

Exploring Trust, COVID-19 Management and Leadership in Government Amidst the Pandemic: A Case Study in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a period of unprecedented uncertainty, marked by swift changes in government leadership and varying reactions among the citizens of Malaysia. This study sought to address the resulting challenges. The central problem was the volatile nature of public sentiment during the pandemic, stemming from sudden shifts in government leadership and mixed reactions from the Malaysian populace. The primary objective of this research was to gauge the level of confidence that the public had in the ruling government during the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate any existing relationships between public acceptance and confidence levels. The study collected 190 valid responses through an online survey conducted in Kuching city, utilizing convenience sampling. The results revealed a noteworthy, positive, strong, and statistically significant relationship between public perception and the level of confidence in the ruling government. Notably, leadership emerged as the most influential factor in shaping public perception and confidence levels. This finding underscores the importance of leadership in determining the public's confidence in the government during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the intricate dynamics of public perception and confidence during the pandemic, emphasizing the pivotal role played by leadership. It offers valuable insights for policymakers

and government authorities, providing an opportunity to strengthen public trust and support during times of crisis.

Keywords: Trust, Covid-19 Management, Leadership, Confidence Level

Introduction

In an unprecedented turn of events in Malaysian political history, a change of government occurred without the necessity of a general election. This abrupt shift in political alliances, involving several Members of Parliament, led to the formation of a new government, taking the reins of power. This unique and unexpected development elicited a diverse range of reactions from the Malaysian population. Following the establishment of the new government, known as Perikatan Nasional (PN), a total of 27 civil society associations voiced their condemnation of what they termed a "backdoor" government (The Star, 2020). Among these organizations, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Election, commonly referred to as BERSIH, was particularly vocal in expressing its opposition to any government formed through such means, especially one that assumed power midway through a term and did not align with the mandate originally given to the Pakatan Harapan coalition (The Star, 2020). In an official statement, Thomas Fann, the chairman of the Coalition For Clean and Fair Election (Bersih), strongly criticized the formation of the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government. Fann (2020) asserted that this development was undemocratic and represented a betrayal of the people's trust in the government they had elected. He emphasized that Muhyiddin Yassin should not hold the position of Prime Minister, as his support came from political leaders who had been rejected by voters in the previous General Election, namely UMNO and PAS.

Additionally, Fann (2020) pointed out the controversial aspect of PN's formation, with several of its members facing corruption charges, further tarnishing the coalition's image. In response to Muhyiddin's impending swearing-in as Prime Minister, some Malaysians took to social media platforms, using hashtags like #NotMyPM on Twitter to express their dissent. A small group of individuals also engaged in public protests in Kuala Lumpur, voicing their disagreement with the way the coalition assumed power. Notably, the legitimacy of the PN government had not yet been challenged in the Malaysian parliament. Adding to the discontent, Malaysia suspended parliamentary activities for the first time in history due to the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing criticism from various political leaders and the public. Surprisingly, the incumbent Prime Minister and his cabinet resigned after just 17 months in power, marking a historic event on August 16, 2020. In light of these unprecedented political developments and public dissatisfaction, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of the public in a selected region regarding the governance of the Perikatan Nasional coalition. Despite protests either from individuals or from the civil society association, however, it does not picture the whole Malaysian opinions.

The following research questions (RQs) are listed to understand better about the public perception towards PN:

- RQ1: What is the confidence level of the current ruling government?
- RQ2: What are the factors that influence the confidence level?
- RQ3: Is there a relationship between public perception and confidence level?

Several objectives need to be highlighted as part of the completion of the paper. The specific research objectives (ROs) are stated below:

- RO1: To determine the confidence level of the current ruling government.

RO2: To determine the factors influencing the confidence level towards the ruling government.

RO3: To determine the relationship between public perception and confidence level.

Literature Review

This section discusses the three (3) dimensions of public perception which are Trust, COVID-19 management, and leadership as well as the confidence level towards the ruling government.

