Restorative Rhetoric and Ideological Positioning in Leaders' Social Media Crisis Communication on Food Security

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ABSTRACT

In times of global crisis, leadership discourse plays an important role in shaping public perception and establishing trust. At the intersection of restorative rhetoric and ideological positioning, this study examines how leaders in global food security engaged in social media crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic disrupted food systems and heightened public anxiety, social media emerged as a critical space for leaders to offer reassurance and counter misinformation. This provided a unique opportunity not only to investigate how their discourse functioned to manage the crisis, but also to examine the underlying ideological positioning of these leaders. Drawing on a qualitative research design, tweets from six high-ranking leaders of international food security organisations were analysed by employing a dual analytical framework integrating restorative rhetoric theory with ideological discourse analysis. It was found that the communication of the crisis leaders progressed through five stages of restorative rhetoric, from initial crisis reaction to corrective action and rebuilding. Within these stages, a discourse analysis revealed systematic ideological positioning of leaders as well as the organisations they represented through the use of both semantic structures and formal structures. Leaders consistently emphasised positive institutional attributes while deflecting responsibility. The use of inclusive language served to construct solidarity while maintaining institutional authority. This study uniquely demonstrates that restorative rhetoric in crisis communication is not ideologically neutral, revealing how leaders simultaneously engage in empathetic messaging and strategic legitimacy management, thus contributing to a critical understanding of institutional discourse during global crises.

Keywords: crisis communication; crisis leaders; ideological discourse; restorative rhetoric; social media

INTRODUCTION

In the past, leaders in a crisis relied heavily on public relations firms to craft and disseminate their messages through a variety of traditional media outlets. Carefully managed press releases, televised addresses, and newspaper interviews were the primary means of disseminating information, as well as shaping mainstream narratives and public perception about the management of the crisis. However, with the rise of social media, crisis leaders have abandoned many traditional modes of communication and are instead engaging directly with the public through social media platforms (Cheng, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered multiple overlapping crises, with food security being particularly urgent as it directly impacted physical health, emotional well-being, and social cohesion (Devereux et al., 2020; Laborde et al., 2020). It demanded clear leadership to maintain public trust and international cooperation. Therefore, examining how leaders responded to the specific challenges of the food security crisis during the pandemic provides valuable insights into the use of rhetorical and ideological strategies when managing a global crisis.

The importance of direct communication by leaders through social media is greatest during times of crisis, and this was certainly true during the pandemic. Accurate information, misinformation and disinformation are all disseminated quickly through social media, and this compels crisis leaders to take on a proactive role in using the same platforms to direct narratives, dispute misinformation, and assert authority (Mehta et al., 2021). The growing importance of social media crisis communication as an area of investigation is reflected in the recent works of Kwok et al. (2021), Noor et al. (2024), Ruan et al. (2023), Mirbabaie et al. (2021), and Wang et al. (2020), to name a few. These studies contribute to our understanding of the important role social media communication plays in establishing public trust.

CRISIS RHETORIC AND LEADERSHIP DISCOURSE

Investigating rhetoric has to do with the careful examination of language used to achieve specific goals, such as persuading or expressing empathy. In times of crisis, leaders engage in rhetoric as part of their crisis management strategies for restoring public trust. Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010) describe this as restorative rhetoric, used by leaders to facilitate sense-making among those affected, and support the healing process which takes place as a crisis transitions to some form of normalcy. Given the fact that not all crises are the product of wrongdoing or unethical practices but may even be the result of natural calamities, Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010) offer a framework for examining the use of rhetorical functions by crisis leaders. The assertion is that understanding the effective use of restorative rhetoric contributes as much as the use of strategic functions such as the timely dissemination of information, the coordination of actions and remaining accessible to media agencies.

Several studies have drawn on the restorative rhetoric framework, and given its focus on natural dialogues when crisis leaders communicate with the wider public, more recent investigations on social media crisis communication have drawn on the framework to examine the use of rhetoric by leaders in dialogic communication with the wider public (Reed & Bramlett, 2022; Vera-Burgos & Griffin Padgett, 2020; Williams et al., 2017). Studies examining the rhetoric of leaders are, however, limited, although such investigations have the potential to inform effective communication practices in times of crisis. While past studies on restorative rhetoric have reported on language use, none have anchored their analysis to linguistic theory for a systematic analysis of choices made by crisis leaders to shape meaning and identity. The present study addresses this gap by drawing on van Dijk's (2011) ideological discourse theory to explore how crisis rhetoric functions not only to engage in humanistic communication but also to reproduce ideological positioning through discourse. Specifically, we aim to show that even when taking on the role as "facilitator and sense-maker…to manage the healing process from disaster to restoration" (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010, p.378), crisis leaders continue to position themselves in favourable light through the linguistic choices they make. It follows that the research questions the present study addresses are:

1. How do leaders communicate restorative rhetoric during a health crisis through a social media platform?
2. How does ideological positioning manifest in leaders' social media discourse across the various stages of restorative rhetoric during a health crisis?

By addressing these questions, the present study offers practical insights into how rhetorical and ideological choices in leaders' narratives are designed to shape trust, perception and engagement among consumers of crisis communication.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The present study draws on restorative rhetoric theory as proposed by Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010). The theory posits that, depending on the nature of the crisis, leaders need to move beyond managing reputational risk and image repair and take on the role of facilitators who support communities in coping with the emotional turmoil and physical devastation post-crisis. This role is particularly important as a crisis transitions from the disaster to the restoration stage. Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010) assert that beyond drawing on strategic communication to restore order, crisis leaders also rely on humanistic communication as a way to meet the emotional needs of victims on the road to recovery. Restorative rhetoric, argue Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010), may be used by leaders in the "aftermath of unique crises" (p.379) where they and their organisations are not directly to blame. They are however leaders in times of crises, and positioned to engage with the wider community to restore confidence, facilitate healing, and create a sense of safety. The theory outlines five key stages: (1) initial reaction, (2) crisis assessment, (3) addressing issues of blame, (4) healing and forgiveness, and (5) implementing corrective actions and rebuilding. The framework has been used to examine the social media communication of leaders in times of unique crises. For example, Williams et al. (2017) applied this framework to analyse the rhetoric employed by Mayor Thomas Menino via Twitter following the Boston Marathon Bombing in 2013.

