

## Fake News During Covid19 In Malaysia: How Ministry Of Health Encounter Fake News Contagion In Facebook Context

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 epidemic has become a serious public health concern on a global scale. Malaysians spend an average of eight hours and five minutes each day surfing the internet, as opposed to watching television. In the middle of this, there has been a concealed information pandemic that distinguishes COVID-19 as a digital infodemic with an abundance of false information, rumours, and conspiracy theories. The convenience and accessibility of information sharing on social media has resulted in more misleading information being circulated faster, leading to the propagation of fake news that can damage reputations and lead to social media misjudgements. Stress, anxiety and confusion have been caused by the COVID-19's thorough and repeated content, geographical data and information sources.

Because of the anti-vaccine community refuses to acknowledge the facts, the number of Malaysians who are expected to have vaccinations is declining. Their interference merely keeps the government from accomplishing the herd community goal. Due to this, the Malaysian Ministry of Health has faced difficulties in dealing with the spread of misleading news on Facebook since March 2020, despite political tensions and a change of the government. The purpose of this study is to describe many kinds of false information that was spread during COVID-19 and to assess how effectively the ministry has dealt with it. By using qualitative method, thematic analysis applied to the social media platform which is Facebook which were identified based on the pages hits on posted headings, pictures, figures and news. The results indicate that there was widespread dissemination of false information on COVID-19, vaccinations, extremist viewpoints, and uncertainty about health measures in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Fake News, Misinformation, Facebook, Malaysia's Ministry of Health

### **Introduction**

There have been significant developments and rapid advances in technology in recent years, and most Malaysians choose to get their information from new media platforms rather than traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television news. According to Barua et al. (2020), innovative technologies are becoming more affordable and accessible. According to research from April 2019, the worldwide mobile population has surpassed four billion unique users, and as of February 2019, a total of 48% of web pages were seen using mobile devices globally, with Asia and Africa leading the way (Statista, 2022). As a result, many users prefer to spend most of their time online rather than in person.

Unfortunately, the spread of incorrect data operates as a contagion, adding to pre-existing risks by instilling doubt, worry, and skepticism in new vaccines. As a result of the anti-vaccine community's refusal to accept the reality, the percentage of Malaysians predicted to receive immunizations declines. Their disobedience simply prevents the government and Ministry of Health from reaching the goal of herd immunity, which is critical to ensuring society continues to function normally and does not prolong the epidemic (Salathé & Bonhoeffer, 2008).

In February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the COVID-19 pandemic report was based on erroneous data (World Health Organization, 2020). According to Colomina (2020), one of the key differences between COVID-19 and earlier epidemics is that most people are anxious about continually being fed fake news, which leads to distrust of the media. One of the reasons contributing to social media disinformation is a lack of objectivity when confronted with doubtful facts. As a result, if it is not regulated, it can lead to misunderstandings and public conflict. Nonetheless, Malaysians must be cautious and take care because material posted online does not always have legitimacy or clear sources. It is not like traditional media, where the information presented is first reviewed by an editor who assures the works' credibility.

### **Problem Statement**

Consumers are no strangers to new media these days. Its impact is significant, as a previous study discovered that consumers in Malaysia aged 30 and above use social media, particularly platforms, as a medium to communicate and acquire additional information, such as the latest news, which is broadcast faster online than on television and newspaper outlets (Hassim et al., 2019). According to data given by Hootsuite (2019), Malaysians spend an average of eight hours and five minutes each day surfing the internet, as opposed to watching television, etc. According to Tandoc et al. (2018), information sharing on social media has

become so convenient and accessible that society has become involved in the production of information and news, resulting in more misleading information being circulated faster. This is where the issue begins, as the propagation of fake news can damage reputations and lead to social media misjudgments. This has serious implications for human psychology, since it can lead to despair, altered emotions, and undesirable behaviors (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Authorities must not only deal with the spread of incorrect information, but also with the subsequent public disruption if it occurs. According to research that examined misinformation labelled false by independent fact-checkers, incorrect content was fiercely spread on social media (88%), consisting of numerous textual and visual reconfigurations (Brennen et al., 2020). The most frequently repeated accusation concerns government involvement in containing the COVID-19 outbreak, claiming that governments and health institutions have failed to ensure appropriate information is distributed in accordance with what society requires.

