

Once Upon a Pandemic

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‘Once Upon A Pandemic’: Assessing Children’s Stories Endorsed By The Indonesian Government To Communicate COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to evaluate children's stories that are used to communicate and to educate children about the COVID-19 pandemic. It evaluates the appropriateness of the story selection by assessing the intrinsic elements and the visual images of the stories. The research focuses on three stories that have been endorsed by three Indonesian government bodies, and evaluates both the narrative and the visual images of the stories. These children's stories have become extremely popular and have been widely acknowledged as a wonderful method of educating, entertaining, and assisting youngsters in dealing with the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its important role in communicating crises to and educating children about the pandemic, little study has been conducted to assess the appropriateness of these children's stories. This study investigates how well these children's stories are in addressing the COVID-19 crisis to children. It is found that not all of the children's stories endorsed by the Indonesian government are suitable for accurately communicating the COVID-19 crisis to children.

Keywords: children’s stories, crisis communication, education, Covid-19.

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused a crisis and a life that is out of the ordinary. Though changing to a completely different way of life is challenging for everyone, children have a particularly difficult time of it. It is unfortunate that during times of crisis, children are not often given special attention, and vital information geared toward them is frequently neglected. It is critical that they are provided accurate information so that they are not perplexed, frustrated, or confused. Children do deserve appropriate, effective, accurate, and engaging communication techniques during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although literature in general is not a means of crisis communication, children's stories play a unique role. On the one hand children’s stories can bring children to magical worlds with fantastical characters, or to distant lands with unique animals and traditions. They are the ‘cognitive tools of children’s imagination’ according to Egan (2001). On the other hand, children's stories are not only a source of entertainment for children, but also a source of education, communication, and information. As early as 13 B.C., literature was expected to be both pleasant and useful, or “Dulce et Utile” in the words of Horace (Željka Babić & Petar Penda (eds), 2017). In children's literature, however, the order is reversed, and it is

"Utile et Dulce," according to Citraningtyas (2004; 2019) since the educational aspect is frequently greater than the pleasure aspect. Children story is a genre that has the most important element in educating children. Through children's stories, parents, educators, teachers, and the community educate and communicate a wealth of knowledge.

The majority of previous researches on children's stories have concentrated on the educational aspect of children's stories and on the nature of the interaction between adults and children during book sharing. Children's stories have been used as an educational tool for both cognitive skills and moral education. From stories, children learn about many things and receive a lot of information: from recognizing letters and numbers, colours and types of flora and fauna, the origin of life, to learning about societal norms (Loukia, 2006; Nahian et al., 2020). Storybooks are also a valuable resource for school activities, such as enhancing students' language skills, enrich vocabulary, and provide knowledge about different nations of the world (Albaladejo Albaladejo et al., 2018; Flint & Adams, 2018; Sheridan, 2000). There is also significant body of research and theory on how stories provide examples and role models to aid in the achievement of moral education goals (Gunnestad et al., 2015; Juan, 2019; Rahim & Rahiem, 2013; Thambu, 2017; Thompson, 2011).

Children's stories are not only entertaining and educational for cognitive and moral education purposes. They are also a means of communication and a source of information. In recent decades, for example, there has been a trend toward the use of narratives, stories, and storytelling in the healthcare setting as a tool for diagnostics, therapeutics, as well as patient – student - practitioner education.

Evidence from several disciplines, including nursing, social science, and psychology, supports the effectiveness of stories to communicate health information (Greenhalgh, 2001; Hartling et al., 2010). Kuntz and team (Kuntz et al., 2019), for example, identified storytelling as a means to cope with patients' difficulties in a research done on children, adolescents, and young adults aged 10 to 22. Patients acknowledged that storytelling helped them form stronger bonds with their families. Because of its capacity to captivate the reader, stories have also been found to be an excellent method for communicating with and influencing patients. According to a research on the use of stories to communicate health information (Hartling et al., 2010), participants felt they could empathize with the stories; and thought it was easier to receive information than a normal medical information sheet.

