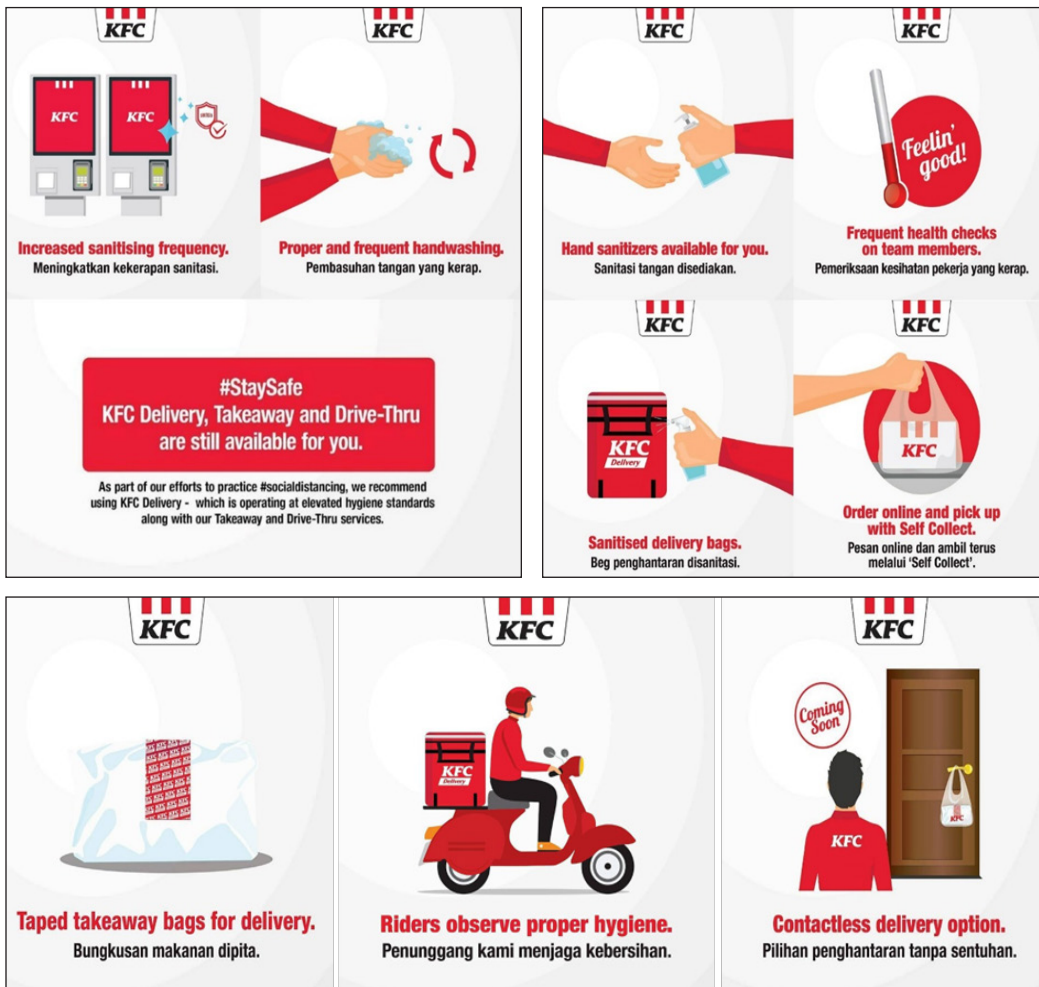

Figure 4. Choice of image and graphic patterns (KFC)

'#Kita boleh happy dengan famili' caption was posted alongside the image of a Happy Meal set to suggest *We can be happy eating McDonald's' Happy Family set*. #Kita boleh video call je' or *We can video call* was below the image of McDonald's' food on a tiled video conference screen which can be interpreted as the possibility of virtual dinners with family and friends. The **first-person point of view 'we'** repetition implies a relationship that involves the brand and its consumers.