### **Fake News**

Yuxi Wang, Martin McKee, Aleksandra Torbica and David Stuckler denoted false information as “news articles that are intentionally written to mislead or misinform readers but can be verified as false by means of other sources”. Three primary fake news elements are identified: (i) its form as a news article, (ii) devious intent (satirical or malicious), and (iii) content validation as fully or partially false. Meanwhile, other scholars perceive fake news as false information encompassing intentionally or unintentionally distributed rumors, myths, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories (Wang et al., 2019).

The spread of fake news has become a social issue. As previously stated, obtaining a common meaning is one of the most difficult difficulties in recent writing. There are various reasons why defining this notion is challenging. First, it is an expression with a changing meaning because, prior to 2016, it only referred to satirical news, to entertain the audience through humor and satire (Balmas, 2014; Holbert, 2005), later acquiring different meanings, intentions, and productions that threaten journalism (Carlson, 2018; Waisbord, 2018) and democracy itself (McKay & Tenove, 2020). Second, the term "fake news" has become a buzzword (Tandoc et al., 2018; Habgood-Coote, 2019; Egelhofer et al., 2020), an empty word, commonly associated with something bad or just false (Farkas & Schou, 2018). Third, the phrase carries a political burden in the sense that it is frequently used in the discourse of political players, primarily to denigrate competing views or parties, as a form of weapon on the battlefield of contemporary political debate (Brummette et al., 2018), has been one of the main barriers to its definition, as well as a cause for other authors to doubt the concept's authenticity (Habgood-Coote, 2019).

Studies have found that the phrase is commonly employed as a linguistic element to support an argument by accusing and discrediting opposing political beliefs, in the sense of labeling opposition assertions (even if they are correct) as false. For instance, Farkas et al. (2018) found that the term is frequently used to accuse and discredit opposing political opinions. The term's value as a negative and offensive name not only of the work of the media or journalists, but also, for example, of a political leader, evolved away from the expected fake news genre of internet misinformation (Egelhofer, 2020). Molina et al. (2019) discovered seven types of online content associated with or characterised as fake news: false news, polarising content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism. Farkas and Schou (Farkas, 2018; Schou, 2018) discovered three contexts in which the term "fake news"

is used: to criticise digital capitalism, right-wing policies, and liberal and mainstream journalism.

### **Fake News In Malaysia**

Fake news first appeared prominently in Malaysian political discourse in early 2017. 'There are those who misuse social media and blogs to spread lies and propaganda, such as Malaysia is going bankrupt and is a failed state,' ex-Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak declared in March 2017, warning political opponents against 'false propaganda' that would jeopardise the country's economic progress (Murty, 2017). Over the next year, this effort persisted in fabricating fake news as a security danger to Malaysia. Najib argued that fake news poses an urgent threat and that Malaysia's government would not jeopardise Malaysia's sovereignty by allowing foreign groups to steer the course of the nation. He cited instances in which false news was used to meddle in a country's affairs (Yunus, 2018).

Within the Malaysian context, the Malaysian government's efforts to secure fake news eventually justified the passage of the broad-reaching Anti-Fake News Act in April 2018, which criminalized fake news and set a penalty of up to six years in prison. Several important occurrences earlier that year anticipated the Malaysian government's resolve to secure fake news and advance far-reaching legislation against and criminalizing the issue. In April 2017, Datuk Jailani Johari, Deputy Minister of Communications and Multimedia, announced that the existing law under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 could be used to prosecute WhatsApp group administrators, particularly if the content disseminated on the platform 'endangers national security' (BERNAMA, 2017). Muhyiddin Yassin, then Minister of Home Affairs and later Prime Minister, said in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in January 2020 that he would utilize various laws to combat misinformation on the internet (Chin, 2020). He specifically referred to Section 505(b) of the Penal Code and Sections 211(1) and 233(1)(a) of the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998.

Spreading fake news is against the law, and the culprit should face severe penalties. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) will investigate the propagation of fake news and will collaborate with the Royal Malaysian Police on the investigation (PDRM). Spreading fake news is a crime in Malaysia, according to Sections 211 and 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. Our leaders' solution to countering the spread of fake news emphasises collaboration across government entities. For example, the Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) is relentless in publishing info denying 'news' and baseless accusations spread by irresponsible people across all their social media outlets (Adlina et al., 2020). Daily, the MOH also releases the most recent statistics on the spread of coronavirus in Malaysia and around the world. Following that, the MOH released virus prevention videos and issued press comments from the ministry itself, ensuring that the public only received legitimate information.