While restorative rhetoric foregrounds ethical responsiveness and community healing, it pays relatively less attention to the ideological positioning embedded in crisis narratives. This is where van Dijk's (2011) theory of ideological discourse offers a significant analytical extension. The present study integrates van Dijk's (2011) ideological square, a framework that explicates how discourse systematically constructs group identities through polarisation.

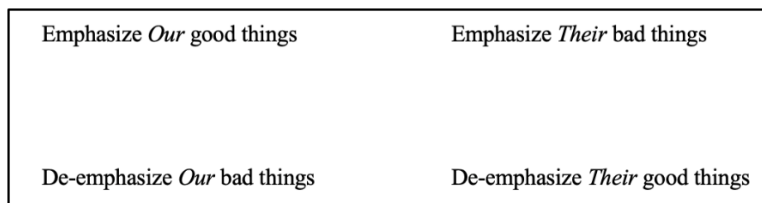| Emphasize *Our* good things	Emphasize *Their* bad things
De-emphasize *Our* bad things	De-emphasize *Their* good things

FIGURE 1. The Ideological Square (Source: van Dijk, 2011)

Specifically, the ideological square represents the way two groups with opposing points of view, self-interests, and attitudes use the tools of language to emphasise the good properties of Self and bad properties of Others while de-emphasising the bad properties of Self and good

properties of Others. This strategic polarisation is not just a stylistic feature but a discursive form of domination, whereby group-based ideologies are enacted to assert power, legitimacy, and moral authority in public discourse. van Dijk (2011) offers a list of semantic and formal structures which may be used as a discursive form of domination. The following table lists some of these structures:

TABLE 1. Semantic and Formal Structures (van Dijk, 2011)

Semantic Structures	
Type	Description
Negative topics/Semantic Macrostructures	Any overall topic describing the Other as breaching the norms and values of the Self
Granularity (preciseness vs. vagueness)	The negative properties or actions of the Other are described in more specific terms compared to the Self; the positive properties or actions of the Self are described in more specific terms compared to the Other
Presuppositions	Background assumptions or taken-for-granted beliefs about the Other that are not known to be true
Denomination (of propositions: participant description)	The Other is named or identified as different from the Self (Us) through the use of labels such as strangers, immigrants, enemies, etc.
Predication	The act of attributing qualities, actions, or states, negative to the Other and Positive to the Self
Modality	Used to express high certainty when emphasising positive attributes of Self and negative attributes of the Other; also, to express low certainty to mitigate the negative attributes of Self and downplay the positive attributes of the Other
Agency	To emphasise or de-emphasise the agency of Self or the Other, depending on the nature of actions taken
Formal Structures	
Superstructures	Positioning negative meanings about the Other and positive meanings about the Self in headlines and leads
Syntactic structures	Active sentences to emphasise negative agency of the Other or positive agency of Self, passive sentences to de-emphasise the negative agency of Self or positive agency of the Other
Pronouns	Used to signal in-group and out-group membership to reflect degrees of power, solidarity, intimacy, etc.
Demonstratives	To signal closeness or distance to people being described, e.g. those people
Rhetorical moves	Repetitions, enumerations, rhymes, and alliterations to emphasise and hence draw attention to negative meanings about the Other, and positive meanings about the Self

Collectively, these semantic and formal structures used in texts and talk serve to discursively represent identities and advance ideological beliefs. van Dijk (2011) describes this as "discursive forms of domination" aimed at "applying ideological control in the public sphere" (p.403).

It is our contention, therefore, that the integration of van Dijk's (2011) theory of ideological discourse with Griffin-Padgett and Allison's (2010) restorative rhetoric theory enriches our understanding of crisis communication. While restorative rhetoric as a framework offers a structured approach for examining crisis communication, it does not prescribe the ideological positioning of the message itself. Rather, the language used to enact these strategies is shaped by the communicator's goal and identity. The present study thus adopts the view that although the framework is analytically neutral, its deployment in real-world crisis contexts is greatly influenced by ideological choices embedded in discourse.

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how leaders governing global food security communicated through Twitter (known as X since July 2023) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study method was selected for its ability to yield in-depth, descriptive, and heuristic insights into rhetorical patterns and the social meanings embedded within them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the context of the global health crisis, the communication strategies adopted by high-ranking officials played a crucial role in mitigating anxiety and fostering trust (Islam et al., 2020; Ulmer et al., 2011).

The present study was confined to 34 months, from March 2020, when COVID-19 was first detected in Malaysia, to December 2022, when most governments transitioned from the pandemic to the endemic phase. Although global in scope, the analytical frame was contextualised using Malaysia's pandemic timeline for temporal consistency.

DATA COLLECTION AND SELECTION CRITERIA

Data were sourced from the official, publicly accessible X accounts of six high-ranking leaders affiliated with global food security organisations. These leaders were selected based on three primary criteria: they held top executive roles (e.g., President, Director-General), they maintained active, verified X accounts throughout the study period, and they consistently posted tweets addressing food security using relevant hashtags or keywords. The goal was not exhaustive inclusion, but deliberate selection to ensure a manageable sample offering diversity in gender, organisational affiliation, and rhetorical style. Information about the selected leaders is presented in Table 2:

TABLE 2. The profiles of the selected leaders governing global food security

No.	Name	Designation	Gender	Organisation	X account
1	Alvaro Lario	President	Male	IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development)	@IFADPresident
2	Antonio Guterres	Secretary-General	Male	UN (United Nations)	@antonioguterres
3	Cindy McCain	Executive Director	Female	WFP (World Food Program)	@WFPChief
4	Johan Swinnen	Director General	Male	IFPRI (The International Food Policy Research Institute)	@Jo_Swinnen
5	Qu Dongyu	Director General	Male	FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations)	@FAODG
6	Samantha Power	Administrator	Female	USAID (United States Agency for International Development)	@PowerUSAID

A total of 302 tweets that directly referenced food security were collected using X's advanced search functionality, filtered by user handle, date range, and relevant terms such as "food security" and "hunger". Only text-based tweets were included, while posts containing only images, videos, or links were excluded to maintain a consistent unit of analysis. The exclusion of visual tweets as well as multimodal tweets was to maintain focus on linguistic content. The researchers acknowledge the value of multimodal analysis and strongly recommend it for future investigations.

