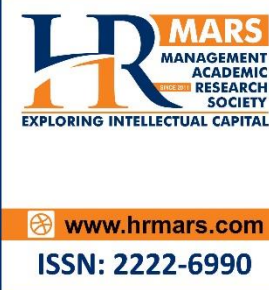




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Fake News and Misinformation: Covid-19 & Challenges Confronted by Malaysian's Ministry of Health

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a significant global public health crisis. Malaysia has announced several Movement Control Orders (MCO) to tackle the spread of COVID-19. Amidst this, there has been a hidden epidemic of information that makes COVID-19 stand out as a digital infodemic with plethora of misinformation, rumors and conspiracy theories. Repeated and detailed content on COVID-19, geographical statistics, and multiple sources of information have lead to chronic stress and confusion. This has challenged the Malaysian Ministry of Health to encounter fake information circulation on social media since March 2020 despite political struggles and the change of government. This paper aims to identify types of fake misinformation circulated during the MCO and to what extent the ministry have curb fake information. Using qualitative method, textual analysis applied to the selected social media platforms which were identified based on the pages hits along with the ministry's social media pages. Posted headings, pictures, figures, news and intervention actions taken by the ministry were examined according to thematical approach. The findings show that Malaysia had an extensive circulation of fake news on COVID-19 fake remedies, vaccines extreme views, and doubt on health strategies.

Keywords: COVID-19, Fake News Circulation, Misinformation, Social Media Platforms, Malaysia's Ministry of Health

Introduction

In recent times there have been many changes and rapid advances in technology where most Malaysians are more likely to choose new media platforms as their sources of information in comparison to conventional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television news. Indeed, there is no doubt new media is a much better medium for information retrieval as it is fast and convenient. In fact, it has become an essential part of social life today. On top of this, the rise of gadgets like smartphones, tablets, and laptops will certainly cause people to unknowingly become lazy in reading newspapers, thus exposing them to the vulnerability of disinformation as many fail to fact-check before sharing information online.

Barua et al (2020) stated that advanced technologies are becoming inexpensive and easily accessible. It is reported that the global mobile population surpasses four billion unique users, according to data in April 2019, and as of February 2019, a total of 48% of web pages were viewed through mobile devices globally with Asia and Africa in the lead (Statista, 2022). Accordingly, the emergence of social media platforms has increased the dissemination rate of information among users. Sihombing (2017) argues that the vital aspect of social media platforms is the involvement of content sharing features that indulge in forms of expression and relationship building among users. Consequently, many users spend a majority of their time online rather than engaging in face-to-face interactions. Inevitably, virtual communication subconsciously reduces the impact of physical interactions and diminishes the need for one-on-one communication.

The influence of what is known as the fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) has encouraged millions of websites to strew information online, including questionable news. According to McGonagle (2017), several pieces of evidence illustrate that the usage of social media platforms has hastened the spread of disinformation across the internet. Tandoc et al (2018) discovered that one reason for this is due to the convenience of information sharing that has enabled platforms to disseminate information as they please to the general public. In addition, the ongoing global pandemic caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has brought about much unrest worldwide and contributed to new norms of living and working. Thus, the Malaysian government and authorities have enforced several regulations, such as the Movement Control Order (MCO) and social distancing to curb the spread of the virus by placing residents in lockdowns in their respective homes. Accordingly, physical activities have basically become online ones to minimize interactions within society.

Significantly, most keyboard warriors bombard media platforms to spread unverified information and malice to the public. Creswell and Poth (2017) found that misinformation was strongly connected to socialization gratification as sharing can be a great form of communication. People had the advantage to obtain information online and express themselves freely. However, the freedom was instead exploited by misfits sharing misleading messages and false information. For instance, the current scenario on the COVID-19 pandemic proves social media is being used as a platform to spread false allegations and misinformation (Pennycook et al., 2020).

The government and the Ministry of Health Malaysia are using their social media platforms to convey information and important messages on COVID-19 issues. However, some users had misused these platforms to distribute false information and news, thus creating communication disruptions and disorders among Malaysians. At least 55% of the population will need to accept the novel COVID-19 vaccinations in order to achieve herd immunity to reach approximately 85%, depending on the country and infection rate (Kwok et al., 2020). The vaccination campaign had been reinforced by the government through the Ministry of Health. However, it was slowly undermined by the circulation of fake news on the side effects and safety of the vaccination.

Unfortunately, the dispersal of false data acts as a contagion that contributes to pre-existing threats, producing doubt, feelings of anxiety, and distrust over new vaccines. Thus, the percentage of Malaysians expected to receive the vaccinations decreases as a result of the

anti-vaccine community who refuses to believe the truth. Their defiance only restricts the government and Ministry of Health from achieving the goal of herd immunity which is vital to ensure society continues to function properly, and not further prolong the epidemic (Salathé & Bonhoeffer, 2008).

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the COVID-19 pandemic report was supported by inaccurate data in February 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Colomina (2020) stated that one of the crucial differences between COVID-19 and previous epidemics is that most people are facing anxiety of constantly being fed hoax news that results in distrust of the media. One of the factors leading to disinformation on social media is the lack of objectivity when encountering suspicious data. Accordingly, if it is not regulated, it can lead to misconceptions and public feuding. Nevertheless, Malaysians must be conscientious and take precautions as the information shared online occasionally lacks credibility and clear sources. It completely differs from conventional media where the information shared will first be viewed by an editor who ensures the works' credibility. Rampersad and Althiyabi (2019) stated that social media is the ideal platform to circulate false information and news vigorously. In spite of that, any news or information found to be a hoax can cause damage to the receiver which could have huge repercussions, emotionally and socially, as well as bring ethical issues into the mix. Thus, stringent regulations are introduced to curtail and reduce the proliferation of fake news dispersion with reference to COVID-19 and its vaccines.