Children's stories have a lot of potential to be used as a medium of education, communication and information for children, including in times of crisis. One factor is due to the genre's wide range of variations. Although ways of communicating the COVID pandemic to children has received enough attention (Soma, 2020), research on the use of children's stories to communicate the pandemic has received inadequate attention. The Corona virus, which was thought to be more dangerous for adults, proves out to be dangerous for children as well. The number of children infected with the Corona virus in Indonesia has reached 12.6% of all positive cases as of June 2021. The death rate for patients under the age of 18 is 3-5%, the highest in the world, compared to a global average of 1% (Sahara, 2021). These findings demonstrate the need of presenting children with accurate and up-to-date information on the pandemic.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, there is a growing trend in using children's stories to communicate the COVID-19 crisis. This article investigates crisis communication efforts directed at children and channelled through children's stories during the COVID-19 epidemic, as endorsed by three Indonesian government entities. Those three stories are: "Cerita si Korona" or "The Story of Corona" endorsed by the Indonesian COVID-19 Handling and Economic Recovery Committee; "Covibook" used by the West Java Education Office in Indonesia; and "My Hero is You" or "Kamu Pahlawanku" referred by the Indonesian Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. The three children's stories could be referred to as a crisis communication channel, as a medium to educate children about COVID-19.

A "crisis" is defined in general as a serious threat to an organization that, if not addressed appropriately, may have negative consequences. A crisis usually has three components: "a threat, a surprise, and a short decision time" (Mikušová & Horváthová, 2019). There are three threats that can arise from a crisis: (1) public safety, (2) financial loss, and (3) reputational damage. Coombs and Sherry (in Coombs, 2021) define crisis communication as "the collecting, processing, and transmission of information necessary to address a crisis situation." As a result, crisis communication is defined as the gathering, processing, and disseminating of information needed to deal with a crisis situation.

Organizations often issue two sorts of communications in crisis circumstances, according to W. Timothy Coombs' (2021) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). They are 'instructing information'

and 'adjusting information'. Instructing information informs the public about what they need to do physically to defend themselves against the crisis, whereas adjusting information helps the public overcome psychological issues caused by the crisis and involves compassion and corrective action (Coombs, 2021, p. 125). These two types of messages are of the utmost importance in crisis communication (Sturges in Coombs, 2021).

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the use of SCCT in three children's stories referred to by three Indonesian government entities. The intrinsic features and the visual images of the stories will be used to review and analyse the types of SCCT messages in the story, as well as its efficiency in conveying the message.

Method

This research uses content analysis method, a technique for producing repeatable and reliable results by analyzing the characteristics of visual, verbal, and/or written documents (Khirfan et al., 2020). By using this approach, the children stories will be interpreted for their intrinsic elements and visual images to be analysed. Intrinsic elements of a story generally includes character, plot, setting, theme, point of view (Eagleton, 2005; Kuiper, 2012).

Characters are the humans, or in some cases, the animals or the creatures who appear in a story. The protagonist and the antagonist are the most common characters. The protagonist is the story's hero, the major character, or the main character. They will receive the majority of the author's attention. The antagonist is the main character's adversary. This character causes havoc and is frequently the source of the plot's stress. The hero's task is

frequently to prevent the antagonist from causing damage to others.

The plot is the progression of events that tells the story. The setting is the where and the when of the story. The theme is the central argument or main idea that the author wishes to communicate. Good vs evil is one the most common theme in children's stories. The narrator's point of view in regard to the events of the story is referred to as his or her point of view. The three basic points of view are first person, in which the narrator tells the story from their own point of view; second person, in which the narrator tells the story about you, the reader or viewer; and third person, in which the narrator tells the story about other people. Because different types and amounts of information about the story's events and characters are available to the reader in each point of view, each point of view generates a varied experience for the reader. Aside from the five basic elements of a story, another key feature in picture books is the image or the visual element of the story. In children literature, these pictures must be interpreted together with the other elements in the story (Hunt, 2005).