KFC posts (other than those of the vector images) were written in uppercase letters (Figure 5). This marketing method is an attention-seeking device to attract readers. For example, the **typographical** feature STANDING TOGETHER TO SERVE THE NATION and white **emboldened typeface** against the red background shows a KFC rider at the centre, flanked by GrabFood and Foodpanda riders on the left with Pizza Hut and McDonald's on the right facing. The riders are illustrated looking

Figure 5. Choice of image (KFC)

over their shoulders at the KFC *abang* rider, who clenches his fist in the air, which exhibits an image of solidarity, camaraderie, and unity among food courier service riders. The background post is a Kuala Lumpur cityscape with the sun appearing at the horizon, symbolising hope in times of darkness.

Language Patterns

Pizza Hut's advertisements featured text code mixed with English and Malay (Figure 3). Code-mixing is common in Malaysia's multilingual and pluralistic society, whether in a formal (David, 2003) or informal context. This language form has also permeated media texts (Bukhari et al., 2015; Halim & Maros, 2014). Here, Adib was quoted saying, '**Senyum itu sedekah,** but my face mask is **wajib** for your safety' to mean a smile is an act of charity but wearing a facemask is obligatory or 'wajib' in Islamic Fiqh (jurisprudence). *Sedekah* in Malay comes from the Arabic, *sadaqah* to mean an act of charity and the call to smile is based on an authentic *hadith* (a collection of Prophet Muhammad's sayings and daily practices) narrated by Bukhari where the Prophet (S.A.W.) said, "Your smiling in the face of your brother is charity" ("What has been related about various kinds of ma'ruf", n.d.) Charity is 'sadaqah' in Arabic or 'sedekah' in Malay. Fatin, the rider uses Malay except for the pronoun reference, 'I' to address herself in, '**I** jauh 1m dari mata anda, sebab keselamatan anda selalu dekat di hati saya**'** (I stay 1m away from you for safety purposes, but

you are close to my heart). Muad says, '**I** selalu bersihkan permukaan kerap disentuh di kedai, sebagai sambutan **special** untuk **you**' (I always clean frequently touched surfaces at the store to welcome you). Using pronoun references, 'I' and 'you' are common among Malay speakers when speaking Malay (Othman, 2006). Words of stay safe, safety, 'keselamatan' (safety) and 'bersihkan' (clean) are in bigger fonts than the rest of the text to manifest the food chain's commitment to adhering to hygienic practices. The exception is Sethulingam, who uses only English. His words are merely adaptations of viral signs by medical personnel on social media- *We stay at work for you. You stay at home for us*. The brand's Instagram caption says *I come to work every day to make your favourite pizza, so you can stay at home*. The adapted lines maintain most of the original sentence structures and words but tune them to adapt

to the act of pizza making. McDonald's, like Pizza Hut, also employs some code-mixing. McDonald's' *Happy* is used to replace 'gembira' in 'Kita boleh **happy** dengan famili. Using 'gembira' is too formal in social media texts. In "Kita boleh **video call** je", the *video call* replaces the lengthy and mouthful 'membuat panggilan video', simplifying the production of words.

KFC's eleven posts on March 18 were written in dual languages, English and Malay (Figure 4 & 6). The English posts were placed on top with wordings in the brand's iconic bright red. Below the English caption is the equivalent meaning in Malay written in black and in a smaller size. Advertising in dual languages accommodated a diverse range of consumers in Malaysia, both international and local. KFC's global slogan, *Finger Lickin' Good,* was not used in any posts. It is because it may be seen as unsanitary, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. However, KFC chose to honour its trademark of 'G-dropping' (pronunciation of the weak ending -**ing** as /ɪn/ rather than /ɪŋ/) in 'STILL **FRYIN'.**

In short, Pizza Hut and McDonald's used code-mixing in their posts. According to Instagram users' statistics in Malaysia in 2020, people aged 25-34 were the largest group of users. Overall, 75% of Instagram users are between the ages of 12-34 ("Instagram users in Malaysia," 2020), and this group of people are very likely also the consumers of these brands. The use of memes to be humorous and language that evokes a sense of informality, relaxation and casualness in the texts show that they

Figure 6. Language patterns (KFC)

are aware of their brand consumers. On the other hand, KFC adopted a more formal approach which perhaps addresses a more diverse consumer background. KFC was the first fast-food restaurant in Malaysia, beginning its business in 1973 (Lim, 2008), and the earliest consumer age group would have been elderly consumers, likely in their 50–60s. Thus, the marketing language adopted is a more standard language form to include consumers of those in the senior citizens' category.