### **Fake News During Covid-19**

Recent research on false information diffusion in the context of COVID-19 has attempted to demonstrate the social media misinformation link (Hou et al., 2020; Huynh, 2020). The rise of unverified information-sharing has had a negative impact on individual health (Pennycook et al., 2020), with the prevalence of erroneous COVID-19-related content in social media (Frenkel et al., 2020; Russonello, 2020). Most people's proclivity to seek valuable information online unavoidably leads to a wide range of fake news consumption and spread (Huynh, 2020). According to Pennycook et al. (2020), with the emergence of COVID-19, online fake

news suggesting preventive measures and specialised coping techniques has emerged. Similarly, Lampos et al. (2020) reported that the increase in unconfirmed COVID-19-related news has resulted in incorrect preventive actions, such as becoming treated by ingesting salty water, bleach, and oregano. Many others felt the Chinese government had purposefully sparked the virus outbreak.

Others believe the virus was created by the US government to threaten the Chinese government. The dissemination of such fake news promotes racial discrimination and jeopardizes public health and government efforts to combat it. According to Hou et al. (2020), digitally savvy people who obtain COVID-19 news are exposed to risky opinions. Similarly, Huynh (2020) found that Vietnamese citizens believe fake COVID-19 news to be more authentic than official news. Frenkel et al. (2020) reported in Taiwan that many social media posts on supposed COVID-19 infections were false. Furthermore, fake news stated that the virus afflicted Taiwan's President, while most Americans distributed false COVID-19-related material due to ambiguities in content appropriacy pre-sharing (Pennycook et al., 2020).

In Nigeria, social media has been flooded with false COVID-19 news (Alpert, 2020). According to Hassan (2020), incorrect information could be spread to enhance online followership. Within hours, a Tweet stating Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari had tested positive for COVID-19 received 3,300 likes and over 2,000 reshares (Hassan, 2020). Meanwhile, sensationalist annotations from so-called "health experts" have gone viral. Hassan (2020) cited the leak of an audio clip on WhatsApp by a supposed WHO employee who prophesied the death of 45 million Nigerians due to COVID-19 on March 23, 2020. Similarly, Sahu et al. (2020) revealed that some so-called Nigerian specialists recommended deceptive preventive measures, such as lounging in the sun and consistently engaging in intercourse, while others claimed Africans were immune to the viral outbreak (Lampos et al., 2020). The statements were unsupported by medical research, and they are still being circulated as falsehood by Nigerian and international social media users.

Despite its consequences for the viral pandemic, studies on the primary determinants of fake news remain underexplored, as previous COVID-19 research only included comments, commentary, laboratory experiments, and exploratory investigations. More research focused on understanding the virus (Sohrabi et al., 2020), documenting thorough virus-related reports (Sahu et al., 2020), and media coverage of the virus (Zhou et al., 2020; Lampos et al., 2020). Because unverified information distribution on COVID-19 has a negative influence on individual health, and many people follow unverified online preventative methods (Hou et al., 2020), it is judged vital to empirically investigate erroneous information-sharing on COVID-19. Scientific investigation on unverified information-sharing is typically limited due to the lack of a theoretical framework model to optimize one's knowledge of deliberate or unintentional misleading information distribution (Talwar et al., 2019).

### **Facebook As An Informational Gateway**

The internet has now become an essential component of our daily life. Social media platforms have practically replaced traditional information gathering techniques (Bondiella & Marcelloni 2019). Among the easily accessible social networking sites, Facebook has become an increasingly crucial tool for people engaging in a variety of communication behaviours, including asking information from their social network. Social networking websites, such as Facebook, are member-based Internet communities that enable users to publish profile information, such as usernames and images, and connect with others in novel ways, such as sending public or private online messages or uploading photos online (Pempek et al., 2009).

Currently, it is expected that 2.41 billion people will be monthly active Facebook users in the second quarter of 2019. With these figures, Facebook has surpassed Twitter as the most important social network in the world. In the third quarter of 2012, it was reported that the number of active Facebook members had surpassed one billion, making it the first social network to do so. In this sense, active users are individuals who have signed into Facebook during the last 30 days. Facebook announced that 2.7 billion users used at least one of its key products in the prior reported quarter (Clement, 2019).