The focus of this study is COVID-19-themed children's stories. Children's stories were chosen since this medium of communication is currently underutilized. Children's stories, in fact, are a vital communication channel that may be used effectively in crisis situations. The selected children's stories are those endorsed by the Indonesian government bodies to educate children about COVID-19. The stories were posted on the websites of the respective government bodies and were visited three times, in May 2020, in July 2021, and in February 2022. The month of May 2020 was chosen since it was the first three months of COVID-19 cases were discovered in Indonesia, and several

safeguards were put in place to restrict the virus's spread. The websites were revisited in July 2021 since it corresponded with the height of the second wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia. The average number of new cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia surged sevenfold in July 2021 (Antara, 2021). The websites were last visited in February 2022, when Indonesia saw the start of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic as the Omicron strain reached the country aggressively (Sari, 2022).

The three stories are as follows:

- 1) A pdf version of picture book titled *Cerita Si Korona* (Ideo & Nailufar, 2020), written by an Indonesian author and published in Indonesian in April 2020. This book is used as a COVID-19 instructional material by the Indonesian COVID-19 Handling and Economic Recovery Committee, and it is posted on their website: <https://covid19.go.id/edukasi/ibu-dan-anak/cerita-si-korona>.
- 2) A pdf version of picture book titled *Covibook* (Molina, 2020), published in March 2020. Latu Tripurantoko has translated this book from its original English language into Indonesian. This story is used as study material by the West Java Education Office (2020) and is available on the West Java Education website.
- 3) A pdf version of picture book titled *Kamu Pahlawanku*, prepared by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (IASC MHPSS RG). The original story, titled *My Hero Is You*, is in English (Patuck, 2020). On May

3, 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (PPPA) released the Indonesian version of this story as a medium for children to learn about COVID-19 (2020), and the pdf version of the story became available at the Ministry of PPPA's official website (kemenpppa website, 2022). This story was inspired by the responses of 1,700 children, parents, caregivers, and teachers from around the world, including Indonesia, to a survey about how to deal with the impacts of Covid-19.

Analysis and Findings

The following findings were found based on the examination of narrative texts and visual children's stories as the research's focus:

Cerita Si Korona (The Story of Corona), is a 10-page illustrated children's story written by Watiek Ideo and illustrated by Luluk Nailufar in pdf format. The Corona virus is depicted on the book's front cover in a bright pink color with yellow legs or spikes with pink tips at the ends. This virus has a face, curved brows, tiny eyes, pink cheeks, and wears a mask. The Corona was splattered with a golden glitter. The typeface used throughout the book is a tidy handwritten mirim font in black.

The Corona virus becomes the main character of the story, and can speak to give advice to children. He introduced himself in a friendly manner: 'Hi! My name is Corona. I am a virus'. According to the virus, he and his 'friends' like to play on the human body. At the end of the story, the Corona virus left, and a little girl with her mother and father waved good bye at the

virus, with a big smile on their face. The little girl wears clothes in the same color as the virus.

Positioning the virus as the main character and personifying it might cause confusion for children who have yet to differentiate between fiction and reality. The virus, as the main character in the story, has the ability to talk and even give advice. The virus is positioned as the source of knowledge and an authoritative figure. This is a deceptive idea to be taught to children. If the goal of this story is to educate children about the corona virus, that obviously need to be avoided, it fails to achieve the purpose because children who still think literally will not regard the virus in the story book as something that should be avoided.

The main character of a story is often referred to as a hero. In general, a hero or heroine is viewed as a source of inspiration and direction for individuals and society since they exemplify and outperform everyone else. A hero possesses features and characteristics that show he is a bright and attractive individual with outstanding natural or supernatural abilities (Spanothymiou et al., 2015). They become a hero because of their excellent attributes that results in the heroes being loved by children, making them interested in and sympathetic with their heroes (Panagiota, 2015).