DATA ORGANIZATION AND CODING PROCEDURE

To analyse the rhetorical and ideological functions of leaders' crisis communication, a two-stage qualitative coding process was employed. The approach combined deductive coding, guided by the stages of restorative rhetoric, with inductive elements to capture emerging discursive patterns. This allowed for the examination of how leaders conformed to restorative strategies and how they positioned themselves ideologically through language.

All retrieved tweets were manually copied and organised in chronological order using a spreadsheet, with columns capturing the date, leader, and tweet content. Tweets were first coded according to the five stages of restorative rhetoric prescribed in Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010). Codes, defined as short phrases or labels representing underlying meanings (Tracy, 2019), were used to identify emergent patterns, values, and rhetorical intent.

Following the initial coding, the data were further processed to produce supplementary analyses, including word frequency visualisations and patterns in inclusive language. Quantitative summaries were generated to track the frequency of rhetorical stages per leader, enabling cross-case comparisons.

STAGE ONE: RESTORATIVE RHETORIC ANALYSIS

In this phase, tweets were evaluated to determine how the selected leaders performed their communicative roles as facilitators and sense-makers, particularly in addressing emotional, social, and practical aspects of the crisis. Emphasis was placed on identifying posts that expressed empathy, promoted solidarity, or framed institutional responsibility in ways consistent with restorative goals. This layer of analysis captured the shifts in communication, from crisis onset to recovery. The five stages of the restorative rhetoric framework served as the guiding structure for the analysis of leaders' communication. Each stage offered a distinct rhetorical focus, from initial crisis acknowledgement to efforts aimed at long-term recovery and restoration. Within this framework, particular attention was given to identifying posts that conveyed empathy, promoted solidarity, or framed institutions. This approach enabled a systematic examination of how the rhetorical strategies of leaders aligned with the principles of restorative communication across different phases of the crisis.

STAGE TWO: IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

To complement the rhetorical analysis, a second analytical phase was undertaken using van Dijk's (2011) ideological square, a theoretical model that explicates how discourse constructs polarised representations of the Self and the Other. This model served to uncover how institutional actors discursively reinforced their legitimacy by foregrounding their own positive attributes (Self),

while emphasising negative characteristics of external actors (Other), and simultaneously downplaying internal shortcomings or the positive aspects of those external to the institution.

The analysis focused on a corpus of 302 tweets, manually coded by two individuals. The first coder was the lead author of this paper and was directly involved in the design and theoretical framing of the present study. The second coder was a personal acquaintance, selected for her postgraduate qualification in applied language studies and prior research experience in discourse analysis.

The goal of the two coders was to identify the semantic and formal discursive strategies through which ideological positioning was embedded in institutional communication. The coding process was guided deductively by van Dijk's typology and supplemented by inductive refinements arising from the dataset itself. Coders worked in parallel using a codebook developed from van Dijk's framework and shared online.

The coding procedure involved two phases. In the first phase, each coder independently analysed all 302 tweets according to the agreed coding framework. Although the coding was conducted independently, the process was designed to be iterative and collaborative. Coders had access to each other's coding notes and emerging annotations via a shared digital workspace, which allowed for continuous visibility of evolving interpretations.

The second phase entailed a systematic comparison of the coded outputs to assess the consistency and accuracy of the applied categories. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a value of 0.84, with agreement on 89.7% of the coded units. This reflects a high level of reliability (McHugh, 2012), demonstrating that both coders applied the framework with a shared understanding of its conceptual dimensions. Coding disagreements were resolved through deliberative discussion, ensuring that final coding decisions reflected consensus rather than compromise.

To enhance the reliability of the coding process, inter-coder reliability was established. A second independent coder reviewed the initial set of codes for a randomly selected subset of tweets. Cohen's Kappa was calculated to assess consistency and ensure the coding scheme met acceptable reliability thresholds.

RESULTS

This section presents findings related to the two research questions guiding the present study. The first research question examines how leaders governing global food security communicated restorative rhetoric through X during the crisis. This includes an analysis of rhetorical strategies aligned with the five stages of restorative rhetoric as articulated by Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010). The second research question explores how ideological positioning was embedded within this restorative communication, drawing on van Dijk's (2011) ideological square to identify patterns of discursive emphasis, agency, presupposition, and inclusive language.

