

## **Malaysians' Experience and Perception of COVID-19 Media Portrayal during the Movement Control Order (MCO) Phases**

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### **Abstract**

It is undeniable that social media is important in today's modern life. People from various backgrounds depend on social media for various purposes. It provides a platform for people around the world to communicate, share and disseminate news and information. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has sparked many discussions on social media and information has been shared among people around the world. Thus, social media is flooded with a mixture of genuine and fake news and information. This study aims to explore Malaysia's experience and perception of social media on COVID-19 related issues during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period via in-depth interviews conducted with seven informants. The findings show that social media is still a prominent choice among people for information on COVID-19 during the MCO period because of its flexibility, user-friendliness, and the availability of current information. Nevertheless, the informants still utilised the television for reasons such as cross-checking of facts and checking on the current updates on COVID-19 from the government.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Traditional Media, COVID-19, Movement Control Order (MCO), Experience, Perception

### **Introduction**

Social media is an important component of a modern lifestyle. The development of technology stimulates human connection around the world via various platforms of telecommunication devices. The emergence of various applications on smartphones such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, and other communication platforms bind people around the world together in the same cyberspace. The advancement of technology allows people around the world to be aware of current updates on the latest issues on disease outbreaks, human crises, geopolitics, and natural disasters. The social media platform is a space that allows people to update and post about the latest issues, which can trigger human attention and fright (Akram, 2017). Krishnasamy (2017) observed that the media environment changes the world based on the need for people to not only gain news and information, but to share and express their opinion on any issue at their convenience. Yet,

issues revolving social media are still ongoing, as concerns continue on the accuracy and credibility of facts and information made available on such platforms. Two perspectives underlie the changes in the media environment. One, involves the society wanting accountability, and second, involves individuals wanting a space on which to voice out their opinion and perspective regarding any issue. The spread of fake news and inaccurate news from various social media platforms have sparked a global phenomenon of disorder among human beings (Aymanns, 2017).

Indeed, social media continue to grapple with ongoing issues revolving around the lack of truth and accuracy, independence, fairness and impartiality, humanity, and accountability (Hamada, 2018). In the mass digital era, the issues on trust, bias, verification, and truth have been raised. In journalism, the essential element in publishing news is objectivity and impartiality, elements which have been largely ignored in a digital age (Sambrook, 2012).

On 27th January 2020, the Malaysian Health Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Dzulkefly announced the government's decision to suspend all immigration facilities to Chinese citizens arriving from Wuhan and Hubei. This decision was made after considering the latest situation of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia and globally.

The Malaysian government restricted tourist arrival from Wuhan since 23 January 2020. The Chinese government also imposed a lockdown on the city, which were identified as Ground Zero for COVID-19 (Malaysia, 2020). News and posts on COVID-19 from various social media platforms have sparked global reactions and speculation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a global phenomenon. On 30 January 2020, BBC NEWS reported that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency. WHO chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus explained that the main reason behind the declaration was due to COVID-19's spread worldwide (News, 2020). The news that COVID-19 had been declared as a public health emergency sparked international concern. For further safety, WHO does not recommend people to travel to and trade with other regions. It also provided a guideline for every country around the world to ensure health protection and to prevent the spread of the virus (Organization, 2020). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Health (MOH) announced standard guidelines in managing COVID-19. It selected 34 hospitals and screening centres in each state of the country, including Kuala Lumpur Hospital, Sungai Buloh Hospital, Tuanku Jaafar Hospital, Sultanah Aminah Hospital, Miri Hospital, and Tawau Hospital (Elengoe, 2020).

On 4 February 2020, Malaysia recorded its first COVID-19 case from a 41-year-old male who had arrived from Singapore. After displaying symptoms such as coughing and fever, the man was ordered to under go quarantine at Sungai Buloh Hospital (Elengoe, 2020). According to a report from Al-Jazeera, by 11 March 2020, the total death rate from COVID-19 worldwide was recorded at about 4,000 deaths, with more than 113,000 infections. On 7 January, Chinese officials announced that they have identified a new virus. The novel virus was named 2019-nCovid and this virus is identified as part of the Corona virus family. China recorded its first casualty from the virus on 11 January 2020 with the death of a 61-year-old man who had purchased goods from the seafood market. He had suffered a heart failure on 9 January.