Theoretical Framework

New Media Phenomenon

In the 21st century, the outbreak of COVID-19 that spread worldwide over the last two years has wrought tremendous changes to the phenomenon of news circulation. In the area of news, Malaysians are greatly attracted to the proliferation of social media platforms. It has been reported that there were 8 billion daily video views in November, 2015, with an increase in the video content of newsfeeds (Newman, n.d.). More than 100 million hours of video content were viewed on social media platforms daily and the increase of video in this social media platform is not only related to news content (Lister, 2022). The public can acquire current news in mere seconds through the internet. The positive side on the convergence of technology is it saves time for journalists to report the news at any place and be quick in submitting any news stories to their editors without further delay.

Social media platforms have become increasingly popular as society prefers to find and forward information through the internet. Social platforms create an explosion of information sharing among Malaysian via WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and others. It brings about huge social problems regarding the spread of false information that affects the credibility of social media. Misperceptions and disinformation violate the humanity and social responsibility of civilians during this public emergency scenario.

Using media ecology and social contagion theories, the emergence of new media outlets has several implications for the public in changing behaviors, thus contributing to a myriad of ethical issues such as misinformation on Ministry of Health's social media platforms. The circulation of fake news leads to devastating outcomes not only jeopardizing public calm but also the legitimacy of news such as the distribution of false content, misleading information,

lies, fabricated content, and false context that cause ethical issues on social media. The authenticity of information can be questioned.

Changing Behaviors

Society is quickly becoming dependent on new media like social network sites (SNS) for several reasons, such as its usefulness and capability in acquiring fast information, resourcefulness, and effectiveness in reaching all of society which is now a 'global village' (McLuhan, 1964). In fact, technology has evolved, transformed transitionally, and improved tremendously over time forcing users to adapt quickly to breakthrough inventions, such as the Internet or the penetration of new media throughout the world without boundaries and big data. This is supported by the Media Ecology Theory which has been applied to explain the emergence of new media phenomena. McLuhan (1964) expressed the theory that information and communication technology (ICT) and SNS can change and affect people's points of view, social norms, etiquette, humanity, public interest, and morality.

According to Social Contagion theory, the blast of uncontrollable information can contribute to the problem of misinformation. This is devastating as it leads to major lies, panic, wrong perceptions, anxiety, and emotional stress. The spread of information or fake status postings on social media is like a contagious virus or disease that can affect the mind, emotions, and behavior of internet users, resulting in negative feelings and widespread outbursts. There will be widespread behavioral changes in people due to the rise of speculation, rumours, and perceived conspiracies that linger in the mind.

Another issue concerns clarity around the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) of the MCO announced by the government and National Security Council (MKN) for the public to adhere. These procedures are constantly changing making the Malaysian public confused about the dynamics of the COVID-19 outbreak. For instance, the inconsistent SOP dining rules in eateries annoyed and frustrated the public annoyed when the regulations and policies constantly changed, often at short notice. There are also allegations that the government is practising double standards in lenient punishments handed out to VIPs, celebrities or social influencers who violate COVID-19 SOP during MCO, while the general public face heavy fines and possibly arrest. Thus, the public has become dissatisfied, furious, and aggressively questioning the government's equality and fairness in enforcing the SOP and policies towards these groups.

The Ministry of Health encountered the problem of not having enough public support in its policy of vaccination to achieve herd community. This is due to the rampant circulation of fake news and false allegations or rumours on vaccines in social media. This caused anxiety and changes in behavior from trust to distrust, misinformation about taking the vaccine as precaution and public health safety on combating COVID-19 infections. Flynn and Reifler (2017) stated that rumours and conspiracy theories are two key concepts that are often mentioned in the dissemination of fake news (p. 129). Both are found originally from bodies of text, but is 'unsupported by the authentic source, and emerge not only from mis- or disinformation but also from information that might turn out to be legitimate. Rumours are mainly recognized by their lack of authenticity and their 'rapid social dissemination' (Belinsky, 2017, p. 243). Some Malaysians change their behavior by disliking, isolating, and

discriminating against the presence of people including celebrities who oppose or reject vaccination.

Influences

The Media Ecology theory is interested in explaining changes in public interest, public health, and information news. The growth of social media influences has brought about a tremendous flow of audience traffic, accessible to anyone including social media platform users and influencers. Lately, it has become a trend to share information actively in a form of text, video, and images rapidly for the presumed benefit of many interested people who share the same views.

Most writers argue that fake news 'mimics news media content in form' and is presented in a journalistic format (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). According to *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* (n.d.), 'fake' is defined as 'not genuine; imitation or counterfeit,' so fake news does not simply mean false news but should be understood as an imitation of news. Along these lines, Horne and Adali (2017) stated that false articles consist of similar structural components, such as a headline, a body text, and - however, not necessarily - a picture, graph or illustration. The presentation on journalistic lines can also involve radio news formats and video (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Berkman et al (2000) stated that we are living in an homogenous world where people are influenced by the spread of unhealthy practices or ways of thinking that shape new norms, enforcing controls and constraints on lived-in environments so that society follows the same conduct. People tend to be complacent in violating the SOPs.

This research is guided by Social Contagion Theory which aims to explain the bad outcomes of the viral of misinformation in response to news put out by the Ministry of Health in Malaysia. Lai (2020) has recently stated that on the individual level, it may cause hoarding, panic buying, psychological distress, and anxiety among certain groups in a population (Ministry of Health, 2020a). Simple access to this information via technology can potentially motivate individuals to easily compare their own lives to the lives they read on online postings and observations through pictures on social media sites. This causes them to feel inadequate or less satisfied with their lives and behaviors.

Greenberg and Rosner (2020) stated that on a societal level, it compromises the government's confidence in effectively making decisions and policies on how to handle the pandemic, economic recession, retrenchment of workers and rising unemployment. This is evident in the current cases of new COVID-19 variants where what is posted on social media platforms by users greatly influences the wider society. Consequently, this leads to misperceptions where people start questioning the authorities about their policies and procedures, especially with reference to the compulsory booster dose that is required to protect them from the Omicron variant.

