

FROM BRIEFINGS TO BELIEF: CONSTRUCTING ETHOS IN PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION

**Salwani Mohd Salleh, Azzieatul Syazwanie Azmi*, Nazatul Shahreen Zainal Abidin,
Anis Idayu Aziz**

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Bukit
Ilmu, 18500 Machang, Kelantan

*Corresponding author: azzie168@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, political communication remains central to shaping public trust, especially in times of national uncertainty and recovery. This paper explores the degree of public trust placed in Khairy Jamaluddin, Malaysia's former Minister of Health, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the rhetorical strategies, communicative practices, and leadership qualities that contributed to his perceived credibility and trustworthiness among the Malaysian public. Beyond offering a historical rhetorical analysis of his crisis communication, this study also serves as a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners seeking deeper insights into effective leadership discourse, crisis messaging, and the dynamics of public persuasion in times of national emergency. Grounded in Aristotle's framework of ethos, the analysis focuses on how Khairy's communication embodied practical wisdom (phronesis), moral character (arete), and goodwill (eunoia). His approach is examined through selected speeches delivered in 2021, a crucial year when Malaysia faced a surge in Covid-19 cases and launched its National Immunisation Programme. During this time, His communication played an important role in shaping public trust, making it a key period to analyse his use of ethos in crisis leadership. The findings reveal that his strategic use of ethos helped foster public compliance, build institutional trust, and humanise crisis leadership. As rhetorical practices continue to shape governance in post-crisis contexts, this paper offers timely insights into how ethos can serve as a guiding principle for effective and credible leadership communication.

Keywords: Leadership Quality, Persuasive Nature, Aristotle's Means of Persuasion, Ethos

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic was one of the most life-altering and devastating crises in recent history. Its rapid and deadly spread plunged the world into crisis mode, forcing governments to act swiftly to protect lives and sustain national stability. Malaysia was no exception. The responsibility to safeguard the nation largely rested on the government, particularly the Ministry of Health (MoH), whose policies and decisions directly impacted the public's wellbeing. In such times, public cooperation and trust became essential. In 2021, much of that responsibility and hope was placed on the newly appointed Minister of Health, Khairy Jamaluddin, to lead the country through the crisis and help flatten the curve.

Although Khairy Jamaluddin now serves as a former Health Minister, his leadership during the pandemic remains a critical part of Malaysia's public health narrative. Appointed in August 2021 at the height of the crisis, he quickly gained recognition for his firm, data-driven approach and consistent public communication. His tenure marked a shift in crisis management, introducing reforms such as enhanced transparency in Covid-19 data, simplified standard operating procedures (SOPs), and targeted efforts to reduce brought-in-dead (BID) cases. These actions were seen as responses to earlier criticisms of the government's pandemic strategy and reflected the leadership qualities expected during a national emergency. His communication style and rhetorical presence during this period offer a compelling context for understanding how trust is built in times of crisis.

This study focuses on selected speeches by Khairy Jamaluddin during his time as Health Minister, examining how his language and messaging reflected the rhetorical appeal of ethos, as conceptualised by Aristotle. Ethos, one of the three classical persuasive modes alongside logos and pathos, centers on the speaker's credibility and moral authority. It emphasises the alignment between a speaker's character, actions, and words in building audience trust. A working definition by Corder (1978) describes ethos as "character as it emerges in language," encompassing both internal values (personhood) and external perception (persona). Analysing Khairy's communication through this lens provides valuable insight into the role of character, integrity, and ethical persuasion in public health leadership.

Ethos is composed of three elements: practical wisdom (phronesis), moral virtue (arete), and goodwill (eunoia). Together, these qualities shape how audiences perceive and respond to leadership communication. Phronesis reflects sound judgment and decision-making; arete indicates ethical conduct and integrity; and eunoia demonstrates the speaker's sincere concern for the public's welfare. Modern rhetorical scholars argue that ethos is not a static quality, but a relational construct shaped during communication and by how the speaker is perceived (Baumlin & Meyer, 2018; Corder, 1978).