Although there are some villain heroes in stories, they are not appropriate for children's stories since children still have difficulty distinguishing between fiction and reality. A hero, according to eight and nine-year-olds, is someone who contributes and do honorable things for his neighbor and society (Huck et al., 2001). For eleven to thirteen-year-olds, a hero is someone who is courageous and prudent.

Someone who is great and is admired for an important achievement or distinctive attribute. In a similar fashion, adolescents aged fifteen to sixteen believe that a hero is an exceptional individual known for his courage, self-sacrifice, and faith in moral values (White, 1999). As a result, making the corona virus as the hero of the story, contradicts children's perceptions of heroes.

Another perplexing concept for children is the image for Corona, the protagonist virus. It looks to be adorable and cuddly, in pink with some sparkles. Pink is a warm color, that is associated with love, warmth, sincerity (Kolenda, 2016). The color scheme employed in this book may not convey the intended message to young children. Messages received may be misunderstood by children as the book's illustration implies that this virus is a cute companion who may be befriended. This is especially true given that the virus's hue corresponds to the color of the little girl's outfit. They look like a team together. As a result, there is little sense of urgency for children to avoid it.

The color of the virus in the story also contrasts with the hue of the coronavirus graphic on the WHO website (World Health Organization, 2022), which is depicted as greenish blue. Red or deep red is the closest hue to the virus image in the media. According to Kolenda (2016) the color red induces an avoidance attitude, much like the words "stop," "danger," or "red light". It is unlike pink that suggests warmth and cuteness.

The story provides four virus prevention advices: wash one's hands, eat well, wear a mask, and get plenty of rest. The COVID-19 virus prevention information conveyed through this story is not the same as the 3M campaign (washing hands, wearing masks, maintaining

distance) put in place by the Indonesian government. At the time of publication of this book, in fact, the 3M campaign had already begun, as reported by CNBCIndonesia.com in its article entitled 'Bukan Imbauan, Ini Perintah: Jaga Jarak, Cuci Tangan, Masker!' ("It's not an appeal, it's an order: keep your distance, wash your hands, wear your mask!") on 5 April 2020 (Budiansyah, 2020). It is a mistake to fail to provide children with accurate and comprehensive guidance, as children must be provided accurate and complete information.

It is also interesting to note that the design, graphics, and typefaces of this story are remarkably similar to Covibook, that was released one month prior. The striking similarities may make one wonders if one of the books was influenced by the other. The story is still on the webpage of the Indonesian COVID-19 Handling and Economic Recovery Committee when it was revisited on 12 February 2022. No other story is uploaded on the webpage. This suggests that during the COVID 19 pandemic, the story is the only source of information made available to children.

The story of Covibook is written by award-winning author Manuela Manola and is also available in pdf format with a length of 12 pages. The front page which is usually the cover page, immediately contains greetings from the virus: 'Hello, I'm a virus, cousins with the flu and the common cold. My name is Corona Virus!'. The front cover image is also a virus with an overall red tint and a human-like face. Despite the fact that it appears in bright colors, the virus graphic is far from charming. The virus appears to be vicious. The typeface used is a script font similar to children's writing, with font colors ranging from black to pink to orange to blue.

Like *Cerita si Korona*, by making the virus the protagonist who can speak, it can cause confusion in children who are still thinking literally. Moreover, the virus actually tells a lot and is even agile to ask children's opinions. He even had time to cheer happily because he was included in a TV show. Instead of avoiding the virus, this can actually lead to a child's desire to be closer and make friends with the popular virus.

Although the virus's face is not adorable, it is seen holding a stylish women's purse with a charming pink scarf on pages 2 and 8. She also made a nice introduction and said farewell at the end of the story. This generates the sense that the virus is once again a prominent celebrity, carrying a fashionable purse, about whom everyone wants to be closer to get to know the virus.

The virus also provides two prevention measures only: washing hands completely while singing so as not to finish fast, and applying antiseptic solutions and waiting for it to dry. This information is incomplete since it does not include all of the elements of the government-determined 3M program. It does not require the use of a face mask. When the West Java Education website was revisited on February 12, 2022, the story had disappeared from the page. This could indicate that the story is no longer relevant in terms of keeping up with the latest virus information.