Degree of Authenticity

The Ministry of Health is utilising social media platforms as a medium to deliver information pertaining to health and safety precautions so that the public has knowledge and awareness. According to social contagion theory, it takes place where there are robust forms of information being circulated on social media platforms that are counter to the official Ministry of Health's social media platforms. Here the production of false news contributes to

inaccurate facts that alarm readers and/or netizens. For that matter, social network users should be wise and conscientious in choosing what they read online, trustworthy, official websites or blogs and validate the information first before sharing it. In combating and countering the problem of fake news sharing, the Malaysian authorities have developed an online platform that permits the public to fact-check claims on information being circulated rapidly on social media.

Consequently, receivers of such information might misrepresent false articles as genuine and trusted news articles (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017). Significantly, it was emphasized that apart from the visual appearance of a news article, 'through the use of news bots, fake news imitates news' by strongly building a network of counterfeit sites' (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 147). Furthermore, it is difficult to determine the authenticity of information provided by netizens on social platforms as too often it lacks legitimate sources or no referencing at all. False news differs in some crucial aspects from authentic news but it still manages to attract a lot of attention on social media platforms, adding to the problem of 'likes' and 'shares'. In Malaysia, netizens should be vigilant by checking thoroughly the validity of news stories to ensure the authenticity of what is being circulated on the *Sebenarnya.my* portal and several credible websites to avoid misinformation, disparagement or hoax. Indeed, any suspicious social media posts or suspect uploaded articles will then be posted on the website *Sebenarnya.my* and labelled as fake news. Astonishingly, 256 fake news stories were exposed and classified as hoaxes on the *Sebenarnya.my* portal in mid-May 2020.

Ethical Issues

Presently, Malaysia is combatting the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ministry of Health has the responsibility to execute its public health functions, for example to generate information through social media platforms. According to Social Contagion theory, the sharing of personal information of patients who are infected by COVID-19 and the circulation of fake news on social media has introduced ethical issues and anger among netizens, as such news causes public humiliation, discrimination, and stigma felt by affected family members and patients (Sukumaran, 2020). People may be pointing their fingers and blaming patients with COVID-19 openly for starting clusters of infection. In some cases, patients have to defend themselves by having to defend themselves openly against such allegations. As history has shown, sharing of fake news is not strange in the midst of a pandemic, but the effect on the public can be long-term and causes anxiety and constant fear (Ortutay & Klepper, 2020). Exhaustive false information can affect the emotions of people, causing them to feel stressed, or panicked due to the irresponsible contagious spread of fake news on social media.

Ethical issues regarding public health information, prejudices, safety and health of the society are now being raised for the Malaysian people to consider. Non-contextual and/or controversial video images of vaccine immunization, infected coronavirus patients wandering around freely with their pink bangle in public places, COVID-19 patients being treated and secluded in hospital beds with insufficient vaccines, are being circulated widely and quickly. In this way such images violate the privacy and confidentiality of affected individuals. This false information certainly violates the ethics as the public is questioning to what extent the source is true, and the validity of news or information being disseminated. It not only affects the objectivity of the news but also has implications for politics and economic matters.

The image of the Ministry of Health in Malaysia is tarnished for not ensuring that everyone in society is treated equally. The government announced on 30th January of 2020 that all medical fees would not have to be paid by non-nationals who were infected with the COVID-19 virus or had come into close contact with confirmed cases and sought treatment in public healthcare facilities (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020b). Franklin and McNair (2017); Tandoc et al (2018) called for research on the computer-assisted detection of fake news and misinformation so that the public's media literacy in the digital information environment would improve. Thomas (2017) suggested there should be modules to elevate media literacy, such as social media guides like 'Tips on how to detect fake news'.

It is imperative for the Ministry of Health to take serious action on handling ethical issues due to the uncontrollable and mass circulation of fake news. 'Controlling the media as a source of information distribution' is a shield to influence public opinion as a precaution from being deceived (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019, p. 51). The fake news label should be imposed as a core solution in regulating social media platforms' influence on public attitudes and perceptions, such as what had been encountered by the Ministry of Health's social media platforms users.

Social Media as an Informational Gateway and Connectivity

Social media sites enable users to connect with each other within a virtual network, such as Twitter and LinkedIn where they can share, co-create, or exchange information with ease through messages, photos, or videos (Ahmad et al., 2019). In 2020, there were an estimated 3.8 billion social media users worldwide, representing half the global population (We Are Social, 2020). The era of social media in the IR 4.0 is one where the online medium is the preferred informational gateway where users can inform their beliefs and then share them, on any trending issues without limitations or boundaries on their SNS.

Again, citing McLuhan (1964), humans are quickly becoming dependent on new media like SNS for several reasons, such as its usefulness and ability to rapidly acquire information, its resourcefulness, and its effectiveness. In fact, technology has made tremendous strides in recent years, encouraging everyone to embrace every technological breakthrough, such as the Internet or the penetration of new media and big data. Social media is an online platform that enables communication to take place virtually and manages relationships between users on the platform. Moreover, users may exchange information with other users through digital platforms where users may interact through various applications, engage actively through their mobile devices, and utilize websites to share, discuss, develop, and promote content. Terms such as "excessive", "addictive", and "dependent" are closely linked to the negative aspects of SNS. Particularly, social networking dependence is the price paid for being on SNS. This is referred to as an addiction because it falls into the category of cyber-relationship addiction (Choi & Lim, 2016).