In public health leadership, ethos plays a decisive role in shaping public perception and encouraging compliance with policies. Research by Dijk et al., (2024) found that public health officials who communicated with transparency, consistency, and emotional intelligence were more successful in fostering cooperation. Trustworthiness, empathy, and reliability were identified as essential traits, especially during extended periods of uncertainty. Similarly, governance scholars such as Cheema (2010) and Armstrong (2005) emphasise that transparency, open communication, and accountability are crucial for maintaining public confidence particularly in crisis settings where fear, misinformation, and policy fatigue are common. Kickbusch and Ihekweazu (2022) further affirms that inclusive and transparent risk communication is key to sustaining trust during global health emergencies.

Khairy Jamaluddin's approach to leadership during Malaysia's Covid-19 crisis reflects many of these values. A recent study by Azmi et al. (2025) examined his communication using Gardner's (1989) leadership attributes framework, concluding that he consistently demonstrated decisive judgment, an understanding of public needs, and motivational clarity. These qualities resonate with the ethical and practical dimensions of ethos, as his speeches often combined informative policy updates with messages of reassurance and solidarity. His style helped calm public anxiety, address criticism, and build momentum for national recovery.

This paper builds upon such findings by offering a rhetorical analysis grounded specifically in Aristotle's ethos framework. While prior studies highlight Khairy's leadership capabilities, this study delves into how his credibility was constructed through language. The goal is to understand how ethos through phronesis, arete, and eunoia operated in his speeches to persuade, unite, and inspire trust during a critical period in Malaysia's pandemic response. As the world enters a new phase of recovery, the relevance of this study remains strong. The ongoing threat of new Covid-19 variants and the potential for future pandemics highlight the continued importance of credible and ethical leadership. Public trust will again become a crucial factor in responding to future crises. Understanding how ethos was effectively used in past health communication equips us to better evaluate and prepare future leaders for the challenges to come.

METHOD

This study employed qualitative rhetorical analysis, focusing on Aristotle's triadic framework of ethos: phronesis (practical wisdom), arete (virtue), and eunoia (goodwill). Transcripts from Khairy Jamaluddin's Covid-19 press briefings were manually coded and thematically analysed to identify persuasive strategies that contributed to his perceived credibility and trustworthiness during the pandemic. The study was conducted based on three downloaded Youtube videos of Khairy Jamaluddin's press conference on Covid-19 updates in Malaysia. Statements from the videos dated September 1st, 9th and 19th, 2021 were transcribed verbatim and analysed to determine the existence of ethos appeal in KJ's speech. The appeal was further categorised into three thematic components which are phronesis (practical wisdom), arete (virtue) and eunoia (goodwill). KJ's statements were closely analysed to see if they match or fit in any of these three components. Any features in the statements found to match Aristotle's description of ethos help to boost the minister's good image and reputation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Aristotle's concept of ethos centres on the speaker's credibility. A credible speaker is seen as trustworthy, making their message more likely to persuade the audience. Credibility is not solely based on a speaker's reputation but is also reflected in the content and delivery of the speech, particularly when it demonstrates phronesis (practical wisdom), arete (moral virtue), and eunoia (goodwill). These three components collectively define ethos. The following statements, taken from transcribed data of Khairy Jamaluddin's recent press conferences on Covid-19 updates, illustrate how he employed ethos appeals. The findings are organised according to the three categories: phronesis, arete, and eunoia.

Table 1 Ethos Appeal in Statements – Phronesis (Practical Wisdom)

The Statements	Ethos - Phronesis
<i>Yang pertamanya adalah, satu usaha yang segera yang memerlukan a sense of urgency, untuk kita memastikan bahawa penularan Covid-19 di beberapa negeri dapat dibendung secepat mungkin. Sense of urgency ini telah pun kita melihat melalui penubuhan greater Klang Valley Task Force yang telah dipengerusikan oleh Datuk Dr. Chong pada bulan lepas. Dan kita akan membawa fokus & intensiti yang sama kepada beberapa negeri yang sedang berhadapan dengan penularan kes yang tinggi.</i>	This urgency is realized through the establishment of Greater Klang Valley Task Force, chaired by Datuk Dr. Chong last month. We will give the same focus and intensity to a few states which are currently experiencing high cases of Covid-19 spread.