Those infected with COVID-19 experience a host of symptoms that include difficulty in breathing, fever, impaired liver and kidney functions, kidney failure, severe cough, and pneumonia (Al-Jazeera, 2020). )n 27 January 2020, the Malaysian government decided to suspend the arrival of Chinese citizens from Wuhan and Hubei. According to the Malaysian Prime Minister's office, the decision was made after considering the latest situation on the COVID-19 outbreak in China. The Prime Minister's office also emphasised that the government is following WHO guidelines, and were seeking advice in managing the spread of the virus. The government decided to restrain immigration facilities into the country, including entry (facility without a visa), Visa on Arrival (VOA), e-visa, and manual visas to all China nationals arriving from Wuhan City and the Hubei province (Star, 2020).

This study aims to investigate public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19-related issues during the MCO period. During the pandemic outbreak, people are facing difficult consequences in numerous aspects of their lives. They are dependent on news from traditional and social media, and so this study also aims to observe the changing landscape and trend of people seeking information from social media alongside traditional media.

### **Research Aims**

Media play an important role in disseminating news and information, and it has become an important part of modern life. The evolution of technology changes the way information is being distributed, accessed and shared all around the world. With the invention of the Internet, particularly the Web 2.0, people no longer depend on newspapers, television, and the radio to get the latest information or news, as it is just a 'Google' away via their smartphones, tab or computers. Since the first handphone was created, the price of smartphones has become affordable, thus, more people have access to the Internet. According to data obtained from Leftronic, in 2019, 2.71 billion people around the world own a smartphone. Meanwhile, more than 5 million people own mobile devices (Milijic, 2019).

The Internet is a medium for people to connect for various purposes such as business, entertainment and social relations. However, this trend has impacted traditional media as they face a huge challenge to survive. The Edge Market reported that the rise of Internet has paved the way for faster, cheaper, and accessible digital media that earn high penetration, especially from the younger generation. The oldest newspaper in Malaysia, Utusan Malaysia (M) Bhd, was under financial stress because of the significant decrease in circulation. Globally, similar trends were observed, whereby traditional publications embraced the digital format (Lee, 2020).

The COVID-19 outbreak, which later evolved into a pandemic, had forced many countries to place a 'lockdown' or restrictions on social, economic and political international activities. The COVID-19 has created a physical distance between people around the world, . People were restricted to their homes during this period and it has created a rather abnormal situation for the media atmosphere. Media plays an important role as a platform for people to gain information and facts. However, the dependency on social media with regards to COVID-19 related issues has shifted to also include other, more traditional media such as the television and radio.

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms are the platform of choice particularly among the younger generation to get information, news, and entertainment. It is popular because the media provides control in the hands of its users. Social media also provides a platform and space for people to state and share their opinion. Social media has so much influence on the modern world that the term 'citizen journalism' was coined. People around the world, from all walks of life, can participate in providing news, stories, and updates in any social media and publish it for the world to see. However, the biggest issue with regards to the information of any sort in social media is the lack of adherence to the five core principles of journalism – truth and accuracy, independence, fairness and impartiality, humanity, and accountability (Truong, 2020).

In Malaysia, when the Movement Control Order (MCO) was put in place, Malaysians were confined in their homes. It was during this time that a majority of Malaysians found themselves presented with media sources other than the Internet and the television, radio, etc. Thus, this study explored this interesting phenomenon, in terms of the usage of media in getting COVID-19 related information, news and updates during the MCO period in Malaysia. As COVID-19 became a pandemic and people were forced to be confined in their homes, it gave Malaysians in general, more time to access the different options to engage with media apart from their usual Internet and social media such as the radio and television.

This research uncovers Malaysians' selection, experience and engagement with media as they were presented with both social media and traditional media on COVID-19 issues; taking into account the advantages and disadvantages of both, social media, and the traditional (TV and radio) media. During the pandemic outbreak, TV media, particularly the prominent Malaysian channels that include national broadcasters RTM 1 and RTM 2, which are considered as the 'mouth of the government', and the long-established private TV channel, TV3, were the dominant vessels to spread information about current news and updates about the pandemic. This is a stark contrast to social media such as Facebook or Twitter, which provide 'live' videos on the official pages of organisations such as on the Ministry of Health Facebook page.

### **Research Objectives**

- To identify the pattern of media consumption, particularly of social media and traditional media.
- To explore the experiences and levels/types of engagement of media users on news and information presented on social media alongside traditional media.
- To examine the perception of media users on COVID-19 issues presented on social media and traditional media during the MCO period.