Misinformation among Users on Social Media

Jamieson and Albarracin (2020) pointed out electronic new media coverage regarding incidents of false information in the United States. That society is prone to falling victim to false news given that so many people choose to disregard the importance of fact-checking, like using *sebenarnya.my* in Malaysia to investigate the authenticity of a source(s). Failure or ignorance to do so will only shape the public opinion negatively. Hence, the Malaysian government and respective authorities not only need to strengthen the regulations, but to

also take action against perpetrators who are unethical in the act of information sharing. Concerning the issue of false news dissemination, some social platforms are deliberately sharing inaccurate information to compete with traditional media sources or sites. It is worrying to observe several fabricated stories being shared without a background check of a story's integrity, made worse by increased access to digital media platforms during the pandemic (Pan American Health Organization, 2020).

Research described how inaccurate information was irregularly removed by social media platforms; 68% of Italian-language false information was not labelled as such so social media platforms users were not aware of Covid-19 fake news stories. Furthermore, 21% of Italian fake news posts fell into the category of "harmful content" and social media platforms had the responsibility to delete it, but these posts were still existing in early April 2021. Between January and mid-March 2020, 3.08 million messages on Covid-19 were disseminated by social media daily and monitored by the Vaccine Confidence Project? (Larson, 2020). Various types of false information account for a sizeable portion of the online content. Hoaxes and rumours are disseminated rapidly on the internet and bury what is authentic news in the communication environment. This practice alarms governments who have to respond to and curb the spread of fake news to prevent behaviors or actions that can cause harm to people. Viral fake posts through social media during the COVID-19 pandemic have certainly got way out of hand in society.

False information pertaining to COVID-19 and shared on social media platforms is affecting the work of medical practitioners and government campaigns to help people. In addition to the misinformation crisis, it was discovered that invalid information regarding the virus has contributed to misperceptions and flawed reasoning that has worsened the outbreak, thus seriously undermining mental and physical health (Samia Tasnim et al., 2020). There has been a vigorous circulation of fake news on COVID-19 through social media sites, for the example the beliefs that: the 5G mobile network is linked to the virus; volunteers were sacrificed after a failed attempt at a test of COVID-19 vaccines; and the pandemic is merely a 'smoke screen' for a bigger conspiracy theory to reduce the human population (Pennycook et al., 2020).

It is imperative for Malaysian netizens to read further on issues and news encountered online before making any statements nor sharing information through their social media outlet. The unexpected outbreak and spread of COVID-19 within a few months contributed to various beliefs and allegations shared extensively on social media. The major conviction of many people was that it was part of a sinister, hidden agenda for something bigger as stated above. The details of the COVID-19 conspiracy theory have reached more than 20 million views worldwide from unknown social media platforms (Mian & Khan, 2020). Consequently, it is vital for society to strive together in fighting such misinformation to achieve public enlightenment, common sense and solidarity based on a properly informed society (Mohammad, 2020).

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has undertaken in-depth research on 126,000 stories tweeted by around 3 million accounts from 2006 to 2017. Vosoughi et al (2018) discovered that false news or lies spread quickly were regularly retweeted and reposted in comparison to reliable or accurate information based on strong evidence. As a matter of fact, false information is the current phenomenon that attracts the light before it

dims. It has the potential to spread to between 1,000 and 100,000 users on Twitter perhour. Vosoughi et al (2018) asserted that false or sensational news was often preferred by people and they tended to not really care if it caused a public uproar.

Problem Statement

New media is no stranger to consumers today. Its influence is remarkable as a previous study discovered that consumers in Malaysia aged 30 and above use social media, especially platforms, as a medium to communicate and acquire additional information, such as the latest news that is broadcast faster online than on television and newspaper outlets (Hassim et al., 2019). According to data released by Hootsuite (n.d.), the average daily time allocated by Malaysians to surf the internet is eight hours and five minutes as compared to watching television, etc. Tandoc et al (2018) stated that information sharing on social media has become convenient and accessible to the point where society has become involved in the production of information and news, so that in effect more false information is disseminated faster. Here is where the problem arises as the spread of false news could contribute to damaged reputations and lead to misjudgements on social media. This has serious ramifications for human psychology in the form of causing depression, affected emotions and problematic behaviors (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Authorities not only have to solve matters of dissemination of false information, but also in tackling the resulting public disorder should that occur. A study conducted to analyse misinformation rated false by independent fact-checkers reported that false content was vigorously shared mostly on social media (88%), consisting of various textual and visual reconfigurations (Brennen et al., 2020). The most consistently recurring claim refers to interventions taken by public authorities in curbing the COVID-19 outbreak, stating that governments and health organizations have not succeeded in ensuring that accurate information is disseminated in response to what society needs.

Thus, it is imperative to emphasize the importance and reliability of authoritative sources on the Ministry of Health's social media platforms, in an effort to restore credibility and genuine information with netizens. As a matter of fact, a strategic, honest and proactive use of social media should be undertaken by public health organizations to increase trust, authenticity and alleviate the damage done by misinformation on social media platforms.

Research Objectives

RO 1: To identify the types of COVID-19 fake news and ethical issues encountered by the Ministry of Health Malaysia on social media platforms.

RO 2: To examine the responses of Ministry of Health officials to the circulation of fake news on COVID-19.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the types of COVID-19 fake news and ethical issues encountered by the Ministry of Health on social media platforms?

RQ 2: How do the Ministry of Health officials respond to and examine the circulation of fake news on COVID-19?

Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative case study approach as it explores the ethical issues of viral misinformation on social media platforms in a single setting. Here the authors attempt to interpret and observe “the essence and the underlying structure of a phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009). In other words, it is a case study that reviews cases that may include incidents that are influential at the individual level. Using textual analysis as a method to examine selected social media platforms’ fake news captions, this method will assess the features of text, such as fake headlines and fake content/context. For example, a researcher might investigate how often certain words are repeated in social media posts. For this research, the social media context or text are taken from the Ministry of Health’s social media platforms, and serve as the data sample which is subjected to the thematic analysis method.

