



# COVID and Me: A Contrastive Rhetoric Analysis of the Philippine and American COVID 19 Narratives

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**Abstract:** Through social media, the Internet has been a platform for various support groups that aim to bring people worldwide into a community that fosters support and information. This is also applicable in the context of the COVID survivors and victims, whose sharing capitalizes on their stories. In the field of Contrastive Rhetoric, narrative discourse such as these shared stories can bring light to the cultural and linguistic features of this genre to unearth potential linguistic and cultural components that will further enhance the pedagogical approaches in the instruction of the macro skills in the English language, especially writing. Thus, this current study explores the differences and similarities between the Filipino and American COVID 19 survivors and patients. It is anchored on Thatcher's (2004) postulation on Contrastive Rhetoric that the Internet serves as the "cultural levelers" in transcending cultural and linguistic gaps. This study used 30 COVID narratives from the two COVID groups on Facebook; 15 of which came from the American group and 15 from the Philippine group. The data confirmed similar features observed from the narratives expected from social media posts based on multimodal discourse analysis and narrative inquiry. However, the cultural difference, especially the low and high context of the cultures, is evident in the stories. These findings are essential tools for teachers in considering the teaching of linguistic features in the English language that may help them accomplish written outputs in the cyberworld.

**Key Words:** COVID narratives, health narratives, Contrastive Rhetoric, multimodal discourse analysis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media, specifically Facebook, has been a recluse for different support groups. Among the support groups found on Facebook are for the COVID 19 survivors and current patients. COVID 19, or the Novel Corona Virus, has become widespread globally since January 2020. Currently, there have been 61, 623, 657 recoveries worldwide (Statista, 2021) from 86, 899, 347 total cases (Statista, 2021). Recently,

various vaccines have been given to people, but generally, the global populace still has minimal access to the said immunization.

As a result, online communities are created. These virtual communities are created for people to help one another, and these have exponentially increased their members as the pandemic continues. Furthermore, these communities serve as support groups that give advice, encouragement, inspiration, or warning the members. Also, online groups have



become a repository of the various narratives of people who aim to fulfill various personal goals.

According to Luo and Zhong (2015), Social Networking Sites (SNSs) like Facebook is a platform where people share and talk about their interests with others. It expands the social circles that resulted in "close-knit relationships" (p. 275). Further, it transforms information dissemination into a faster way of reaching out to people who have Internet access, faster than how information has circulated during the pre-world wide web era. Albeit some pieces of information are not verified or are only based on personal experience, this electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has been a byproduct of the global Internet community.

### *1.1. Related Studies on Survival Narratives*

A few studies related to online narratives on health, domestic violence, and social experiences of people from different cultures and beliefs have been conducted.

Various themes emerged for health narratives, such as retelling the traumatic event, looking for social support, presenting their enhanced body image, and the outlook on the new normal (Cristall et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2020). Moreover, the notion of rebirth and transformation are also the pervading themes of the various online health narratives (Cristall et al., 2020). Interestingly, these are similar among the survivors across age (Haydon et al., 2020). Further, difficulties and challenges, mainly because their routines have been halted have been reported to be an emerging theme, but the storytelling proved to be a coping mechanism as it made the survivors closer to their family members and other people (Kuntz et al., 2019). Also, they became more spiritual (Haydon et al., 2020); however, there is a common desire for them to go back to their lives before they had these conditions (Jensen et al., 2020).

On the other hand, for the abuse-related survival stories, the same findings were discovered. First, the survival stories presented similar abuse experiences among victims from different cultures, socio-economic strata, and other factors (Oke, 2008; Pate et al., 2021). Likewise, their journey to survival, recovery, and self-transformation are similar as well (Oke, 2008).

Meanwhile, for social narratives, various divisions in the rural and urban spaces as reflected on the male narratives, and that these social narratives

of men reveal a marked divide among different social classes (Leap, 2017).

### *1.2. Research Gap*

While the findings of the various survival narratives demonstrate the commonality of the experiences that transcends culture, socio-economic strata, and other variables, it is evident that there is a lack of studies that attempt to compare the health narratives of survivors or patients like COVID 19 in different cultures. In other words, there is a distinct research gap in contrastive rhetoric in the genre of COVID narrative. Likewise, it seems that there are no studies that compare the features of these health narratives.

Hence, in this current paper, I will attempt to compare the COVID 19 narratives of American and Filipino survivors and existing patients. In addition, I argue that despite the marked similarities in their experiences, the discursive patterns in narrating the stories of Filipino and American COVID 19 survivors and patients differ. These can be attributed to their different culture and the L1 of the Filipino informants. However, since the narratives belong to the Internet users who are familiar with the social media language, there are aspects of the stories that transcend culture as the online community platforms serve as cultural equalizers that set a standard regardless of culture. Specifically, this study endeavors to answer the following questions:

1. What significant components of the COVID 19 narratives of the Filipino and American COVID 19 survivors and patients in social dimension, place, and time?
2. What are the cultural perceptions about COVID 19 embedded in the narratives of the Filipino and American survivors and patients?