<p>(Firstly, one immediate effort which requires a sense of urgency to ensure that the spread of Covid-19 can be controlled the soonest possible. This urgency is realized through the establishment of Greater Klang Valley Task Force, chaired by Datuk Dr. Chong last month. We will give the same focus and intensity to a few states which are currently experiencing high cases of Covid-19 spread).</p>	<p>*among the strategies to reduce active Covid-19 cases in affected states.</p>
<p><i>Negeri-negeri tersebut bukan hanya akan menerima bekalan vaksin yang lebih tetapi juga kita telah memulakan proses pemindahan tenaga kerja dan juga aset-aset perubatan...kepada negeri-negeri tersebut daripada negeri-negeri yang tidak lagi memerlukan aset & juga tenaga kerja berlebihan.</i></p> <p>(Those few states will not only receive more stocks of vaccine but also, we have started moving workforce and medical assets for them from the states which are no longer in need of these resources).</p>	<p>...we have started moving workforce and medical assets for them...</p> <p><i>*on the solution to help ease the burden faced by front liners in affected states.</i></p>
<p>We have received 20000 applications <i>yang kita telah lulus adalah 4159 sahaja.</i> And this is based on “strict risk assessment, risk assessment of whether they are vaccinated, their test history, also -- where they come from, and also <i>keadaan rumah mereka.</i> Jadi dalam hal ini, kita masih lagi ketat, di mana the default is still quarantine at the “quarantine centre.” You still have to request for home quarantine.</p> <p>(We have received 20,000 applications, but only 4,159 requests were approved. And this is based on ‘strict risk assessment’ – risk assessment of whether they are vaccinated, their test history, also where they come from, and also their house condition. Thus, in this matter, we are still strict whereby the default is still undergoing the quarantine at quarantine centres. You still have to request for home quarantine).</p>	<p>And this is based on ‘strict risk assessment’ – risk assessment of whether they are vaccinated, their test history, also where they come from, and also their house condition.</p> <p><i>*strict risk assessment for those applying for home quarantine.</i></p>
<p><i>Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia sedar bahawa untuk memastikan penglibatan yang menyeluruh oleh masyarakat termasuklah ahli akademik, pihak swasta dan NGO dalam usaha melindungi diri, keluarga dan juga komuniti daripada jangkitan virus covid 19 adalah dengan menyediakan data serta maklumat yang lengkap dan terperinci berhubung situasi semasa jangkitan virus tersebut di dalam negara.</i></p> <p>(The Ministry of Health is aware that, in order to ensure true engagement from the society which includes the</p>	<p>in order to ensure true engagement from the society.... detailed and comprehensive data on the updates of the virus spread in the country must be provided.</p> <p><i>*exercising transparency in data sharing for total engagement from society</i></p>

academicians, private sectors, NGOs – in the effort to protect one self, families and the community from Covid-19 – detailed and comprehensive data on the updates of the virus spread in the country must be provided).	
<p>Now, <i>tarikh sebenar kematian</i>, then we will do the <i>bedah siasat dan sekiranya ada berlaku apa-apa perkara yang perlu dimurnikan</i>, then later we will clarify <i>ataupun</i> we will amend the data. So, we can announce the death on <i>tarikh kematian yang sebenar</i>.</p> <p>(Now, the actual date of death...then, we will do the post-mortem and should there be anything needs to be refined, then later we will clarify or amend the data. So, we can announce the death based on its actual date).</p>	<p>...we can announce the death based on its actual date.</p> <p><i>*on actual date of death (for accuracy)</i></p>

The component of phronesis, or practical wisdom, in Aristotle's ethos is reflected through a leader's ability to make sound judgments, implement strategic decisions, and respond effectively to pressing issues. In the context of Khairy Jamaluddin's Covid-19 press conference, several statements exemplify this element, particularly through his crisis management strategies and data-driven decision-making. One clear example is his emphasis on the sense of urgency in addressing the spread of Covid-19. By referring to the **Greater Klang Valley Task Force**, Khairy highlighted the government's immediate and focused response to outbreaks in severely affected states. His plan to replicate this intensity and focus in other high-case states reflects sound judgment and situational awareness, hallmarks of phronesis. It shows that he is not only aware of the severity of the crisis but is also capable of implementing proven strategies swiftly and effectively.