As shown in Table 1, we discovered that three brands followed the ongoing campaigns across the country by using certain hashtags to embrace the spirit of unity and togetherness in the fight against the COVID-19 global pandemic. Furthermore, in terms of the images and graphic patterns, the brands made their standard operating procedures (SOPs) public to prove their adherence to the rules and regulations in determining their roles and places as top QSR brands in Malaysia. Furthermore, code-mixing (English and Malay) can be employed in all three brands' posts.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how the top three QSR brands reacted to Malaysia's first MCO, which was enforced from March 18 to March 31, 2020. The overall takeaway that we can deduce from the visual impressions gathered over such a period can be explained in numerous ways. To begin with, the quantity of postings uploaded by the brands demonstrates their commitment to staying relevant in the industry. In addition, the

active role played by the brands via their Instagram accounts proves that they are strong and can stand the test of time.

The following discussion is based on Table 1. All three brands followed the ongoing campaigns across the country by using hashtags (#) to embrace the spirit of unity and togetherness in the fight against COVID-19. Veszelszki (2016) claims that hashtags can link social media users with comparable fields of interest, and those hashtags are frequently exploited as a device by social movements. Thus, to establish a sense of solidarity and togetherness that easily connects them to their consumers and to continue increasing brand awareness, hashtags were imbued with ideas linked to being safe and doing everything as a team.

In terms of the images and graphic patterns, the brands made their standard operating procedures (SOPs) public to prove their adherence to the rules and regulations in determining their roles and places as top QSR brands in Malaysia. By doing so, they demonstrated their brand's recognition and willingness to move along with the enforcement order implemented by the government. These ideas can be supported by a study by Burhan et al. (2021) that interviewed 16 owner-managers in the Pakistani hospitality industry. It was suggested that customers needed to be informed that the restaurant was following all government-mandated SOPs, which was an essential strategy to promote the products and services (Burhan et al., 2021). Besides, in the same study, all interviewees were aware that the permanence of their

Table 1
Table of comparison

	Replication of hashtag signs	Choice of image and graphics patterns	Language patterns
McDonald's	#*KitaBoleh kongsi rezeki* (We can share sustenance) #*KitaBoleh memikul cabaran in bersama-sama* (We can take this challenge together) #*KitaBoleh video call je* (We can just video call) #*KitaBoleh berjuang bersama* (if we cannot be near, we still can fight together) (Figure 1)	McDonald's captions needed to be read with the accompanying images (Figure 1) '#*Kita boleh happy dengan famili'* caption was posted alongside the image of a Happy Meal set to suggest *We can be happy eating McDonald's' Happy Family set* (Figure 1) '#*Kita boleh video call je'* or *We can video call* was below the image of McDonald's' food on a tiled video conference screen which can be interpreted as the possibility of virtual dinners with family and friends (Figure 1).	Employment of code-mixing. *Happy* is used to replace 'gembira' in 'Kita boleh **happy** dengan family (Figure 1). Using 'gembira' is too formal in social media texts. In "Kita boleh **video call** je", the *video call* replaces the lengthy and mouthful 'membuat panggilan video', simplifying the production of words (Figure 1).
KFC	#*StaySafe*	Vector images of ten standard operating procedures (Figure 4) The image of the KFC *abang* rider (Figure 5).	KFC use dual languages, English and Malay. The English posts were placed on top with wordings in the brand's iconic bright red. Below the English caption is the equivalent meaning in Malay written in black and in a smaller size (Figure 4). Advertising in dual languages was made to accommodate a diverse range of consumers in Malaysia, both international and local. KFC's global slogan *Finger Lickin' Good* was not used in any posts. It is because it may be seen as unsanitary, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. However, KFC chose to honour its trademark of 'G-dropping' (pronunciation of the weak ending -**ing** as /ɪn/ rather than /ɪŋ/) in '**STILL FRYIN'** (Figure 6).