Based on these questions, this study holds its significance in understanding the contrastive rhetoric features of the COVID 19 narratives. Likewise, the study may present the influences of culture and the first language of the Filipino and American COVID 19 survivors or patients regarding their perception about COVID 19 and the significant details that happened to them; thus, this sheds light on the varying superstructures of the narrative discourse blocs. This study also contributes to the growing literature on how the Internet serves as a catalyst in influencing the existing corpus on health narratives.

### *1.3. Theoretical Framework*



This study explores the rhetorical and the linguistic features of the American and Filipino COVID narratives posted on Facebook Groups of the COVID survivors and patients. In line with this, the current study is informed by Thatcher's (2004) position on contrastive rhetoric. According to Thatcher (2004),

The Internet has reshaped our writing, just as writing had reshaped orality, and just as multimedia is reshaping the Internet, television, radio, and all other communication and media. (p. 307)

Therefore, the Internet has transcended the cultural aspect that influences writing based on the older premise of contrastive rhetoric, as Kaplan (1997) claimed. Furthermore, Thatcher (2004) explained that communication media "superimposed" (p. 308) the rhetorical and cultural patterns on its audience; hence, serving as "cultural levelers" that resulted in making the digital migrants and digital natives arrive at a "similar set of expectations and behaviors" (Woolever, 2001, p. 50) in the virtual world where online communities are found. Despite the undeniable influence of racial or ethnic culture brought about by the differing traditions, beliefs, mores, and geographical local, another emerging variable is the borderless virtual community that has also created an online culture among the digital natives and migrants. Hence, even though there are existing cultural stereotypes, this is slowly dissipated as online communities grow their membership (Woolever, 2001). It may also confirm the assertion of Kachru (1997) that multilingual or bilingual speakers may add the Internet language to their "code repertoire" (p. 340). Therefore, there may be a possibility that texts created by people are influenced by their L1, target language, and the Internet language codes.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

This study is qualitative in nature that capitalizes on Narrative Inquiry to understand the Contrastive Rhetoric of the Filipino versus American COVID 19 Narratives. The narrative inquiry method involves "eliciting and documenting" various narratives or stories (Murray, 2009, p. 45). Also, it stems from the notion that people "make sense" of their lives through stories. Specifically, the current study adopted the Narrative Inquiry method used by Haydon et al. (2020), where they claim that this framework is suitable for health narrative research

as it encompasses all dimensions of the events and allows participants to tell their stories, highlighting what is essential for them in their recovery.

Further, it hinges on the notion that humans are storytellers who lead "storied lives" (p. 45) as individuals and collective. Hence, analyzing people's stories involves learning what people experience their world, thereby showing that scrutinizing the narratives result in unlocking various experiences of the social actors that provide a clearer understanding of their experiences about facing the health challenges and the battles that occur even after their journey towards recovery.

### 2.2. Data Analysis

The study involves two types of analysis. The first type has a two-fold analysis, and this answers the first two research questions of the study; the first level is the narrative inquiry method adopted from the methodological framework of Clandinin and Connelly's (2020) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry. In their study, the narratives are analyzed based on the three major categories: 1) social dimension, 2) place, and 3) time. The social dimension indicates how the personal feelings related to the informants' experiences, which refer to social and cultural experiences that shape the narratives of the social actors. Meanwhile, place pertains to the environment, physical or otherwise. Then, time may indicate the past, present, and future from when the narrators had COVID 19. Also, it presents how the past experiences affect the current reality of the participants and their future.

Even though "themes" are usually used in qualitative research, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Narrative Inquiry framework used the concept of "threads" to determine and discover the re-occurring thoughts and feelings in the participants' stories as they are intertwined and resonate within the three dimensions. Under these significant themes, sub-themes are created based on the emerging threads that surfaced among the narratives.

The second fold of data analysis is the multimodal discourse analysis of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework. According to them, in this multimodality aspect, the meaning comes from the different modes of communication. Written languages are combined with visual images and moving graphics. The framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) is utilized in the data analysis of the current study. Specifically, its data analysis procedure involves the following:



1. 30 narratives were harvested (15 for the Philippines; 15 for the US)
2. Each post or narrative was identified in terms of its components: text, image or gif, hashtag, emoticons
3. To arrive at the themes embedded in each post, the researcher analyzed the texts based on how they are coordinated with the images, gifs, memes, or music. Analyses included the semantic, pragmatic, or the syntactic level of the text and the scrutiny of the possible extraction of the anchorage, signifier, icon, symbol, and index. Thus, checking the words and images in terms of their potential "interaction" or "dynamics." This process was done by identifying the keyword or the particular item from the picture, gif, or meme and place the corresponding interpretation of the coder.
4. The different modalities were put together in a "syntax," an organized sequence that presents one message.
5. These codes were harvested to determine the recurring themes.

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Components of the Narratives

Based on the analyses, the Philippine narrative reflects its high-context culture as reflected on the narratives' similar characteristics: very detailed in terms of the inclusion of the events (see Excerpt 1), bared their emotions, and tagged the individuals they thanked. Thus, revealing that the Philippine narratives display a writer-responsible feature. This means that the burden of ensuring that the audience is understood by the audience is done by the writer (Richardson & Smith, 2007).