RESTORATIVE RHETORIC IN HEALTH CRISIS COMMUNICATION

A total of 302 tweets were identified from six leaders, with their distribution across stages visualised in Figures 1 and 2.
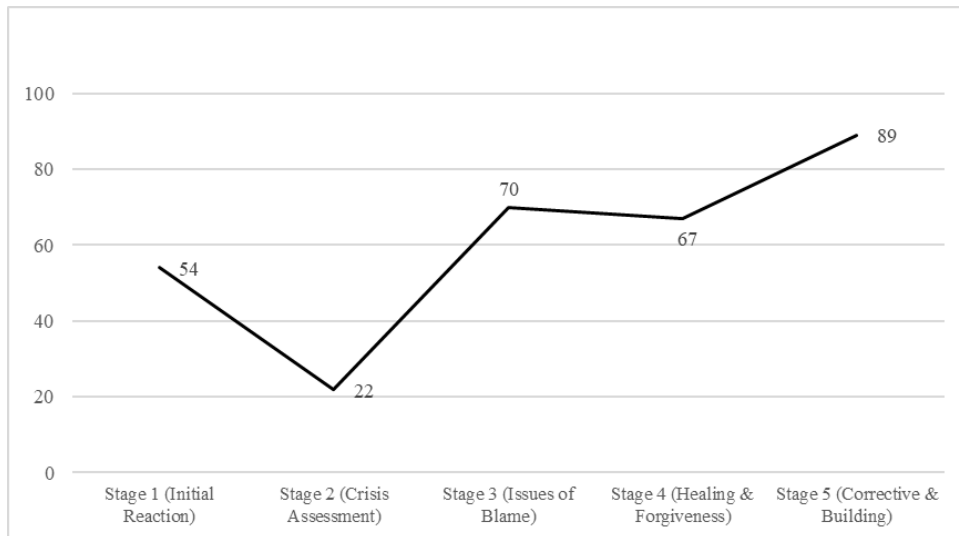

FIGURE 1. Total number of tweets in restorative rhetoric stages throughout the study period
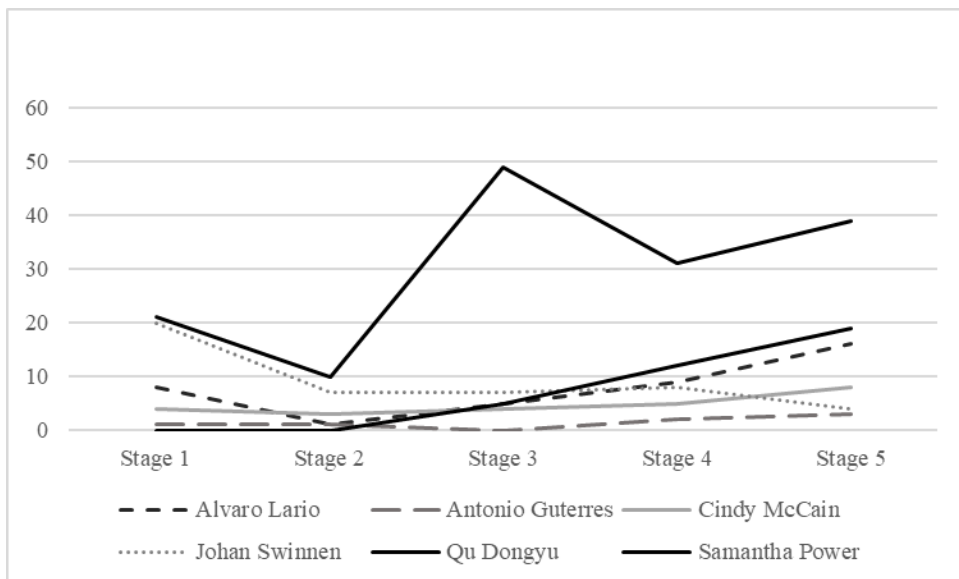

FIGURE 2. Number of tweets in restorative rhetoric stages by the six leaders throughout the study period

The highest volume of tweets occurred in Stage 5 (Corrective Action and Rebuilding, 89 tweets), followed by Stage 3 (Issues of Blame, 70 tweets), Stage 4 (Healing and Forgiveness, 67 tweets), Stage 1 (Initial Reaction, 54 tweets), and finally Stage 2 (Crisis Assessment, 22 tweets). This distribution reflects the prolonged and cyclical nature of the COVID-19 crisis, where leaders

frequently returned to earlier stages, especially Initial Reaction, when new waves of infection emerged. Nonetheless, a narrative pattern consistent with restorative rhetoric was observed, as leaders moved from recognising the crisis toward proposing long-term solutions.

STAGE 1: INITIAL REACTION (MARCH–SEPTEMBER 2020)

During the early months of the pandemic, leaders primarily engaged in strategic rhetoric, focusing on defining the nature of the crisis and emphasising the severity of its impact on food security. Tweets also conveyed humanistic elements, such as empathy and concern for vulnerable populations. Antonio Guterres described the pandemic as a potential "massive global food emergency," while Qu Dongyu noted disruptions to food systems worldwide. Cindy McCain highlighted the use of real-time analytics by WFP to monitor food insecurity and COVID-19 trends, reflecting organisational control and preparedness.

Alvaro Lario and Cindy McCain also personalised their responses. Lario's emphasis on rural poverty and agricultural resilience aligned with IFAD's mission, reinforcing the importance of protecting smallholder farmers. These tweets collectively demonstrate how leaders attempted to reassure the public, highlight institutional action, and build trust through visible leadership.

STAGE 2: CRISIS ASSESSMENT (OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2020)

Though fewer in number (22 tweets), tweets in this stage reflected efforts to assess ongoing challenges and propose coping strategies. Leaders highlighted disparities affecting rural populations, small-scale farmers, and women, groups particularly vulnerable to pandemic-related disruptions. Qu Dongyu's posts during this time underscored collaboration with countries like Italy and Argentina, reinforcing global solidarity in crisis response.

Antonio Guterres drew attention to systemic gender and economic inequalities, emphasising the need for targeted investment in rural women. The focus on vulnerability, systemic risk, and inclusion was central to this stage, where leaders aimed to maintain public morale while acknowledging the long-term nature of the crisis.

STAGE 3: ISSUES OF BLAME (JANUARY–DECEMBER 2021)

This stage involved attributing causes and identifying systemic failures without directly assigning blame to a single entity. Tweets referenced external factors such as the war in Ukraine, climate change, and supply chain inequalities. Guterres, Swinnen, and Power all pointed to these forces as exacerbating existing food insecurity.