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data gathered for this study. It is one of the cluster methods that focus on identifying patterned meanings across a data set. In this paper, thematic analysis will help to obtain insights into the data gathered and what it means. It is a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting themes (Boyatzis, 1998). As well, this study employs inductive thematic analysis in which the subject matter or topics are become part of the process of data coding so that the research questions are convincingly answered (Knafl, 1991). The six-phase thematic analysis process includes the following stages: understanding of data, the production of keywords, subject observation, topic analyzation and conceptualization, the generation of ideas and arguments, and analysis production.

Findings

1. Perception of Vaccinations

The function of social media, ideally, is to inform people with true and legitimate information, and not to engage in misinformation. Figure 1 below portrays that Malaysians hold their own perceptions and arguments about vaccinations. It has been widely circulated on various social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, and others.



Figure 1: Claims made about Vaccinations on Social Media Platforms

(Source: Star, 2020)

Several claims have been made, for example there are statements expressing how vaccines harm the body and accused of being non-halal. Some users claimed that the government and Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia not only have a hidden agenda, for example having conspiratorial links with the West or Israel, but also claiming that vaccinations contain a deadly poisonous virus, are non-halal, aimed deliberately at Muslims, kill the body's antibodies and weaken the immune system. These allegations have caused public anxiety and encouraged many people to avoid vaccinations since the very beginning of the immunization programs.



Figure 2: Claims reflecting Religious Views
(Source: Oh My Media Portal, 2021)

Figure 2 illustrates that Muslims are taking precautions on the vaccination content and prefer traditional or alternative medicines, homeopathic cures or others. They also resort to the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah about taking preventive steps to stop the spread of COVID-19. They have a deep distrust of vaccines which they feel could lead to death. These Muslims and anti-vaccine groups have negative perceptions of the vaccines which they claim are designed to kill humans, and receiving financial profit from selling the vaccines worldwide without taking the responsibility or guarantee of the effects that the person gets after being vaccinated. and the profits of selling the vaccines worldwide are preferred to taking responsibility for ensuring that a vaccine actually works for people.

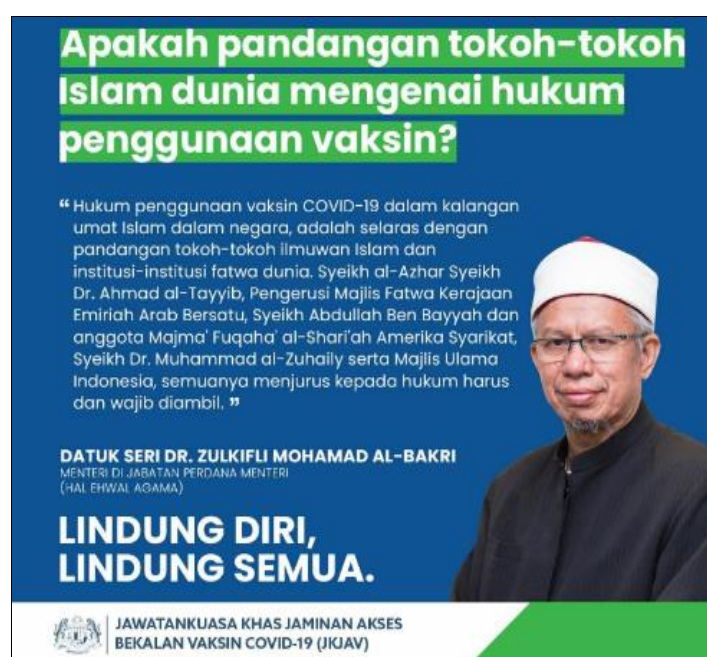


Figure 3: Nation's Religious Icon Defending Vaccinations
(Source: Sinar Harian, 12 March 2020)



Figure 4: Islamic Agency JAKIM Clarifying what Vaccinations are
(Source: Berita Harian, 23 February 2021)

It is worth noting here that religious perspectives on issues are in the mind of every Muslim. Jabatan Agama Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and the Minister of Religious Department, Datuk Seri Dr. Zulkifli Mohammad Al-Bakri, had disagreed on the negatives and extremes views on vaccinations such as 'haram' or contradicts with the religious traits had both disagreed that vaccinations are not 'haram' and do not contradict religious teaching. Datuk Seri Dr. Zulkifli Mohammad Al-Bakri further added that due to health compliance measures, taking vaccination is compulsory for Muslims to protect themselves against the spread of the COVID-19 disease.