Trust

Baier (1986), stated that trust involves the conviction that, to the extent possible, others will care for our interests, and that they will not take advantage of or damage us. Trust therefore implies personal vulnerability induced by ambiguity about others' future actions, we cannot be sure, but we assume that they will be benign or at least not malignant and act accordingly in a way that may put us at risk. In this context, this paper reflects on how situations that arose during the pandemic, from March 2020, affected trust, based on news and information distributed through the media; the news and information were chosen based on decisions that had the greatest impact in terms of media coverage and presence on social networks around the world. Similarly, this paper reflects on the various lessons and consequences that the situation, as experienced through the social context, generated in terms of trust.

Trust is critical during times of crisis, and as such, it has long been the subject of academic debate. Social, economic, political, and health crises have created specialized conditions for investigating and comprehending complicated trust difficulties. Trust is a view that assists individuals in mitigating such uncertainty and danger by assuring them that others will act in predictable ways (Mayer and Davis, 1999). In its most basic form, trust is described "the positive features of an individual's (the trustor's) expectations for how another party (the trustee) might act in situations of uncertainty, risk, or vulnerability" (Evans, 2020, p. 1; Jackson et al., 2022). In general, and in the specific context of health crises, trust studies have become more common—especially in the past two decades (Siegrist, 2019). Devine et al. (2020), reviewed trust studies (especially political trust) undertaken during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Few researchers have related the concept of communication with trust; Flew (2021) noted that they "lack a comprehensive and systematic account of how trust has been understood across the diverse field of communication." In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, studies show that traditional determinants of political trust have less explanatory power when compared to context-specific factors such as the implementation of lockdown measures, the number of infections, and personal experience with the disease (Schraff, 2020). An early review of the literature on trust during the COVID-19 crisis (Devine et al., 2021) revealed contradictory findings on the fluctuation of trust, with some studies demonstrating an increase in trust, while others found evidence for the opposite. Factors that are positively correlated with trust include the implementation of lockdown measures (Bol et al., accepted; De Vries et al., 2020) and a rising number of infections Schraff (2020). Personal experience with the disease is not related to trust.

Covid-19 Management

COVID-19 refers to a novel pneumonia disease originating in Wuhan, China (WHO). The whole country is affected by this virus including Malaysia. The first recorded case of COVID-19 occurred in December 2019 in Wuhan, located in the Huabei District of China. The World

Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) officially classified the epidemic as a global public health emergency on January 30, 2020. Further, the proclamation of COVID-19 as a pandemic was officially declared on March 11, 2020 (Said et al., 2022). Pung et al., (2020) stated that the first reported cases of Covid-19 in Malaysia took place on January 25, 2020. Three Chinese individuals, who had recently arrived from Singapore, were officially diagnosed with the virus. Moreover, the abrupt surge in incidents in the latter half of February 2020 can be largely attributed to a substantial gathering or assembly that took place during a religious celebration. The increase in the number of cases following March 14th can be attributed to a religious gathering known as The Sri Petaling Tabligh cluster (Hashim et al., 2021) held in Kuala Lumpur from February 27th to March 1st (Tang, 2020). Additionally, Tang (2020) and Khor et al., (2020) also asserted that this surge also resulted in a substantial increase in the number of active Covid-19 cases, directly affecting the healthcare capacity of the country.

According to Khor et al., (2020), several nations have chosen to implement stringent lockdown measures as a means of curbing virus transmission and reducing the fatality rate. Malaysia swiftly enforced a Movement Control or Restriction Order in response to the rapid escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, positioning it as one of the first countries in the Southeast Asia region to take such action. Consequently, the prime minister of Malaysia announced the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 16, 2020. The Movement Control Order (MCO) is a strategic and calculated measure implemented to curb the spread of Covid-19 by imposing restrictions on public movement, while still permitting the operation of essential services. (Said et al., 2021). As a result, after the implementation of the first Movement Control Order (MCO), there was a continuous and gradual increase in the daily number of COVID-19 infections, consistently surpassing 100 cases per day between March 15th and April 14th. Tang (2020) documented that on March 26th, there were 235 cases recorded, representing the peak in the number of infections.