Meanwhile, the American narratives reflect Americans' low-context culture as shown in the following similar characteristics: less details, especially of the experiences in the hospital and in the time and date, and assumed that the readers could follow through the ideas indicated in the story (See Excerpt 2). Therefore, the narrative style reveals that the texts have features of a reader-responsible narrative. This means that the burden in understanding the message conveyed in the text is shouldered by the readers (Connor et al., 2008).

Based on these, it is evident that the discourse blocs of the Philippine COVID 19 narratives contains more details about the time and place in comparison to the discourse blocs of the American counterparts.

Excerpt 1

#### *Philippine Narrative*

*On March 22, 2020 I was back in the E.R. I still had diarrhea. The E.R. doctor took note that I was coughing and had a cold.  
On March 24, 2020, a C.T. scan of my lungs was taken to confirm the x-ray results that I did have pneumonia. This was also the day that I met one of my doctors for the first time, Dr. \_\_\_\_ an infectious disease specialist.*

Excerpt 2

#### *American Narrative*

*I am on day 4... my boyfriend, day 3... My symptoms were diarrhea and then just head pain and a burning nose. No fever. He had a fever and a slight cough.*

However, it is observed that more information about the medication in the American discourse blocs are found whereas the Philippine discourse blocs have minimal contents about the medication. Apparently, this is because of the community rule that posting of the COVID 19 drugs is prohibited in order to discourage Filipinos to engage in self-medication. Thus, is aspect of community rules is considered culture-bound.

### Cultural Perceptions about COVID

Aside from those, the narratives of the two groups indicate the different points of view in the narration. For the Philippine narratives, the narrators are in the retrospective view; hence, the recounts emphasize on gratitude and appreciation, whereas, in the American stories, the narrators are at their lowest points where they are still afflicted by COVID. As a result, the narratives sound more pessimistic. Thus, the view on COVID of the two groups differs as the Philippine narratives showed the appreciation in the entire experience because they "learned" from it while the American narratives presented how COVID has put them into a miserable state in the physical, psychological, and financial aspects.

In addition, the view on the narrative perspectives also convey the face of the narrators. It appears that the Filipino informants adhere to the



eastern practice of saving face. This collective practice prompts them to share their narratives after they have healed or they are waiting for the final COVID 19 tests. In comparison, face is viewed differently by American informants by presenting themselves at the onset of having COVID 19 virus. This reflects the conflicting image that is maintained by the two groups.

Despite the differences, the Philippine and American narratives also share features such as the following: 1) exclusion of pictures, 2) use of emoticons in displaying intense emotions, 3) showing similar feelings about COVID and their condition like fear and hopelessness. Thus, the online groups serve as their online community recluse in seeking encouragement aside from the desire to know who also experiences the same feeling and predicament. This affirms the positions of Cristall et al. (2020) and Pate et al. (2021) in line with health narratives that they include the recounting of the traumatic incident, which display the narrators' one factor of vulnerability.

It is interesting to note that their spirituality was heightened by the experience aside from their appreciation to their family members (Haydon et al., 2020). This is through the notion God allowed them to have a second life for a specific purpose. Aside from this, spirituality is also observed among stories that seek encouragement from others to enkindle their faith.

### Linking to Contrastive Rhetoric

The findings of the current study have confirmed past claims in the field of Contrastive Rhetoric about culture (e.g. Connor et al., 2008) that culture overrides the discourse bloc, but the newer trend shows that the Internet culture is also observed in the texts through conforming to common rules on the SNS groups. Indeed, there are cultural differences that shape the narratives of the two groups, but the emerging unifying online culture through the Internet is undeniably evident among the stories of the two cultures in the study. Hence, the concept of culture now cannot be boxed in the race but shared practices.

It is also interesting to note that in the American group, all narratives and posts are from women whereas in the Philippine group, various genders participated and shared their narratives. Therefore, language teachers should provide opportunities for students to be comfortable in expressing themselves in terms of what they feel, especially the male

students. Also, various online etiquettes or netiquettes need to be strengthened in class as well.

Hence, the findings reveal that another aspect of culture needs to be integrated in the language instruction since everyone who use the Internet especially SNSs are considered netizens, who need to experience success in the online social interaction as well (Thatcher, 2004) and that their stories being shared online should also fulfill the communication demands of the virtual community.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the similarities and differences of the COVID narratives of the two cultures. Using 30 narratives from the two Facebook groups on COVID 19, these stories were analyzed using narrative inquiry and a multimodal approach. The results show that there are differences in the features of the narratives. However, as these are posted in the online groups, similar features reflect that the online platform has allowed the users to be in a global village; thus, acquiring a similar language.

In the aspect of Contrastive Rhetoric, these are essential findings that aid the language teachers in paying more attention to the online discourse to strengthen the learners' ability to express themselves in the discourse expected of them online. Thus, allowing the learners to achieve competence in the digital world as well. It can be done through the use of online materials as part of the linguistic discussions in class. Hence, allowing the learners to achieve competence in all their endeavors.

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