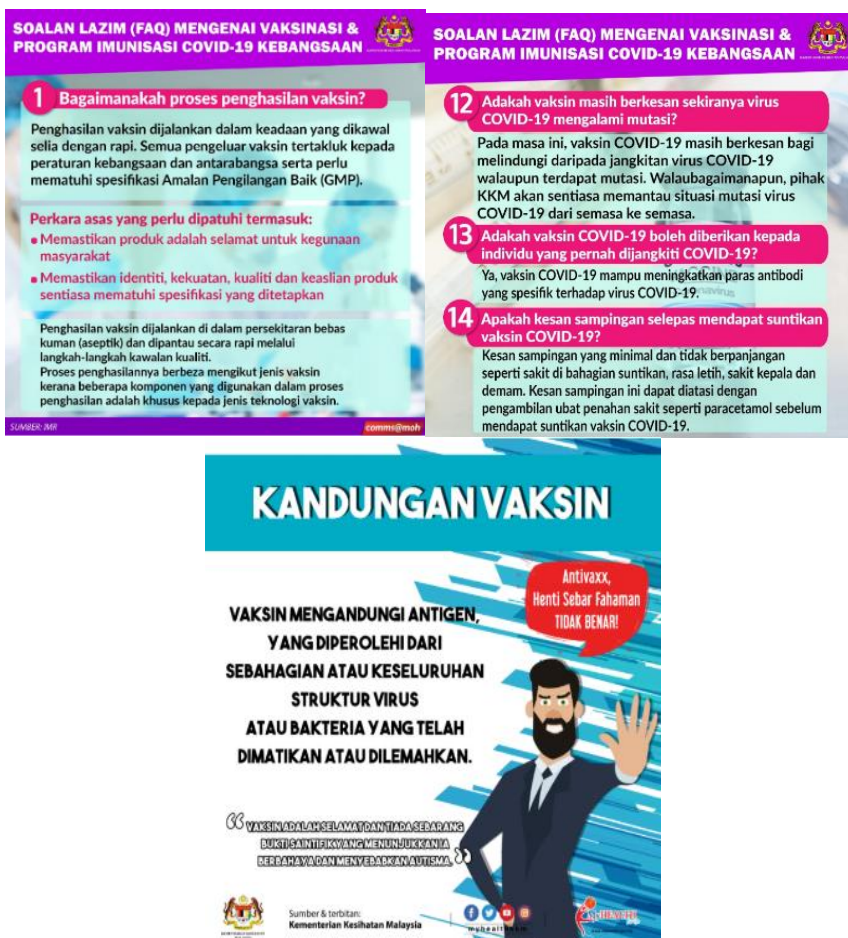


Figure 5: A few Ministry of Health explanations of Vaccinations
(Source: Malaysian Ministry of Health, 2020)

Malaysia's Ministry of Health responded to false allegations made by some people. The ministry undertook efforts to provide Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) columns and produced infographics on its website and Facebook platform for public viewing. On the website, queries or doubts emanating in the public were answered so as to avoid misunderstanding, distorted information, bad perception, or polemics on vaccinations. Moreover, the Ministry of Health set out to reduce misconceptions of vaccinations so as to achieve herd immunity, in other words, establish a form of indirect protection from infectious disease so that a sufficient percentage of a population is immune to an infection, thereby reducing the likelihood of infection for individuals who lack immunity

>> KHAS > COVID-19 > Khairy jawab 'kemarahan' warganet mengenai dos penggalak keempat

Khairy jawab 'kemarahan' warganet mengenai dos penggalak keempat

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1.6K



Figure 6: Malaysian Minister of Health Clarifying Speculations about Vaccinations
(Source: Sinar Harian, 2022)

The Minister of Health, Khairy Jamaluddin, responded to the ongoing arguments made by netizens on social media sites about the compulsory booster dose (*dos penggalak*). He explained that it is based on scientific research and medical evidence. This had to be done due to the emergence of Omicron variant cases and Khairy emphasized the benefits of taking the fourth booster jab not only to enhance the body's immune system, but to also protect vaccinated people from changes in the COVID-19 infection. Khairy Jamaluddin also stressed that the response of the Ministry will change in accordance with the circumstances concerning the Omicron variant's effects.

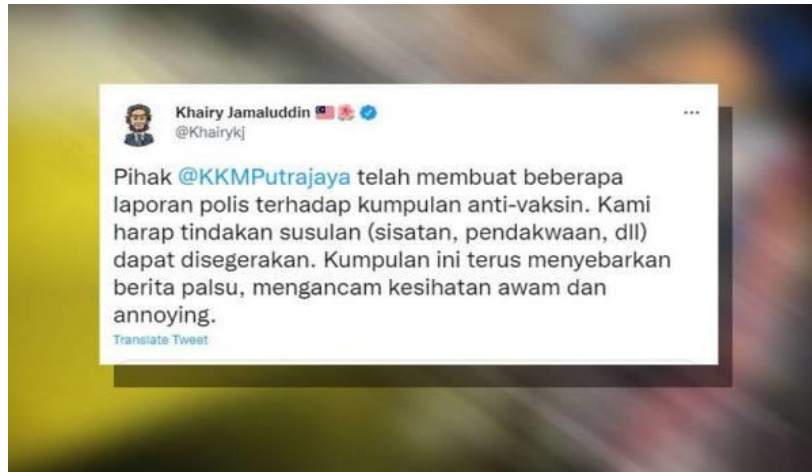


Figure 7: Malaysian Ministry of Health's Intervention on Spreading Fake News about Vaccinations

(Source: Sinar Harian, 2022)

Responding to claims made by anti-vaccine groups, the Minister of Health Malaysia, Khairy Jamaluddin, took action by lodging police reports on such groups, so as to control and forbid them from spreading fake news that will not only harm Malaysian citizens' lives, but may also contribute to public fear in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.

2. Daily updates on fake news about the Coronavirus, number of cases, and death statistics

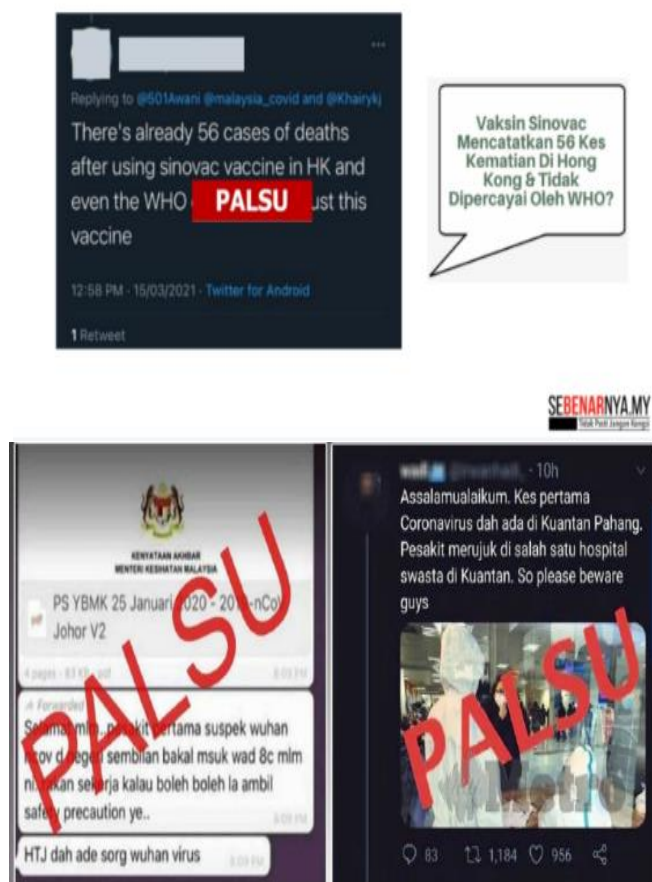


Figure 8: Fake Claims on COVID-19 Cases and Death Statistics
(Source: Sebenarnya.my Portal, 2021)