The government implemented the Movement Control Order by enforcing travel limitations, quarantine measures, and other interventions such as contact tracing, medical examinations, and disseminating information via the media. Higher learning institutions and non-essential facilities were shut down to mitigate the transmission of Covid-19.

Federal Constitution

Article 9 of the Federal Constitution guarantees the freedom of movement for all citizens, although this right is not unrestricted since it entails several restrictions. The limitation by Article 9(2) exists to protect the public's interests regarding security, public safety, and health. Therefore, the epidemic of the coronavirus is classified under this constraint. (Abd Kadir et al., (2020), Masum et al., (2021), Said et al., (2021), Said et al., (2022).

To curb the transmission of the virus, the governing body has chosen to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) as a measure, per Article 9(2) of the Federal Constitution. Article 9 of the Federal Constitution states that:

Prohibition of banishment and freedom of movement

9. (1) No citizen shall be banished or excluded from the Federation.
- (2) Subject to Clause (3) and any law relating to the security of the Federation or any part thereof, public order, public health, or the punishment of offenders, every citizen has the right to move freely throughout the Federation and to reside in any part thereof.
- (3) So long as under this Constitution any other State is in a special position as compared with the States of Malaya, Parliament may by law impose

restrictions, as between that State and other States, on the rights conferred by Clause (2) in respect of movement and residence.

As such, under Article 9(2) of the Federal Constitution, the government has the power to impose Movement Control Orders on Malaysian nationals, as stated in Article 9 of the Constitution. This article specifically deals with matters related to the freedom of movement of individuals globally. Nonetheless, the right is not unchangeable; limitations can be enforced when public safety or health preservation is in jeopardy.

Effective management of the Covid-19 crisis contributes to the public's level of confidence in the government's performance. When the ruling government imposes such restrictions, there are many mixed effects and perceptions from the public. Some even classified the imposition of MCO as "the draconian law" (Smith, 2021) which affected the business activities and slowed the business activities. Nonetheless, in another aspect of the effect of MCO on the environment, research conducted by Abu and Kassim in 2021 revealed that air pollution as well as river pollution decreased tremendously due to the imposition of MCO.

Leadership

The concept of servant leadership by Greenleaf become more popular in recent trends (Sendjaya & Saros, 2002). Greenleaf believes that being the one who serves first, and the act could inspire others to do the same way. A survey carried out by Qgenanalyst on Analisa Persepsi Kepimpinan Semasa Kawasan Bandar Majoriti Melayu reported that 82% were satisfied with the PN performance. The percentages were split into 3 categories: 34.83% refers to the welfare of the people, and 21.69% prioritizes the economy of the country. Lastly, 19.06% is on practicing good governance. By looking at the highest percentage, which is welfare, the outcome indicates that PN's leadership is viewed as aligned with Greenleaf's philosophy. This shows that the PN leadership has a strong desire to serve the community. To heighten this situation, it is supported by Schaubroeck et al., 2011 stated that "servant leaders focus on the welfare of others" (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

During the outbreak, Malaysia's economic impacts and prospects of recovery are always a concern among its leaders. Suspension of operations among foreign investors, ban on entry of tourists, decrease in numbers of goods, and supplies subsequently impaired business performance and wealth creation (The Straits Times, 2020). During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the government under PN's leadership reportedly spent RM600 billion to combat the pandemic within a short period (Mohamad, 2021). The economic recovery under PN leadership would consume some time as Malaysia struggles to redevelop its economic fundamentals. Regarding welfare, it can be concluded that the government provides a range of programs to support financial aid to certain individuals as well as groups. The source of income to countries worldwide is taken into consideration where the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry is the focus to boost economies post-COVID-19 (Chuai et al. 2021).