Notably, leaders balanced accountability with solution-oriented rhetoric. Guterres urged the lifting of export restrictions and allocation of reserves, while Swinnen and Power detailed actions taken to prevent further deterioration, such as seed distribution and emergency relief. These tweets reflected an implicit shift of responsibility from institutional actors to global conditions, allowing leaders to frame their organisations as responsive, rather than culpable.

STAGE 4: HEALING AND FORGIVENESS (JANUARY 2021–MAY 2022)

Leaders shifted toward a more restorative and supportive tone in this phase. Tweets emphasised recovery, aid distribution, and capacity-building. For instance, Power announced substantial USAID funding for Haiti, while Lario called for greater investment in land restoration to assist

smallholder farmers. Johan Swinnen and Cindy McCain framed the path forward as one of collaboration and peace, linking food security to wider societal benefits such as reduced migration and conflict.

This stage was marked by rhetorical moves that inspired hope, strengthened community identity, and positioned organisations as compassionate actors with a long-term vision.

STAGE 5: CORRECTIVE ACTION AND REBUILDING (JUNE–DECEMBER 2022)

The final stage focused on tangible recovery strategies and long-term commitments. Leaders framed their organisations as active agents in rebuilding global food systems, promoting innovation, and restoring public trust. Tweets referenced partnerships, appeals for humanitarian support, and the transformation of agrifood systems.

Guterres and Dongyu reiterated the importance of open supply chains and anticipatory action. Alvaro Lario and Samantha Power employed language of belief and optimism, articulating faith in human capacity and institutional readiness to face future crises. This rhetoric of hope was critical in establishing credibility and resilience, encouraging global audiences to look beyond the pandemic.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AS A CROSS-CUTTING FEATURE

Across all stages, leaders frequently employed inclusive language through the use of pronouns such as "we," "our," and "us", to create a sense of shared responsibility and solidarity. This strategy was most prevalent in later stages, reflecting a shift toward community-driven recovery and collective action. Qu Dongyu was especially consistent in using such language, reinforcing FAO's commitment to multilateralism and collaborative leadership.

The use of inclusive rhetoric was not merely symbolic; it functioned to strengthen institutional ethos, mobilise support, and bridge emotional distance between leaders and global citizens. Tweets that acknowledged "our food systems," "our farmers," and "our future" invited public ownership of solutions and shared accountability for outcomes.

Leaders governing global food security communicated restorative rhetoric on X by progressing through the stages of crisis recognition, assessment, blame, healing, and rebuilding. While strategic messages dominated the early stages, later tweets increasingly blended compassion with calls to action. The leaders' rhetorical choices, marked by emotional resonance, institutional alignment, and inclusive language, served to stabilise public sentiment, assert leadership, and guide audiences toward a shared vision of recovery.

IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONING WITHIN RESTORATIVE COMMUNICATION

While leaders adopted restorative rhetoric to guide public understanding and emotional recovery throughout the COVID-19 food security crisis, the present study reveals that such communication was also shaped by underlying ideological strategies. As revealed in the table below, these strategies unfolded across five restorative stages, illustrating a consistent ideological orientation even as rhetorical priorities shifted over time.

TABLE 3. Frequency Of Semantic and Formal Structures by Stage

Structure	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Agency	41	13	56	49	69
Capitalisation	0	0	3	6	1
Exclamatives	12	2	11	0	3
Hashtags	45	15	56	26	55
Modality	26	9	26	30	45
Predication	29	13	59	54	74
Presupposition	47	20	66	61	89
Pronouns	43	11	54	47	67
Repetition	6	3	5	3	3

The total distribution of van Dijk's (2011) discourse structures across all five stages of restorative rhetoric offers insights into the ideological strategies employed by leaders managing the global food security crisis. The total frequency of the selected linguistic structures across all five stages of restorative rhetoric revealed several dominant patterns. Presupposition emerged as the most frequently used structure (n = 283), followed closely by predication (n = 229), agency (n = 228), and pronouns (n = 222). These figures indicated that leaders often relied on implicit assumptions, evaluative language, and the attribution of responsibility, while simultaneously positioning themselves and others through the strategic use of pronouns. Hashtags (n = 197) were also prevalent, demonstrating a strong orientation towards visibility, branding, and thematic coherence on social media. Structures such as modality (n = 136), exclamatives (n = 28), repetition (n = 20), and capitalisation (n = 10) were used more sparingly, suggesting limited use of emphatic or stylistic devices in crisis discourse.

In Stage 1 (Initial Reaction), leaders primarily focused on early signal amplification and awareness-building. This was reflected in the frequent use of hashtags (n = 45), presuppositions (n = 47), and pronouns (n = 43). These structures served to align public understanding around the emerging threat, foreground shared values, and establish early narratives of solidarity and urgency. The relatively high use of exclamatives (n = 12) during this stage may have functioned to attract immediate attention or convey emotional gravity.

During Stage 2 (Crisis Assessment), there was a visible decline in structural frequency overall, though presuppositions (n = 20) and hashtags (n = 15) remained significant. This suggested that while leaders began to evaluate the scope and implications of the crisis, they still relied on prior assumptions and trending themes to structure public interpretation. The decline in structures such as exclamatives and repetition further supported the shift towards a more measured and analytical tone in communication.

Stage 3 (Issues of blame) saw a resurgence of structural usage, particularly for predication (n = 59), agency (n = 56), and presuppositions (n = 66). This pattern reflected an intensified discourse of attribution, where leaders delineated causes, responsibilities, and evaluative assessments of institutional responses. The high frequency of hashtags (n = 56) and pronouns (n = 54) during this stage highlights attempts to sustain public engagement while crafting narratives of accountability and collective involvement.

In Stage 4 (Healing and Forgiveness), structural emphasis shifted towards reconciliation and forward-looking discourse. Presupposition (n = 61), predication (n = 54), and modality (n = 30) dominated, indicating an effort to establish shared understandings while projecting confidence about possible recovery paths. The increased use of capitalisation (n = 6), though minor, may reflect subtle attempts to stress certain keywords or emotional tones. Notably, exclamatives dropped to zero, highlighting a tone of solemn reassurance rather than dramatic appeals.