Additionally, the decision to **reallocate medical resources and healthcare personnel** from low-demand to high-demand regions demonstrates efficient resource planning. This statement reveals his ability to assess needs across different states and respond accordingly. Such a move also reflects an understanding of system-wide coordination, rather than isolated interventions which are a sign of strategic leadership. Further reflecting phronesis is his explanation of the **strict risk assessment** involved in approving home quarantine applications. By transparently outlining the criteria such as vaccination status, test history, travel origin, and home conditions, Khairy demonstrated the government's commitment to rational, evidence-based policies. His clarity in explaining this procedure not only boosts public understanding but also reassures the audience that decisions are grounded in careful analysis and not made arbitrarily.

These statements collectively show that Khairy's ethos, through phronesis, is communicated by his practical handling of public health challenges. His speech reflects competence, responsibility, and the wisdom needed to lead in a crisis. The clear articulation of decisions and strategies enhances his credibility as a capable and rational leader, strengthening the persuasive impact of his public communication.

Table 2 Ethos Appeal in Statements – Arete (Virtue)

The Statements	Ethos - Arete
<p>...at one point, Malaysia was top 10 in the world, and at one point, Singapore was lower than us. Now another way round. That is how we emerged in this matter, so I think each country will see ups & lows success in deliver Covid but I'm quite positive, cautiously optimistic...we'll pray to God in the next two months we will see light at the end of the tunnel. Thank you everyone, Thank you.</p>	<p>I'm quite positive, cautiously optimistic...we'll pray to God in the next two months we will see light at the end of the tunnel.</p> <p><i>*positive mindset and strong faith in God.</i></p>
<p><i>Penglibatan yang menyeluruh oleh masyarakat dan pemahaman yang betul mengenai situasi semasa jangkitan covid 19 di dalam negara amatlah penting untuk memastikan proses peralihan ke fasa endemik dilakukan dengan lancar dan selamat.</i></p> <p>(Total engagement by the community and on-track understanding of the current scenario of Covid-19 spread in the country is very crucial to ensure a smooth and safe shift towards the endemic phase).</p>	<p>...is very crucial to ensure a smooth and safe shift towards the endemic phase.</p> <p><i>*concern towards people's safety.</i></p>
<p>But I would also like to say that when we release a lot of this data, there will be a lot of interpretation and analysis. So, the Ministry of Health will continue to provide insights and try to interpret the data. But of course we welcome especially experts, universities data scientists to also try to interpret some of the trends and share with us so that the whole of society can have access to this data and have better insights on how to live with covid 19.</p>	<p>...the Ministry of Health will continue to provide insights and try to interpret the data. But of course, we welcome especially experts, universities data scientists to also try to interpret some of the trends and share with us...</p> <p><i>*being helpful, resourceful and supportive.</i></p>
<p><i>Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia berterima kasih terhadap bantuan pelbagai agensi dalam sama-sama di semua peringkat kerajaan persekutuan mahu pun di peringkat kerajaan negeri agar kita dapat sama-sama memastikan keadaan segera pulih di negara kita.</i></p> <p>(The Ministry of Health would like to thank various agencies for their help either at federal or state level in the effort to ensure fast recovery in our country).</p>	<p>The Ministry of Health would like to thank various agencies for their help either at federal or state level...</p> <p><i>*Being appreciative.</i></p>
<p><i>Jadi saya nak pergi tengok sendirilah..betul ke tidak..dan didapati memang betul. Semalam saya pergi Kajang...covid ICU tinggal sorang je...dan wad-wad yang dulu digunakan untuk covid dikembalikan untuk mengguna..digunakan sebagai wad biasa. Dan saya nak bagi semangat kepada kakitangan yang mungkin tertekan selama 2, 3 bulan yang lepas ni dengan kes yang meningkat dan saya nak supaya tidak ada apa-apa sambutan yang rasmi. Ini saya bagitau pengarah-</i></p>	<p>I decided to go have a look myself... And I wanted to uplift the spirit of staff who have been under a lot of stress for the previous 2, 3 months with the spike in cases. I didn't want any official welcoming celebration.</p>