In Malaysia alone, the AEC industry struggles to maintain operation and policymakers are developing government-level pandemic response strategies (GPRS) to reduce the impact of COVID-19 (Pathirana, 2020). Through this initiative, Malaysian leaders were able to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to ensure sustainability in the economy by avoiding potential domino effects in the local economy which resulted in economic recession. In other words, the Malaysian government responded to the economic crisis by introducing a variety

of stimulus measures, such as tax breaks and subsidies for businesses (Hashim et al., 2021). Another critical decision made by top leaders during the crisis is the announcement of the PRIHATIN Economic Stimulus Package (ESP) which was intended to reduce the impact of this pandemic and to provide urgent assistance while reducing the burden on its citizens. In practicing good governance, Malaysia in general took a range of initiatives to curb the spread of COVID-19 from January 2020 through the implementation of MCO. Such enforcement helps the country to minimize active cases on which the government acknowledges the success is due to public compliance and collaboration. As a result, government intervention to contain Covid-19 has been proven effective (Tang, 2020).

Despite such improvement, Malaysians believed that the Emergency Proclamation indirectly assisted the prime minister in escaping imminent leadership challenges (Mohamad, 2021). It was circulated on which the government, referring to the cabinet and the Prime Minister, Muhyiddin, could introduce laws without the consent and approval of parliament. Tun Dr. Mahathir in his blog and X account, concluded the move as a form of violation of democracy. During the pandemic, Malaysia's democracy was unstable. As a result, two changes of administration under COVID-19 and the declaration of emergency (Ismail et al., 2021). To expand, the Malaysian democracy and its leadership at that time seemed to be non-functional soon after the power shift was taken in 2020 until Muhyiddin quit then Yang Di-Pertuan Agong declared an emergency throughout Malaysia.

In addition, cooperation between all parties, heads of departments, and ministries is needed to establish regular communication and discussions and not to work alone during this time of crisis. The leaders of Malaysia prove to have different views on how to construct approaches and measures in dealing with the threat to national health security. Before the pandemic, the government and health authorities took great steps to bolster Malaysia's capacity for health emergency and disaster preparedness, all of which played a crucial role in responding to COVID-19. Among these steps was the implementation of the MySED II and the establishment of the Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC). Furthermore, public leaders in Malaysia have also created systematic streams of information and communication with the public through various means. Constant daily interaction between the government and its people to deliver the latest statistical updates and the do's and don'ts during MCO via Short Messaging Service (SMS) reminders from the Malaysian National Security Council, daily press conferences, and social media posts had proven to maintain a successful execution of legislative measures (Ganasegeran et al., 2020).

Confidence Level

Confidence, as defined by scholars like Luhmann (1998) and Giddens (1996), denotes the inherent expectation that familiar elements will maintain their stability over time. In the context of this study, "level of confidence" pertains to public acceptance. It's worth noting that the terms "acceptability" and "acceptance" are typically considered passive evaluations, reflecting attitudes rather than active behavioral responses, as pointed out by Batel, Devine-Wright, and Tangeland (2013) and Schade and Schlag (2003). In essence, these terms signify a general inclination to embrace something but not necessarily an indication of active support. To sum up, "acceptability" and "acceptance" encompass a general willingness to embrace an idea or concept, without necessarily implying active support. On the other hand, "public acceptance" (PA), as described by Cohen, Reichl, & Schmidthaler (2014) and Kraeusel & Möst (2012), encompasses a positive attitude toward a specific matter at a particular point in time. This includes elements of encouragement, affirmation, and endorsement, suggesting

a more active and engaged stance toward the subject matter. Confidence in one's abilities generally enhances motivation, making it a valuable asset for individuals with imperfect willpower. The fact that higher self-confidence enhances the individual's motivation gives anyone with a vested interest in his performance an incentive to build up and maintain his self-esteem (Bénabou and Tirole, 2000). According to Smith & Petty (2006), individuals with high self-esteem are more confident about their abilities and the accomplishment of their efforts as well as having more resources to buffer them against adverse events. Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem experience greater negative affect, tend to generalize negative feedback in one area to other parts of their identity and have a low desire to try new things or to change.