Finally, Stage 5 (Corrective Action and Rebuilding) recorded the highest structural usage across the board. This final stage highlighted intensified communicative efforts with presupposition (n = 89), predication (n = 74), agency (n = 69), pronouns (n = 67), and hashtags (n = 55) reaching peak frequencies. Such dominance suggested that leaders emphasised institutional credibility, concrete actions, and collective resolve. The prominent use of modality (n = 45) further illustrated authoritative expressions of intent, possibility, or obligation. Although less frequent, exclamatives (n = 3), repetition (n = 3), and capitalisation (n = 1) continued to play a supporting role in emphasising calls for action and renewal.

SEMANTIC STRUCTURES: FRAMING MORAL LEGITIMACY AND PROACTIVITY

Presupposition was the most frequently deployed semantic strategy (n=283). The structure is used to embed implicit assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs about the crisis situation, often signalling continuity, unresolved challenges, or ongoing institutional efforts.

Tweet	Elaboration
Cindy McCain (Stage 4 - 27 May 2022) "2022 was **already** going to be a year of unprecedented needs. Then the war in Ukraine hit."	The use of "already" presupposes systemic strain before the Ukraine conflict, shifting blame toward structural/global causes.
Qu Dongyu (Stage 5 - 20 October 2022) "It was a pleasure to meet @FAO National Goodwill Ambassadors from the Near East and North Africa. They **remain** committed to raising awareness about food security, climate change, and nutrition."	The word "remain" presupposes a prior and ongoing commitment, subtly reinforcing institutional continuity and responsibility without explicitly addressing any failure or shortcoming.

Agency was the second most frequently deployed semantic strategy (n=228), used to frame leaders and their organisations as proactive, responsive, and empathetic. In Stage 1, early in the crisis, tweets emphasised swift institutional mobilisation:

Tweet	Elaboration
Antonio Guterres (10 June 2020) "#COVID19 is a threat to food security and nutrition, especially for the most vulnerable. **We must act now** to avoid the worst impacts."	Uses "we must act" to signal urgency and moral obligation, directly positioning the UN as an active agent in the response.
Qu Dongyu (6 March 2020). "Today we celebrate #WomensDay! Women are a pillar of our food systems. At FAO, **we are committed** to empowering rural women..."	Combines institutional identity ("At FAO, we…") with a declaration of commitment, asserting leadership in promoting gender equity during crisis.

These declarations construct a competent, forward-leaning institutional ethos. In contrast, agency in Stage 5 became more solution-oriented and visionary:

Tweet	Elaboration
Antonio Guterres (14 December 2022) "The donation of 260,000 metric tonnes of fertiliser from Russian producers will help alleviate humanitarian needs & prevent catastrophic crop loss in Africa. The **@UN will continue** to make every effort to ensure global food security for 2023."	Guterres positions the UN as an agency that not only assists but leads as a solution provider in ensuring food security for the global population and an important entity responsible for world crises through cross-country collaboration.
Cindy McCain (19 October 2022) "Guten Tag from #Berlin! **Today I'll be speaking about WFP's work** to build more resilient food systems, promote climate adaptation & support communities in crisis."	WFP is portrayed as a forward-looking organisation focusing on resilience, adaptation, and sustainability, key indicators of visionary rhetoric.

Across stages, the agency served as a tool for reputation management, allowing leaders to assert control and signal leadership continuity.

Predication was also pervasive (n=229), with actors and institutions consistently attributed roles, qualities, and ethical values. Tweets highlighted the resilience and importance of marginalised groups:

Tweet	Elaboration
Antonio Guterres (Stage 1 – 10 June 2020) "#COVID19 is a threat to food security and nutrition, especially for the most vulnerable. We must act now to avoid the worst impacts."	Predicates "COVID-19" as a threat and the vulnerable as especially affected, reinforcing the ethical duty of the institution to act.
Alvaro Lario (Stage 5 – 22 July 2022) "Reminder: investing in rural development is not just a moral duty, it is a smart investment in sustainable growth."	Predicates rural development as morally essential and economically strategic, elevating the rural poor as central to broader development agendas.

This strategy discursively elevated the contributions of targeted populations while reinforcing the speaker's ethical alignment. Predication also marked external phenomena as threatening:

Tweet	Elaboration
Alvaro Lario (Stage 1 – 17 April 2020) "At the Group of Friends on Food Security and Nutrition: IFAD highlighted how #COVID19 is disrupting livelihoods, especially for small-scale producers."	COVID-19 is cited as the cause of livelihood disruption. This frames the crisis as externally driven and supports the organisation's role in mitigating its impact.
Qu Dongyu (Stage 1 – 22 April 2020) "I briefed the @UN Security Council today on the urgent need to protect food supply chains in the face of #COVID19. The pandemic is disrupting lives, markets, and trade flows worldwide."	The pandemic is predicated as actively "disrupting" multiple systems. This reinforces the framing of COVID-19 as a comprehensive external threat and justifies institutional involvement.

Such attributions framed the Other, events, systems, or conditions as chaotic and unjust, thereby legitimising institutional intervention. Next, modality appeared most prominently in Stages 3 through 5 (n=136). As reflected in the following examples, leaders used modal verbs to express necessity, obligation, and ethical judgment.

Tweet	Elaboration
Antonio Guterres (Stage 3 – 7 May 2022) "In my visit to West Africa, I heard from leaders and communities. **We must** do more to address the root causes of instability: poverty, exclusion, inequality, and food insecurity."	The modal verb "must" conveys urgency and moral obligation, reinforcing the UN's ethical stance on addressing systemic challenges.
Cindy McCain (Stage 3 – 14 January 2021) "Great call today with my friend, Sen. @ChrisCoons, discussing how **we can** better support efforts to prevent hunger and promote peace."	The modal "can" expresses institutional capacity and potential for positive change, subtly positioning WFP as both capable and collaborative.