<p><i>pengarah hospital jugak....bukan tujuan saya nak cari kesilapan atau pun..err..saya nak cari salah sape.</i></p> <p>(So, I decided to go have a look myself...whether it's true or not...and it was true. Yesterday, I went to Kajang, there was only one Covid ICU (patient) left. Wards previously used for Covid are now back to common wards. And I wanted to uplift the spirit of staff who have been under a lot of stress for the previous 2, 3 months with the spike in cases. I didn't want any official welcoming celebration. This is what I told the hospital directors as well...I didn't intend to find faults with anyone).</p>	<p><i>*Practical, caring and down-to-earth.</i></p>
--	---

Arete, the component of ethos that denotes virtue, refers to the moral character and integrity of a speaker. A virtuous speaker is seen as someone who upholds values such as honesty, responsibility, humility, and care for others. In the context of Khairy Jamaluddin's Covid-19 press conference, his character as a virtuous leader was demonstrated through various statements that highlighted his ethical commitment to the nation's well-being. One notable example is his positive yet humble stance when discussing **Malaysia's fluctuating Covid-19 position** compared to other countries. By acknowledging the dynamic nature of the pandemic and expressing cautious optimism while invoking divine guidance, he projected humility, resilience, and faith. This aligns with the virtue of maintaining hope while remaining grounded in reality, which resonates well with a public navigating uncertainty. Khairy's concern for **public safety** is evident in his emphasis on the importance of total community involvement and accurate public understanding to ensure a smooth and safe transition into the endemic phase. His deliberate inclusion of societal responsibility in public health management reflects his ethical consideration for collective welfare over individual convenience.

Virtue is also reflected in his support for **collaborative interpretation of health data**. By encouraging data scientists, experts, and academic institutions to interpret Covid-19 trends alongside the Ministry of Health, Khairy signaled transparency and inclusivity. This shows his openness to external expertise and reinforces the value of shared knowledge for the betterment of society. Another aspect of his virtuous character is seen in his **appreciation toward agencies** at both federal and state levels. His public gratitude underscores a humble recognition of joint efforts, enhancing his image as a respectful and inclusive leader who does not claim sole credit for national progress. His **personal visit to Kajang Hospital** further solidifies his arete appeal. Choosing to personally verify the ground situation without fanfare and with the intention to uplift fatigued healthcare workers indicates humility, compassion, and a sincere commitment to staff morale. His insistence on avoiding formal celebrations and refraining from fault-finding demonstrates a grounded and empathetic approach to leadership, especially during crisis recovery.

Overall, the statements reveal Khairy Jamaluddin as a leader with strong ethical principles, humility, and a people-first mindset. His virtues enhance his credibility and contribute to the persuasive power of his speech, reinforcing public trust in the government's efforts during the pandemic.

Table 3 Ethos Appeal in Statements – Eunoia (Goodwill)

The Statements	Ethos - Eunoia
----------------	----------------

<p>All of these to give some reassurance to parents that in lieu of the fact that we cannot give vaccination to those who are under 12. We are doing our best to make sure that teachers are vaccinated. We are doing our best to make sure that people who are working at schools; the clerical staff, the canteen staff, the janitorial staff, the security guards as well as the bus drivers are vaccinated. So that the environment is vaccinated.</p>	<p>All of these to give some reassurance to parents that in lieu of the fact that we cannot give vaccination to those who are under 12.</p> <p><i>*Giving reassurance to parents.</i></p>
<p><i>Maka untuk mencapai keadaan itu, saya bersama pengurusan tertinggi KKM telah bersetuju untuk kita memastikan data dan maklumat berhubung covid 19 di dalam negara dapat diakses oleh semua pihak. Sebelum ini pun KKM telah memuatnaik data granular ke dalam GitHub di mana data yang dimasukkan sentiasa ditambah baik dari semasa ke semasa.</i></p> <p>(Thus, to attain that situation, the top management of KKM and I have agreed to ensure that all data and information are accessible to all. In fact, KKM has been uploading granular data on GitHub ever since and these data are continuously upgraded from time to time).</p>	<p>...to attain that situation, the top management of KKM and I have agreed to ensure that all data and information are accessible to all.</p> <p><i>*Transparency guaranteed for the public.</i></p>
<p>So this is the new data set that we'll be sharing publicly err...starting now...<i>dan kita percaya dengan adanya perkongsian maklumat ini, dia akan dapat membantu bukan hanya Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, tetapi juga rakyat untuk buat analisa.</i></p> <p>(So, this is the new data set that we'll be sharing publicly err...starting now...and we believe that this information sharing will not only assist KKM but also the public in doing the analysis).</p>	<p>...we believe that this information sharing will not only assist KKM but also the public in doing the analysis.</p> <p><i>*Being resourceful for the public.</i></p>
<p><i>Saya berharap dengan maklumat dan data yang dikongsikan di GitHub dan CovidNow, masyarakat akan mempunyai pemahaman dan kesedaran yang lebih baik berkenaan situasi jangkitan COVID-19 dalam negara. Di samping itu juga, usaha untuk melakukan perubahan tingkahlaku ataupun behavioural change dan usaha untuk mengamalkan SOP-SOP dapat dipertingkatkan supaya kita boleh mula memasuki fasa baharu untuk hidup bersama dengan virus SARS-CoV-2 ini.</i></p>	<p>...the community will have deeper understanding and better awareness... the efforts to exercise behavioural change and practise SOPs can be improved to prepare us for the next phase...</p>