Ellis (2005) viewed the strengthening of an individual's self-acceptance beliefs as the cornerstone of psychological well-being. Developing unconditional self-acceptance leads individuals with psychological health problems to accept themselves as fallible human beings who sometimes make mistakes. In a study conducted by Leary et al., (2015), specific instances of acceptance or rejection cause acute changes in one's state of self-esteem, and over time, social experiences of acceptance or rejection cause one to have chronically high, or low, global self-esteem. Moreover, Newton (2009) mentioned that there may be a significant indirect relationship between social trust and confidence in political institutions. If social trust helps build social capital and social capital, in turn, helps strengthen political institutions, then governmental performance may improve, inspiring citizens' confidence. Conversely, if social trust declines and stores of social capital diminish, then political institutions will perform less well, governmental performance will suffer, and citizens' confidence in government will fall. Although effective political institutions do not guarantee good governmental performance, they can help. It is possible to imagine a government performing unsatisfactorily despite good institutions; it is difficult to imagine a satisfactory governmental performance without effective institutions for making and implementing policies.

Conceptual Framework

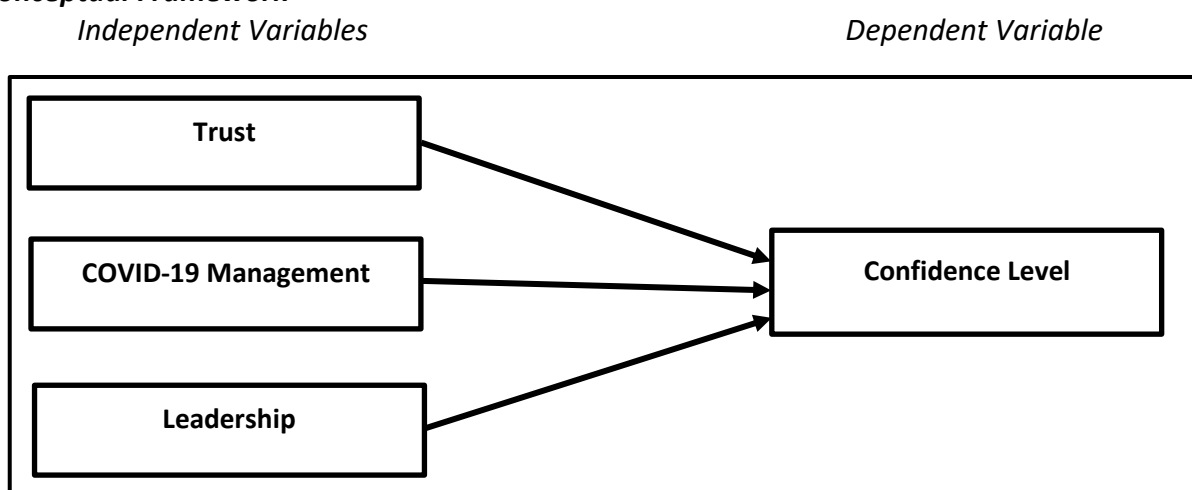


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework between independent variables and dependent variables. The independent variables for this study were trust, COVID-19 management, and leadership while the dependent variable was confidence level.

Materials and Methods

The focus of this study was to seek the public perception and confidence level towards the PN's administration. The communities that were selected as respondents were the citizens who stayed in the Kuching district. The survey was conducted from November 2021 until January 2022. Convenience sampling was employed due to limitations during the pandemic. A total of 190 respondents were collected. A validated administered questionnaire was transformed into Google Forms to ease the data collection process. The questionnaire was adapted from various sources. The questionnaire consisted of five sections which were demographics profiles (Section A), an assessment of public perceptions which were trust, COVID-19 management, and leadership (Section B), and an assessment of confidence level (Section C). All assessments were using the Likert scale between 1 to 5, with which e.g.: 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree. Table 1 displays the items requested for each variable as well as their sources.