Modality amplified the urgency of proposed actions and implicitly endorsed the speaker's stance as morally superior. Across stages, modal constructions helped to assert leadership vision and discursively anchor the 'right' course of action.

Leaders also engaged a range of formal discursive devices to construct shared identity and heighten emotional salience. Pronoun use was central to this, especially the inclusive "we," "our," and "us," which occurred in 158 instances across all stages. For example:

Tweet	Elaboration
Antonio Guterres (Stage 2 – 15 October 2020) "Many rural women suffer from discrimination, structural inequalities, and poor access to services. **We** must do more to ensure equal rights and opportunities."	"We must" conveys collective ethical obligation and positions the speaker's institution as a moral agent.
Qu Dongyu (Stage 4 – 28 January 2022) "Addressing the causes and impacts of soil degradation is one of **our** priorities. Together, **we** can unlock soil's full potential and leave no one behind."	"Our" and "we" emphasise FAO's mission while constructing solidarity with global stakeholders.

These usages conveyed a sense of shared responsibility and institutional closeness to affected communities. Particularly in Stages 4 and 5, inclusive pronouns served to blur hierarchical boundaries and align the speaker's organisation with grassroots action:

Tweet	Elaboration
Qu Dongyu (Stage 4 – 28 January 2022) "Addressing the causes and impacts of soil degradation is one of **our** priorities. Together, **we** can unlock soil's full potential and leave no one behind."	The use of "our" and "we" positions FAO as part of a collective, community-driven mission, aligning the institution with on-the-ground action.
Antonio Guterres (Stage 5 – 9 June 2022) "The impact of the war in Ukraine on food security, energy & finance is systemic, severe & accelerating. **We** need coordinated global action to support people and countries most in need."	"We need" projects to global unity and shared responsibility, reinforcing the UN's connection to grassroots stakeholders and vulnerable populations.

Hashtags such as #FoodSecurity, #ClimateAction, and #ZeroHunger are part of superstructures as they appear on the surface structure of the text, affecting visibility and shaping how information is organised and indexed (Shamsuddin et al., 2023). Hashtags were frequently deployed (n=197), not just for categorisation but as ideological cues. Across all five stages, leaders used them to tether their messages to global advocacy movements and institutional goals:

Tweet	Elaboration
Johan Swinnen (Stage 1 – 24 March 2020) "@IFPRI Insights Special Issue featuring impact and policy responses to COVID-19. How can we protect food security in the face of such shocks? **#COVID19 #FoodSecurity**"	The hashtags #COVID19 and #FoodSecurity frame the tweet within the dual crises of health and hunger, highlighting institutional concern and alignment with global emergency discourse.
Qu Dongyu (Stage 3 – 19 January 2021) "We need innovation in policy, technology, and business models to transform our **#agrifood systems. #DavosAgenda @wef**"	Hashtags #agrifood and #DavosAgenda position FAO's vision within elite policy circles and signal alignment with systemic transformation.

Besides hashtags, capitalisation and repetitions were also used as formal structures to intensify rhetorical delivery, signalling emotional urgency and commitment. For instance:

Tweet	Elaboration
Alvaro Lario (Stage 1 - 1 April 2020) "Investments in rural agriculture can help people help themselves. **Help** their communities. **Help** their countries."	The repetition of "Help…" at the start of successive phrases creates a rhythmic structure that reinforces the cascading impact of rural investment. It intensifies the message's memorability and emotionally anchors the institution's call to action.
Antonio Guterres (Stage 5 - 30 November 2022) "The donation of 260,000 metric tonnes of fertiliser stored in European ports is a step in the right direction. But it is **NOT** enough. All barriers to Russian food & fertiliser exports must be removed."	The all-caps "NOT" signals urgency and dissatisfaction, enhancing the rhetorical force of the message and amplifying pressure on international policy actors.

Such rhetorical repetition and emphasis enhance memorability while emotionally anchoring the call to action.

CONSTRUCTING THE OTHER: DEFLECTING BLAME, INVOKING SYSTEMS

Rather than assign blame directly, leaders often used granularity and passive voice to frame crises as systemic and external. These utterances assume historical and structural weakness, diffusing blame away from institutions. Granularity, or the detailed specification of causes, further de-centres responsibility. Granularity was observed in 84 tweets, such as:

Tweet	Elaboration
Alvaro Lario (Stage 1 - 18 September 2020) "I am pleased to join @AkselJakobsen3, @SabriBoukadoum and others to discuss how climate change, conflict, and market shocks affect food systems in fragile states."	By listing "climate change, conflict, and market shocks," this tweet uses granular attribution to explain crisis conditions, avoiding direct institutional responsibility.
Qu Dongyu (Stage 4 – 10 February 2022) "On this year's #WorldPulsesDay, I call on youth, policymakers & stakeholders to invest in pulses to improve nutrition, address climate change and support sustainable agrifood systems."	Mentions of "nutrition," "climate change," and "sustainable systems" reflect granular framing, positioning the issue within multiple intersecting global challenges.

These elements foreground complex causality, enabling leaders to appear informed while sidestepping direct attribution of failure. Finally, agency suppression via passive voice subtly absolved leaders and institutions of error:

Tweet	Elaboration
Johan Swinnen (Stage 1 - 28 July 2020) "Be sure to check out @IFPRI's new #eBook w/ timely insights on food system resilience. **Developed in partnership** with 22 organisations, the eBook includes 30 short essays."	"Developed in partnership" is a classic passive construction, leaving unclear who led the development, thus diffusing agency across an unnamed collaborator
Cindy McCain (Stage 5 - 23 September 2022) "Important discussion with President @AndrzejDuda today at #UNGA. The need for strengthened food systems and increased humanitarian access **was emphasised**."	The phrase "was emphasised" is a classic passive construction. It reveals the message's content but withholds who emphasised it, allowing the speaker to appear neutral while still reinforcing institutional priorities.