<p>(I hope that with the data and information shared on GitHub and CovidNow, the community will have deeper understanding and better awareness in dealing with the spread of Covid-19 in the country. Besides, the efforts to exercise behavioural change and practise SOPs can be improved to prepare us for the next phase which is to live together and adapt to the existence of SARS-CoV-2 virus).</p>	<p><i>*Preparing the public for the endemic phase.</i></p>
<p><i>Dalam perkara ini, kita sedang memastikan bahawa kita dapat memberi kaunseling kepada barisan petugas hadapan kita. Dan kita telah menggerakkan unit psikologi kita untuk melaksanakan kaunseling kepada mereka yang rasa tertekan. Kita juga sedang melihat apa lagi yang kita dapat laksanakan untuk kita cuba meringankan beban mereka.</i></p> <p>(With regard to this matter, we are working on providing counselling to our front liners. And we have motioned our psychology unit to give counselling to those under pressure. We are also looking at what other means we can adopt in the effort to ease their burden).</p>	<p>...we are working on providing counselling to our front liners...We are also looking at what other means we can adopt in the effort to ease their burden.</p> <p><i>*Working on the well-being of front liners.</i></p>

Eunoia, one of the three components of Aristotle's ethos, reflects the speaker's goodwill towards the audience. It demonstrates how much the speaker genuinely cares for the well-being of the people and aims to foster trust and emotional connection. In Khairy Jamaluddin's Covid-19 press conferences, this aspect is clearly evident as he consistently emphasised **compassion, support, and consideration** for all sectors of society, especially vulnerable groups. One of the most notable examples is his effort to provide reassurance to parents. Despite the inability to vaccinate children under 12, he asserted that the government was doing its utmost to ensure that all individuals within the school ecosystem including teachers, clerical staff, canteen workers, and even bus drivers are vaccinated. This highlights his deep concern for children's safety and shows an attempt to alleviate parental anxiety, reinforcing a sense of security for families. His continuous push for **transparency** further amplifies his goodwill. Khairy explained that he and the top leadership of the Ministry of Health (KKM) had agreed to make Covid-19 data accessible to the public, showing his **commitment to openness**. By uploading granular data to GitHub and improving it periodically, he demonstrated not only a willingness to share information, but also a **belief in empowering the public** through accurate and timely data.

Moreover, his intention to benefit both the Ministry and the public by publicly sharing new data sets illustrates his **resourcefulness**. He emphasized that such transparency would allow the people to perform their own analysis, fostering **collective understanding** and promoting **public engagement** in fighting the pandemic. In addition, Khairy expressed hope that shared data and public platforms like CovidNow would result in increased awareness, better behavioural adaptation, and stronger SOP compliance. His statements reflect a **forward-thinking attitude**, one that seeks to prepare the community for the realities of endemic

living. This shows how much he values societal readiness and cooperation in transitioning to the next phase of the pandemic response. Lastly, his remarks on addressing the emotional burden of frontliners serve as a powerful act of goodwill. He noted that the Ministry was actively providing counselling, deploying psychological support units, and exploring additional initiatives to lighten their burden. Such efforts reflect genuine empathy and concern for mental health, positioning him as a caring and considerate leader who acknowledges the invisible sacrifices of healthcare personnel.