Table 1
Questionnaire Items in Section B (Public Acceptance)

No	Items/Statements	Source
Trust	The government looks after my interest. The government does not take advantage of the citizens. The government acts to protect the citizens. The government is trustworthy. The government policies are communicated to the citizens.	Adapted from Grimmelikh uijzen & Meijer (2014)
COVID-19 Management	The government manages the COVID-19 pandemic effectively. The government has been helpful to those in need. The government manages the economy successfully during the pandemic. The government allocates the country's resources fairly during the pandemic. The government comes out with a good vaccination program.	Adapted from Conway III, Woodard, and Zubrod (2020)
Leadership	The government goes beyond self-interest for the good of the country. The government considers the moral and ethical consequences of decisions. The government talks optimistically about the future. The government reexamines critical assumptions to question whether they are appropriate. The government helps others to develop their strength.	Adapted from Bass and Avolio (1996)
Confidence Level	The government improves the quality of life of its people. The government maintains a harmonious relationship among the citizens. The government has my support. Overall, I am confident with this government.	Adapted from Tolbert and Mossberger (2006)

Results

Demographic Profile

Table 2 presents the demographic composition of the survey respondents, totaling 190 individuals. Among these participants, the majority were female, accounting for 101 respondents, constituting 53.2% of the total sample. In terms of age distribution, the most prominent age group among the respondents was between 18-28 years old, with 77 individuals, representing 40.5% of the sample. Following closely were respondents aged 40 years and above, totaling 70 individuals, or 36.8%. The 29-39 years old age group comprised 43 respondents, making up 22.6% of the sample. Regarding ethnic or racial background, the highest representation came from the Iban community, with 78 respondents, making up 41.1% of the sample. The Bidayuh community was the next largest group, with 43 respondents, accounting for 22.6%. Malays constituted 34 respondents, or 17.9%, while the Chinese ethnicity was represented by 6 respondents, accounting for 3.2%. The Kenyah community had 5 respondents (2.6%), and the remaining respondents belonged to various other ethnic groups, such as Melanau, Dusun, Kedayan, etc., with a total of 22 individuals, making up 11.6%. Regarding occupation, the majority of respondents were employed in the public sector, with 72 individuals, representing 37.9% of the sample. The unemployed group accounted for 53 respondents, or 27.9%, while those from the private sector constituted 52 respondents, making up 27.4%. The self-employed group had the smallest representation, with only 13 individuals, or 6.8% of the sample. Lastly, among the respondents, 130 individuals, or 68.4%, were identified as registered voters, while the remaining 60 respondents were categorized as non-registered voters.

Table 2

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Profile		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	89	46.8
	Female	101	53.2
Age	18-28	77	40.5
	29-39	43	22.6
	40 and above	70	36.8
Race	Malay	34	17.9
	Chinese	6	3.2
	Bidayuh	43	22.6
	Iban	78	41.1
	Kenyah	5	2.6
	Kelabit	2	1.1
	Others	22	11.6
Occupation	Public Sector	72	37.9
	Private Sector	52	27.4
	Self-employed	13	6.8
	Unemployed	53	27.9
Voter's Status	Registered	130	68.4
	Not Registered	60	31.6

Descriptive Statistics

Reliability

Table 3 reported the reliability test results for all variables. The result shows that Cronbach's Alpha for trust is 0.907, followed by COVID-19 management at 0.885, leadership at 0.914, and the last is level of confidence at 0.923. This suggested all items measuring all variables were reliable and had good internal consistencies.