The Corona virus is not the main character or the protagonist in *Kamu Pahlawanku (My Hero Is You)*, a story book in a 22-page pdf format. The virus is placed in its proper context, that is, as a virus that must be avoided and combated together. The main character of the story is a child named Sara. Sara, along with a flying creature named Ario, travels the

world campaigning for health protocols for children. In the story, Sara invites other children to participate in implementing protocols, adjust and come to terms with this situation.

Apart from campaigning for 3M, the story *Kamu Pahlawanku* also reassures children, and reduces their fear of different and uncertain circumstances. Sara and the children were invited to be heroes with their respective capacities. The virus is not visible throughout the story at all. He does not get a 'voice' let alone get the main attention as a protagonist or get personification and cute face.

The story *Kamu Pahlawanku* is the most fitting story for children in terms of intrinsic features. It casts the virus in a proper position rather than as the story's primary character or hero. The virus is not depicted in a charming, warm, and sincere color. Nor is it given a voice. The virus's positioning in the *Kamu Pahlawanku* story corresponds to the COVID-19 virus's actual position. It is unlovable, harsh, dangerous, and should be avoided at all costs. It, too, is invisible. The correct viral therapy will not confuse youngsters. The correct treatment of the virus will not confuse children.

There is a significant difference in the delivery of messages about Covid-19 conveyed through the *Cerita si Korona* and *Covibook* story with the story of *Kamu Pahlawanku*. Messages about COVID-19 are generally instructive (instructing information) only in the *Covibook* story and *Cerita si Korona*. The goal is to inform and instruct children on how to avoid COVID-19 by taking the recommended measures. Even so, the two stories still lack comprehensive information and guidance since one of the crucial health routines, wearing masks, is lacking.

In the Cerita si Korona and Covibook story, no adjusting information was used. As a result, while these children's stories had an impact on their cognitive domain, they have not had an impact on their emotional or conative realms. According to the 'mind trilogy' theory, the brain operates on three levels: cognitive (knowledge), affective (feeling), and conative (action) (Gupta, 2020; Kurczewska, A., Kyrö, P., Lagus, K., Kohonen, O. and Lindh-Knuutila, 2018). The cognitive stage is the simplest level because the recipient of the message only reaches the stage of knowing the message conveyed. The conative stage, on the other hand, is the highest level, as it is capable of changing behavior. To achieve this stage, the message presented must not only impact the cognitive domain, but also the emotional realms.

In a crisis situation and trying to reach children, both types of messages in SCCT theory, namely instructing and adjusting ideally exist and cognitive and affective aspects. For a message to be able to move action (conative), it must first touch the cognitive and affective aspects.

Kamu Pahlawanku fulfills the aspects of instructing and adjusting information in SCCT theory. The instructing message was delivered in full, in accordance with the government's campaign at the time, which was to do 3M. The adjusting message conveyed was also very profound, including providing a sense of calm and comfort even though the pandemic situation was very worrying. In addition, the delivery of messages in this story touches the cognitive, affective and conative domains.

Conclusion

In times of crisis, organizations frequently send two types of communications according to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). They are

'instructing information' and 'adjusting information'. Children's stories are rarely examined for this purpose, despite being utilised as a medium for crisis communication for children during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is thus crucial to assess their use as a means of edutainment for crisis communication. This article assesses the usage of SCCT in three children's stories referred to by three Indonesian government bodies, through their inherent qualities. It is concluded that among the three stories, Kamu Pahlawanku is the most suited for use as a crisis communication directed for children.

This conclusion implies that children's stories should be reviewed before they are utilized and accepted as a crisis communication channel. Furthermore, children's stories, like flyers, posters, and other types of crisis communication, must be updated as the pandemic progresses. This is especially important considering that the COVID-19 pandemic is a new outbreak that people have limited knowledge. As a result new information progress quickly.

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