Facebook has become an indispensable element of the lives of Internet users as an acceptable instrument for Internet communication. Facebook has become an integral part of people's daily lives. According to the research findings, 65% of Facebook users log in every day, and 85% log in at least once a week, indicating that Facebook is growing increasingly popular and one of the most important instruments for interpersonal contact (Tella, et al. 2013; Tella & Babatunde, 2017). According to Bhattacharjee (2001), system acceptance is a critical aspect in user adoption of the system. However, from a long-term perspective, whether the system is accepted is related to whether people "continue to use" that system. As a result, for Facebook, it is currently worth researching how users, particularly female undergraduates, continue to prefer Facebook as a platform for information sharing. People join online communities for the purpose of exchanging information, which is a crucial motivation (Ridings and Gefen 2004). Social networking services (for example, Facebook) enable their members to share many types of information, such as thoughts, images, and videos, with only a few clicks. Sharing information via electronic media, social network, or media is now trending as an information-sharing technique, as opposed to the traditional methods of conversation and document distribution by postage (Dahri & Yunus, 2018).

### **Theoretical Approach**

Two theories that have affected in this study are Social Contagion Theory and Media Ecology Theory. Social contagion is described as "the transmission of behaviors, attitudes, and emotions through crowds and other types of social aggregates from one member to another" in the American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary. The effects of people interacting with one another in daily life have long been understood intuitively, but Gustave Le Bon first stressed the scientific basis for social contagion in his well-known book "The crowd: A study of popular mind" (1895). In the idea of diffusion, Le Bon's social contagion theory focuses on the effects of social influence on people's perceptions, attitudes, and actions while attempting to explain the underlying causes of their adoption. Despite the fact that the terms "diffusion" and "adoption" are frequently used interchangeably in related studies, it defines diffusion as the process by which behavior spreads among entities via specific channels; adoption, on the other hand, is used to refer to a decision and subsequent implementation of acceptance or disapproval for a transformation through a sequence of stages (Kee, 2017). According to earlier research, people's actions, attitudes, and feelings will be influenced by others in social networks, which results in a phenomenon known as social contagion (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Levy & Nail, 1993). The social contagion theory proposes that an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are affected by the emotions displayed by people who belong to the same social media network (Levy & Nail, 1993). This theory was used to describe how and why a person may be influenced by groups in the social media network (Venkatesh et al., 2020).

According to the media ecology theory (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1979; Strate, 2004), we may comprehend this process by looking at how technology, communication, and media

interact with the human environment. Scholars of media ecology place a higher priority on "networks of interactions" (ecosystems) than "individual essences" and "processes" than "entities" (Stephens, 2014). This study looks at the network of relationships and procedures that help to create, spread, and validate false information. According to media ecology researchers, it is best to understand the intricate and dynamic linkages and processes that make up a media ecosystem (McLuhan et al., 1967) via the lens of the media environment's past (McLuhan, 1962).

There have been several past studies on media ecology, including ones that looked at public television's delivery of local news and how it affects media interactions with the people (Atika, 2020). Along with the media's development, the relationship between the public and the media in terms of information access can close the information gap. Information distribution is becoming more rapid, and instant messaging has a significant influence on society (Dessy Dwi Lestari, 2020). These two studies demonstrate the continued applicability of media ecology in the present day.

### **Conclusion**

False information distributed by fake news has had negative effects with the potential to alarm the public unnecessarily that cause stress and uncertainty. The COVID-19 has presented issues for the Malaysian Ministry of Health, but it has also had to cope with the spreading of incorrect information by irresponsible users. The current situation in Malaysia serves as a stark reminder of the consequences false news can have on a society if it is not managed or monitored. Although Malaysian society is now exposed to and blindly trusts in rapid technological advances, citizens should remain alert when checking information and reviewing the facts that are supplied to them online before spreading them with others. A lack of caution here might result in long-term mental health concerns as well as challenges understanding how the actual world functions.

In order to stop the dissemination of false information, standard operating procedures and strict rules must be thoroughly considered. Therefore, the Malaysian Ministry of Health must not only stop the transmission of false information, but also permanently resolve the problem of a pervasive communications disorder. In order to penalise those who promote fake news online, it is hoped that the government, decision-makers, and Ministry of Communication and Multimedia Commission would work well together. Therefore, this study will help them address the essential steps to stop the spread of false information and resolve the misinformation problems.

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