Table 3

Reliability Test Result (n=190)

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
<i>Independent Variables</i>		
Trust	5	.907
COVID-19 Management	5	.885
Leadership	5	.914
<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
Confidence Level	4	.923

The first research objective for this study was "to determine the confidence level of the current ruling government". To achieve this, the mean scores for all items of the dependent variable were calculated and demonstrated in Table 4. Scores were separated into three ranges. Which high ranges scores (3.68-5.0), average scores (2.34-3.67), and the low scores (1.0-2.33). All mean scores for all items in confidence level fell on the average score suggesting that the respondents have mixed answers to the items and showed slight acceptance towards the current government.

Table 4

Mean and Standard Deviation for confidence level towards the government (n=190)

Items/Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
The government improves the quality of life of its people	3.1105	1.0951
The government maintains harmonious relationships among citizen	3.3947	1.1207
The government has my support	3.1789	1.2083
Overall, I am confident with this government	3.0156	1.1840
Confidence Level	3.1750	1.0386

The second research objective was "to determine the factors of public perception towards the current ruling government". To achieve this, the mean score for all independent variable (public perception) were calculated. Covid-19 Management was leading the highest scores (M=3.5505, SD=0.87037). Leadership scored at (M=3.1011, SD=0.93667). Meanwhile, the lowest score was Trust which attained (M=3.0979, SD=0.9346). Since all mean scores fell under a good level of satisfaction it can be accepted that trust, COVID-19 Management, and Leadership are the construct of public perception and factors of confidence level. Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviation for public perception.

Table 5

Mean and Standard Deviation for Public Perception (n=190)

Items/Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Trust	3.0979	.9346
COVID-19 Management	3.5505	.8703
Leadership	3.1011	.9366

The third research objective was “to determine the relationship between public perception and confidence level”. Below is the measurement used to interpret the r-value as suggested by Sekaran and Bougie (2019).

Relationship significant if p-value<0.05

- 0 – 0.3 (weak)
- 0.3 – 0.5 (Moderate)
- 0.5 – 0.7 (strong)
- 0.7 -1 (very strong)

Table 6 reported the result of the relationship analysis of the correlation coefficient between Public Perception and Level of Confidence. Based on the data, all variables of Public Perception were strongly and positively correlated with confidence level ($r=.906^{**}$, $p<.01$). Among the variables of public perception, leadership has the strongest correlation with confidence level ($r=.883^{**}$, $p<.01$), followed by trust ($r=.857^{**}$, $p<.01$) and COVID-19 management ($r=.787^{**}$, $p<.01$).

Table 6

Relationship between Public Perception and Confidence Level

Variables	Public Perceptio n	Trust	COVID-19 Management	Leadership	Confidenc e Level
Public Perception	1				
Trust	.810 ^{**}	1			
COVID-19 Management	.822 ^{**}	.759 ^{**}	1		
Leadership	.794 ^{**}	.818 ^{**}	.820 ^{**}	1	
Confidence Level	.906 ^{**}	.857 ^{**}	.787 ^{**}	.883 ^{**}	1

^{**}Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Discussions

The mean score for confidence level was just average suggesting a relatively balanced or neutral overall perception of the government’s performance during the COVID-19 pandemic among the respondents in the study. The government's actions and policies during the pandemic were perceived as consistent and neither exceptionally positive nor negative by the respondents. This could imply that the government's response was seen as moderate and in line with expectations. Besides, positive and negative aspects of the government's response might have balanced each other out in the eyes of the respondents. For example, there could have been areas where the government excelled and others where it faced criticism, resulting in an overall moderate perception. On the other hand, respondents may not have had strong opinions about the government's performance due to limited information or awareness of its

actions during the pandemic. This could result in a more neutral or average perception. The results indicating strong positive correlations among the factors of public perception suggest that these factors are closely related and tend to move together. In other words, when individuals have a positive perception of one aspect (e.g., trust in the government), they are likely to have a positive perception of other aspects (e.g., COVID-19 management and leadership). This finding suggests a holistic view of public perception during the COVID-19 pandemic, where different aspects are interconnected. The most significant finding is the positive, strong, and significant relationship between public perception and confidence levels. This means that as public perception becomes more positive (e.g., higher levels of trust, satisfaction with COVID-19 management, and confidence in leadership), the level of confidence in the government also increases significantly.