There are countless updates on news and information that are continuously shared and trend across various social media platforms, for instance Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. The problem arises when attempting to verify the information presented in these postings and shares to ensure its credibility and authenticity. In this era of IR 4.0, information can be spread online in a split second by Malaysian citizens. However, irresponsible sharing without verifying the truthfulness of the information shared can cause public outrage, fear, chaos, distress, and misunderstanding.

Judging by the above figure, it can be observed that there are numerous examples of fake news that are continually shared online. Unsurprisingly, the news takes the form of allegations and speculations that are sourced from unreliable websites. In the same manner, the updated deaths, cases, and figures revolving around COVID-19 are inaccurate since it is not sourced from the Ministry of Health's website of official Facebook page. Instead, most of the data presented and shared were hoaxes, rumours, and false updates, thus causing confusion, panic, and public disquiet in the Malaysian citizenry. This practice is irresponsible and unethical as it could undermine the peace and harmony of the nation.

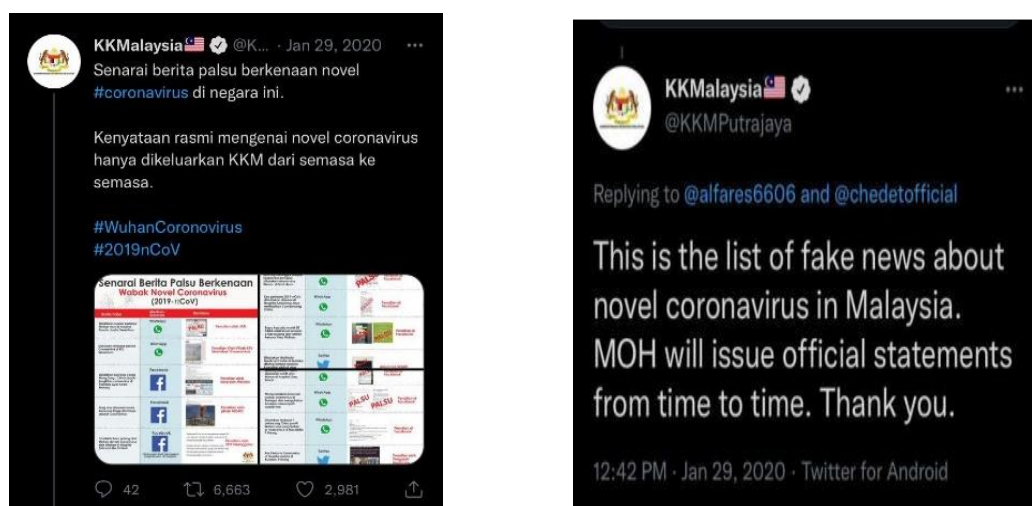


Figure 9: Ministry of Health Listed of Fake News Portals on COVID-19
(Source: Information Department, 2020)

In response to ethical issues, the Ministry of Health in Malaysia announced to the public to take extra precautions on and be alert to the spread of fake news. The ministry issued official statements from time to time for the purpose of controlling and reducing the daily spread of fake news on COVID-19-related issues, and especially the number of cases and deaths that will only escalate public alarm, confusion, and misinformation among Malaysians.



Figure 10: Ministry of Health Clarifying COVID-19 Cases and Death Statistics
(Source: Kosmo, 2021)



Figure 11: Ministry of Health's Intervention on Combating Fake News
(Source: Sinar Harian, 2022)

The Ministry of Health is serious to prevent the spread of fake news by enforcing severe punishments on offenders who deliberately share and propagate fake news or claims. They can be charged under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 which provides for a maximum fine of RM50,000 or imprisonment of up to one year, or both, and a further fine of RM1,000 for each day the offence is continued after conviction. This statute seeks to curb and control the spreads of fake news about the coronavirus, and the number of cases and deaths reported on social media platforms.

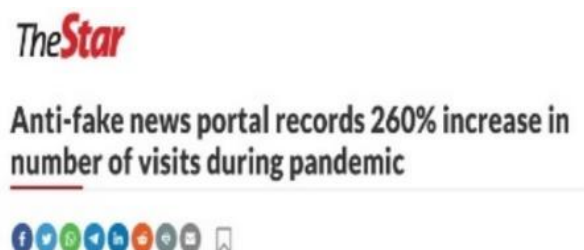


Figure 12: Government's Effort in using Sebenarnya.my to Combat Fake News
(Source: The Star, 2021)

The picture above illustrates the government's fight against fake news. Malaysia's authorities have created a one-stop center for a fact-checking portal, 'Sebenarnya.my' (translated as 'the truth'). Basically, it acts as a hub for Malaysians to check and verify sources of information before spreading what they receive as news. In other words, whenever the public receives any news, information, or input data that is circulated on social media platforms, it is the user's responsibility to validate it before sharing the information online.

3. Speculation about the MCO which led to Public Confusion



Figure 13: Claims about the MCO which led to Public Confusion
(Source: Kosmo, 2021)

It can be observed that fake MCO announcements were made in several states of Malaysia, such as Kedah, Kelantan, Sabah and elsewhere. This false news has been circulating through various social media platforms, like WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook creating unnecessary panic, public and personal feuding, anxiety, confusion, and distress among Malaysian citizens. This is a devastating issue as Malaysians are forced to face the uncertainty of COVID-19 while those working on the frontline are trying to curb the outbreak of COVID-19. They are also having to deal with disinformation on the MCO that has contributed to major misunderstandings among social media users about what it is intended for.