In sum, Khairy Jamaluddin's use of *eunoia* is highly effective. His messages are filled with genuine concern, transparent communication, and supportive leadership. These qualities not only strengthen his credibility, but also build an emotional rapport with the audience, making his communication more persuasive, especially during a time of national crisis.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic was a global crisis that profoundly transformed how governments, institutions, and individuals responded to threats affecting public health, national security, and everyday life. It reshaped healthcare systems and exposed the critical importance of leadership communication in maintaining public trust. In Malaysia, the National Recovery Plan was introduced as a structured and evolving approach to manage the pandemic and guide the nation back to normalcy. Amid this turmoil, the role of the Health Minister gained unprecedented visibility and significance. The burden of responsibility placed on the Health Minister was immense, and it demanded not only intelligence and decisiveness but also credibility, empathy, and trustworthiness.

Khairy Jamaluddin, who held the portfolio during a crucial period of the Covid-19 crisis, emerged as a key figure whose communication style became central to the national response. His speeches were not just informative; they carried persuasive weight rooted in *ethos*. This study explores how he demonstrated *ethos* through practical wisdom (*phronesis*), moral virtue (*arete*), and goodwill (*eunoia*). These rhetorical strategies helped present him as a reliable and ethical leader, which in turn fostered public cooperation and reduced resistance to health policies such as vaccinations, quarantines, and behavioural guidelines.

Although the data analysed in this study dates back to 2021, its relevance remains strong in 2025. The world continues to face health-related challenges, including the risk of new Covid-19 variants and the ever-looming possibility of future pandemics. The nature of global health threats has become increasingly unpredictable, making it more important than ever for leaders to possess the kind of *ethos* demonstrated by Khairy Jamaluddin. When people are uncertain or fearful, they look at leaders who exhibit sound judgment, ethical conduct, and genuine concern for public welfare. Without these traits, public messaging can fail, trust can erode, and compliance with health measures may diminish, ultimately putting lives at risk.

This study, therefore, offers more than a retrospective analysis, but it serves as a blueprint for effective leadership communication in times of crisis. Understanding how *ethos* functions in real-world political discourse can guide current and future leaders on how to responsibly engage with the public. As new health crises emerge, the lessons from Khairy Jamaluddin's communication strategies will continue to provide a valuable reference point for fostering unity, maintaining transparency, and strengthening national resilience. In sum, the application of *ethos* in public health communication is not a one-time need confined to Covid-19. It is a lasting principle that should guide all forms of crisis leadership. Future leaders must be equipped not only with policy knowledge but also with the ability to

communicate with credibility, virtue, and goodwill which are the qualities that inspire trust and collective action, especially when facing the unknown.

REFERENCES

Aristotle. (2007). *On rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (G. A. Kennedy, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Azmi, A. S., Aziz, A. I., Salleh, S. M., & Zainal Abidin, N. S. (2025). *Speaking Through Crisis: Analysing Leadership Attributes in Khairy Jamaluddin's COVID-19 Updates*. In *Proceedings of the Cirebon International Conference on Education and Economics (CICEE)* (pp. 614–616). Universitas Swadaya Gunung Jati. <https://ejournal.ugj.ac.id/index.php/cicee/article/view/8900>

Baumlin, J. S., & Meyer, T. (Eds.). (2018). *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*. Parlor Press.

Briones, R. L., Kuch, B., Liu, B. F., & Jin, Y. (2023). Leadership Communication During Pandemics: Building Trust and Resilience. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 31(1), 45–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12400>

Cheema, G. S. (2010). *Building Trust in Government*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://publicadministration.un.org/publications>

Corder, J. W. (1978). Ethos as Self-Revealed in Speech. *Rhetoric Review*, 1(1), 30–45.

Gardner, J. W. (1989). *On leadership*. Free Press.

Kickbusch, I., & Ihekweazu, C. (2022). Trust and Transparency in Risk Communication During COVID-19. *The Lancet Global Health*, 10(3), e296–e297. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(22\)00041-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(22)00041-0)