The analysis shows that restorative rhetoric was intertwined with ideological positioning throughout the food security crisis. Leaders did not merely inform or comfort; instead, they actively constructed a discourse that asserted institutional authority, aligned with ethical causes, and distanced themselves from systemic failures. Semantic strategies like agency, predication, and modality framed institutions as responsible and moral, while formal structures like pronouns, hashtags, and repetition built solidarity and trust. Across all five stages, leaders used ideological discourse to stabilise public confidence and reinforce legitimacy, confirming De Rycker and Mohd Don's (2013) assertion that crisis discourse is a site of ideological struggle as much as moral guidance.

DISCUSSION

This study offers significant insights into how global food security leaders engaged in crisis communication via X during the COVID-19 pandemic, weaving restorative rhetoric with ideological positioning. By drawing on Griffin-Padgett and Allison's (2010) restorative rhetoric framework and van Dijk's (2011) theory of ideological discourse, the analysis demonstrates that crisis communication, though ostensibly empathetic and restorative, is never ideologically neutral. Instead, it is deeply imbued with discursive strategies that promote institutional legitimacy, deflect blame, and assert moral authority.

The data revealed a strong alignment with the five stages of restorative rhetoric, with distinct rhetorical shifts observed. In the initial stages, leaders like Antonio Guterres and Cindy McCain focused on reassurance and urgency, portraying their organisations as responsive and morally grounded. By Stage 5, the rhetoric had evolved to emphasise vision, recovery, and structural transformation, demonstrating an institutional arc from reaction to leadership. This structured progression aligns with restorative rhetoric's movement from uncertainties to a shared future vision (Blignaut & Aronson, 2020). The use of inclusive language (e.g., "we", "our", "together") across all stages reinforced collective responsibility and solidarity narratives. However, this ethical presentation can obscure strategic motives, revealed through van Dijk's ideological lens.

Through agency, leaders presented themselves as agile and decisive actors in early tweets. The shift from immediate action to visionary leadership in later stages reflected intentional alignment of institutional identity with competence and foresight. Leaders used predication to attribute vulnerability to marginalised groups (e.g., smallholder farmers, rural women), ethically aligning their institutions with humanitarian causes while elevating moral positioning without addressing systemic inequities embedded within their own institutions. Modality further entrenched this stance through phrases like "We must do more" that expressed obligation while reinforcing solution-provider roles and deflecting criticism.

Presupposition and granularity redirected blame by framing issues as "already existing" or "exacerbated," implying that the crisis merely aggravated pre-existing fragilities. By listing multiple causes such as climate change, war, and inflation, they framed crises as multi-causal and systemic, thus de-centring responsibility. This aligns with van Dijk's (2011) notion that discourse masks the Self's negative properties by over-emphasising external complexities.

Formal structures, particularly pronouns, hashtags, repetition, and capitalisation, strengthened emotional connection and projected solidarity. Inclusive blurred institutional boundaries and constructed collective ethos, especially evident in later stages, where leaders positioned organisations as working alongside affected populations.

The most revealing dimension involved constructing a systemic "Other" through passive constructions, granularity, and presupposition. Leaders rarely named specific actors responsible for food insecurity. Passive voice obscured agency, creating strategic vagueness that aligned with restorative rhetoric's non-adversarial tone while shielding institutions from critique. Granularity diffused blame through overlapping causes that diluted institutional failure traceability, reinforcing van Dijk's insight that ideologically charged discourse foregrounds complexity to evade culpability. The discursive manoeuvring reflected in the tweets raises ethical concerns about the circumvention of accountability (Wu & Qian, 2024). Through ambiguity, leaders are able to mask institutional weaknesses and even instances of inaction.

Beyond demonstrating how a dual-layered analysis may be undertaken to demonstrate that restorative rhetoric serves emotional engagement and performs strategic legitimacy, the present study also reveals how leaders engaged in a rhetorical balancing act by responding to the immediate real-world impact of the crisis while shaping public perception, favouring institutional credibility. Their humanistic communication was interwoven with discursive practices which positioned the institutions they represented as indispensable actors in global food governance. The analysis undertaken in the present study reveals that the discursive realisation of restorative rhetoric is shaped by ideological motives such as restoring credibility and reaffirming commitments.

CONCLUSION

The findings reaffirm that social media crisis communication, while following familiar restorative patterns, is not ideologically neutral in execution. Leaders employed language that strategically reframed responsibility, asserted institutional legitimacy, and aligned responses with broader narratives of global governance and resilience. This suggests that while the restorative framework remains structurally neutral, its realisation is mediated by ideologically driven linguistic choices aimed at restoring credibility, deflecting blame, or reinforcing institutional values.

The study demonstrates that crisis communication functions as both empathetic restoration and strategic ideological reinforcement. By applying van Dijk's ideological square to restorative rhetoric, it offers a new lens for assessing how organisations maintain legitimacy during global crises through strategic ambiguity and the selective narrative deployment. For practitioners, the findings suggest the importance of reflexivity when crafting crisis narratives, ensuring solidarity and trust restoration do not obscure accountability or structural inequities. There is a need to ensure that efforts to persuade and establish credibility do not come at the expense of accountability. Crisis leaders must move beyond offering reassurances and toward acknowledging responsibility for addressing structural problems.

Study limitations include the focus on just six leaders in the global food security sector during a specific timeframe, potentially limiting generalisability. The interpretive nature of discourse analysis, despite rigorous procedures, introduces analytical subjectivity. Future investigations could expand to multiple sectors and leadership levels, incorporate longitudinal analysis of post-crisis phases, integrate audience reception data, adopt multimodal approaches, and employ automated natural language processing tools for larger-scale analysis of crisis rhetoric.

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