Table 1 (*continue*)

	Replication of hashtag signs	Choice of image and graphics patterns	Language patterns
Pizza Hut	*#HappyKatRumah*	Images of real employees of Pizza Hut and delivery riders at work abiding by the COVID-19 Preventive Measures (Figure 3) The split pizza image together with the caption *Coming Together by Staying Apart* (Figure 3)	Code-mixing of English and Malay '**Senyum itu sedekah** but my face mask is **wajib** for your safety' means a smile is an act of charity, but wearing a facemask is obligatory or 'wajib' in Islamic Fiqh (jurisprudence) (Figure 3). Fatin, the rider uses Malay except for the pronoun reference, 'I' to address herself in, '**I** jauh 1m dari mata anda, sebab keselamatan anda selalu dekat di hati saya' (I stay 1m away from you for safety purposes, but you are close to my heart) (Figure 3). Muad says, '**I** selalu bersihkan permukaan kerap disentuh di kedai, sebagai sambutan **special** untuk **you**' (I always clean frequently touched surfaces at the store to welcome you) (Figure 3).

business depended on customers who would be convinced of the hygienic procedures in preparing and serving food (Burhan et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the sizeable magnitude of the pandemic, no record of COVID-19 has been transmitted by food intake to date (Nakat & Bou-Mitri, 2021). This claim is probably true but obtaining customers' trust is of extreme importance, particularly when they have been bombarded with various information about the spread of COVID-19. At such a challenging time, maintaining employees' health and safety while assuring a high level of food safety and customers' confidence is critical (Nakat & Bou-Mitri, 2021). We can also conclude that following the SOPs could act as a marketing strategy to gain trust from the customers of the three fast-food restaurants studied and continue to position themselves positively, despite struggling with the COVID-19 outbreak. This result is reinforced by Burhan et al. (2021), which indicated that adherence to the SOPs was the cornerstone among several owner-managers to maintain effective marketing and promotional efforts during the COVID-19 crisis. As for the present study, the images also developed a dynamic engagement with the consumers by emphasising the first-person point of view in most captions. It strengthened the consumers' position in upholding their business journey to maintain a win-win partnership.

The employment of code-mixing (English and Malay) is present in all three brands' posts. Generally, the brands intertwined the languages (written in formal and informal contexts) to signify the multicultural society in Malaysia. This strategy enhanced the consumers' sense of belonging and signifies how these international brands have been making efforts to localise their names and positions in the country. Furthermore, MCO 1.0 also coincided with the Muslim's fasting month, Ramadan, and this explains why some posts contained ideas related to Islam and its practices. Furthermore, because the consumers were not allowed to leave the house, the brands proved their sensitivity by uploading posts related to humorous ideas and providing delivery services to create a less stressful environment among the locked-down people, which can also be considered a wise strategy in manifesting the act of cooperation between the brands and the consumers. To conclude, the graphic and linguistic features included in the three QSR brands' Instagram advertisements prove that advertising is not static but evolves with changing environments, needs and policies.

CONCLUSION

The current research has explored the qualitative aspect, i.e., semiotic analysis (language and visual elements) of fast-food restaurant chain Instagram posts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future studies can involve analysis of product positioning, corporate image, user-generated responses and user-to-user relationships of the advertisements. Other qualitative methodologies employed are thematic analysis, content analysis and sampling methods.

Instagram features (technological affordances) can also be analysed using quantitative data modelling and regression analysis. This type of analysis necessitates significant mathematical skills and a large amount of data. Analysis involving questionnaire methods can find out the relationship between the advertised product and the followers' personality traits and purchasing powers. Furthermore, future studies can also examine how Instagram users react to those advertisements, especially the fans of these fast-food outlets. In that way, the analysis is more impactful (and reciprocal) as it considers the customers' views of their favourite brands in terms of language use and hospitality that can contribute to the respective establishments, particularly the hospitality industry during the pandemic.

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