Figure 14: Government Clarifying Speculations about MCO that resulted in Public Confusion
(Source: Malay Mail, 2020)

“Every day, we have to form and prepare (answers from) the rapid response team (that would answer any queries regarding Covid-19, as a countermeasure to fake news). Every day we have eight to nine issues to clarify... (about) 120 issues to date.”

(Malay Mail, 2020)

The Communications and Multimedia Minister and National Security Council (MKN) dealt with this problem by undertaking daily press conferences and making statements that address these issues. The purpose was to avoid disinformation about what the government is doing in combating against COVID-19. The government intervened by taking down several

inaccurate postings, hoax statements, and rumors. Besides that, various messages were sent through the Short Message Service (SMS) on a daily basis to educate and inform Malaysian citizens and social media users with authentic information.

4. Inconsistency in the Announcements on Standard Procedures



Figure 15: Claims on Inconsistency in the Announcements on Standard Procedures
(Source: Oh Bulan Portal, 2021)

It is observed that users of the very popular social platform, Tik Tok, furiously commented about a particular trending reality TV show in Malaysia. On this program, 50 celebrity judges insensitively and purposely violated the SOP by not wearing face masks nor face shields, while also breaching the social distancing rule of at least one meter as regulated by the Ministry of Health. This ignorance and carelessness triggered much outrage among Malaysians who then questioned the relevance of the SOP imposed on them. During this dispute, some compared the SOP breach with the limit imposed on the number of Muslims who are allowed to pray in a mosque, and the heavy-handed implementation of SOP enforced for Friday prayers.



Figure 16: Government Clarifying Inconsistency in the Standard Procedures
(Source: Tharanya Arumugam, 2020)

"The rakyat are confused, to say the least, by the seeming contradictions, leading to much social media speculation as to the reasons why. SOP must be clear and precise to avoid another kind of CMCO."

(Tharanya Arumugam, 2020)

Several arguments and grievances were articulated by Malaysians on the inconsistency, vagueness, ambiguity, and in fact the rationality of the SOP, and why the implementation and duration this rule was not consistent or arbitrary. Once the SOP was implemented, it became imperative for the government and MKN to ensure that all directives concerning it were clear and precise, to avoid public confusion, uncertainty, and speculations that were being disseminated on social media. It is crucial for the government to be serious and consistent in implementing regular SOP, but also use to common sense for the benefit of Malaysians, and ensure the economy functions as normally as it can during the pandemic.

5. Question of fairness in terms of penalties



Figure 17: Claims made about Fairness and Unequal Penalties
(Source: Free Malaysia Today, 2021)

It emerged that several public figures, celebrities and social media influencers aroused controversy by violating the SOP that was supposed to be enforced by the authorities without fear or favor. It made the Malaysian people angry with how the government treated those people who deliberately breached the SOP without feeling any responsibility or sense of guilt. The public also expressed their anger on how punishments inflicted on figures in the public spotlight were much lighter compared to ordinary citizens who disobeyed the SOP. Furthermore the punishments or penalties were greatly debated by Malaysians, netizens and opposition leaders. The standard of procedures (SOP) should be imposed equally on all Malaysians no matter their political background or status. In terms of punishments meted out to people, the government has been accused of giving special treatment or using double standards for certain politicians, VIPs, celebrities, public figures and social media influencers.

Not surprisingly, this fuelled a lot of prejudice in the wider community about discrimination and only encouraged Malaysians to not trust their own government.



Figure 18: Government Clarifying the issue of Fairness and Unequal Penalties
(Source: The Malaysian Reserve, 2022)

“The Ministry of Health has issued a compound. What is important is that the government is being fair. Whoever breaches Covid-19 protocols will be compounded. If everyone had to resign from receiving such fines, then no one would be available for work.”

(The Malaysian Reserve, 2022)

“Government officers, many government employees have been compounded, so do they all have to resign? There is no need. The important thing is that action is taken, which means that the government does not differentiate between individuals who commit offences, it can be a minister, deputy minister, head of department ... it can be anyone.”

(The Malaysian Reserve, 2022)

Responding to the issue and comments highlighted by disgruntled Malaysians, the government stated that it did not differentiate between individuals or provide any special privilege to those people who commit any offence or violate the SOP. The Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, added that individuals of high status are not different from ordinary citizens in terms of fines, penalties, punishments that are meted out. As a matter of fact, he stated that anyone who violates the SOP would face arrest, including government cabinet ministers and others, no matter who they are.

Conclusion

The spread of hoax news has resulted in harmful outcomes leading to misinformation that has, and can, cause public distress, confusion, and unnecessary panic. The Ministry of Health in Malaysia has not only had to deal with the challenges posed by the COVID-19, but also the

spread of fake or false information by inattentive users. The effects of fake news on a society if it is not controlled or monitored are made evident by what is happening in Malaysia. Malaysian society is now vulnerable to and naively trusting of rapid advances in technology, but people need to take care in verifying information and checking the facts that are sent online to them before sharing it with others. Carelessness here could lead to long-term mental health problems and issues in perceiving how the real world works.

Consequently, the implementation of standard procedures and stringent regulations must be taken seriously to curb the spread of fake news. Therefore, the Ministry of Health in Malaysia has to not only control the circulation of fake news, but also overcome the issue of widespread communications disorder once and for all. It is hoped that the government, policymakers, and Ministry of Communication and Multimedia Commission will work well together to punish online spreaders of hoax news. Hence, this study will aid them in addressing the necessary interventions to control the dissemination of fake news and overcome misinformation issues.

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