The finding that all mean scores for trust, COVID-19 management, and leadership fell under a "good level satisfactory" could be due to several reasons such as the government may have effectively communicated its strategies and actions related to COVID-19 management, instilling trust and confidence among the public. Clear and transparent communication from leadership can positively impact public perception (Yuen et al., 2019). The adoption of transparent communication demonstrates public leaders' genuine interest in maintaining or enhancing relationships with the public. Apart from that, communication scholars have found that transparent communication induces public trust and increases perceived leadership reputation. Respondents may have perceived that the government demonstrated competence in managing the COVID-19 crisis. Effective crisis management can enhance public trust and confidence in leadership. The public's trust in government is crucial to their perceptions of social risks. The public's trust in the central government was significantly correlated with what has been perceived as public emergencies and public health threats, as well as how well the government handles both categories of said crisis (Ma & Christensen, 2018). The effectiveness of government policies requires cooperation founded on public trust, which can best be secured by timely, transparent, and truthful government messaging (Liu et al., 2021). If the government's actions during the pandemic resulted in measurable and positive outcomes, such as low infection rates, efficient vaccination campaigns, or economic support for affected individuals, this could contribute to higher trust and confidence levels. The same study reveals social behaviors worthy of note, confirming a tendency for people in some countries to rebel against lockdowns. Based on the data collected at the outset of the pandemic, provide an early indication that leaders face an arduous task in securing compliance with onerous government regulations for an indefinite period.

A country's legal and governance systems shape its institutions, progressively modified by developments in the political, social, and cultural ethos, whose characteristics ultimately determine the effectiveness of a government's responses to the pandemic, and success in securing public trust. These findings provide politicians, regulators, public organizations, corporate leaders, charitable organizations, and communities with valuable and timely advice on how best to manage pandemics and their economic aftermath. To overcome the global nature of the crisis and stimulate economic recovery, nations must work together openly and honestly, with politicians evincing unprecedented levels of fiduciary and mutual trust (Liu et al., 2021). Leadership stability during a crisis can be reassuring to the public. The true test of leadership is how the government functions in a crisis (Yuen et al., 2021)). Investment in public health, such as through the establishment of independent or government-managed national centers of public health or disease control, infectious disease physicians, and disease

outbreak response systems, provides a critical mass of available expertise. Infrastructure investment in isolation facilities, additional bed capacity, equipment, personal protective equipment, and therapeutics provide needed resources for the response (Peeri et al., 2020). Crises require leaders to take responsibility and do this visibly. By being visible and responsible, they are showing accountability and sharing risks with their followers, an important sign of solidarity with the many health workers and others who face personal risks during the pandemic. By being responsible, they show and model personal vulnerability. Taking responsibility also means that leaders exhibit constancy and resilience, that they are in this for the long haul and can be relied on to continue to persevere on behalf of their followers (Oliver, D. 2020). If the government provided consistent and steady leadership throughout the pandemic, this could positively influence perceptions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This result highlights the crucial role of public perception in shaping confidence levels. Governments should take note of these findings, as they underscore the importance of public perception in maintaining and building confidence among the population. Effective communication, transparency, and policy decisions that align with public expectations can positively influence how the public perceives the government's performance during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings also emphasize the importance of effective governance, communication, and policy decisions in maintaining and building trust and confidence among the population during times of crisis. Given the strong correlations and the significant relationship between public perception and confidence levels, policymakers should prioritize strategies that enhance public trust, improve COVID-19 management efforts, and demonstrate strong leadership. Public engagement, clear and transparent communication, and responsive policy measures can all contribute to improving these key aspects of public perception and, consequently, public confidence in the government. In summary, the findings suggested that public perception factors are interconnected and that they play a pivotal role in determining the level of public confidence in the government during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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