### **Research Questions**

- What is the pattern of consumption of media, particularly of social media and traditional media?
- What are the experiences and levels/types/ engagement of media users on news and information presented on social media alongside traditional media? How do the media users experience and engage with the news and information presented on social media alongside traditional media?

- What are the perception of media users on COVID-19 issues presented on social media and traditional media during the MCO period?

### *Perception and COVID 19*

According to Joseph Reitz (1972) perception can be defined as a step by people gaining information about their environment that contains the element of hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. Moreover, perception is also defined as a process of people interpreting and organising their sensory impressions in order to give an explanation and understanding of their environment (Yitbarek Takele, 2014). Qiong (2017) argues that process of perception contain three stages, which are selection, organisation and interpretation. The selection process can be explained in our daily life when we face a variety information, which can then help spark some of our interests and intentions.

However, not all the information is readily available and perceivable to the public. The second process involves organisation, which entails the organisation of meaningful information by media consumers. Thus, different people will interpret information based on their respective understanding. Interpretation, on the other hand, refers to gleaning meaning for selective stimulation about something, and involves the individual's previous experience and cultural background.

Media shape the perception among people. According to Karan Thapar (2009) in his work 'Perception Vs Truth', perception can be far from reality. Media contain the element of a rush to be published first without emphasis on ethics or investigation while reporting. The main reason for this is the motivation to compete with old media such as newspapers, and to break news in the first place. Additionally, media tend to sway the opinion to create a perception that is in contradiction with reality.

According to Hohn (2016), experience is the element of cognition, and emotion, communication, and action represent an original and organic unity, looked upon from the position of later modes as an undifferentiated whole. Experience is a continuous process in our day-to-day life with everything that goes on around us. Experience is the verdict and the sign that are the reward of that interaction between human and environment. On the other hand, John Dewey on 'arts as experience' elaborates that experience is a transformation of human interaction into participation and communication with the environment (Dewey, 1934).

Media plays an important role during the COVID-19 outbreak. People around the world depend on the media to gain information, to share news, and to contribute as a part of a huge online community. Social media contain various user process platforms that assist the spreading of gripping content, persuasive dialogue, and communication to the largest spectators. These elements are crucial to a digital space made by the people and for the people. Social media impart an environment that is favourable for interconnection and networking to occur at various levels such as personal, business, professional, political, marketing and social (Kapoor, 2017). According to Kushner (2020), in writing about the role of social media during a pandemic, social media play a role as a source of information and misinformation. Social media provide a variety of information about the current news around the world. The information from social media assists people to be more alert and safe, and

provides an essential understanding of current issues not only for the individual but for society as a whole. However, social media also spread false information and fake claims about the implementation of rules and regulations, as well as on conspiracy theories. In a nutshell, social media is a platform to influence people to react to COVID-19, in addition to being a powerful vessel to disseminate positive vibes during the outbreak.

The survey conducted by Vase Ai (2020) on Malaysia media consumption found that prior to the MCO, 83% of informants used Facebook as their main platform for news. However, the third phase of the MCO showed a decrease, as only 70% of consumers used Facebook, preferring instead to refer to the Ministry of Health for further information. Therefore, during the same phase, data show that 60% of consumers used the MOH as a platform for news-seeking, compared to 54% during the first phase of MCO (Hirschmann, 2020). During the pandemic, social media are actively used not only for disseminating information, but also as a medium for awareness. A report from The Star on 19th March 2020 on two Malaysian hashtags indicates that #StayAtHome was trending in the whole country. The hashtag was originally made by Malaysian doctors through social media to encourage Malaysians to adhere to the government-mandated Restricted Movement Order (RMO). Besides #StayAtHome, social media campaigns also utilised the #KitaJagaKita hashtag. In less than 12 hours, the hashtag earned 17000 likes and 57000 shares on social media (Sheng, 2020).

Traditional media such as television and radio is the main focus during COVID-19 for consumers to seek out for more accurate and trustworthy sources. According to a report from Gulf News (2020), COVID-19 witnessed the return of traditional media to the centre stage. The pandemic brought about this renewed shift to print, audio and visual media as the main sources of news due to their more-established credibility. Therefore, in a climate of widespread fake news and rumours freely circulating on social media, people have been compelled to search for reliable information from credible sources such as the radio (Hameli, 2020). Amid this background, this research seeks to explore and gain information on human perception on COVID-19.

Malaysians can check the validity of news by using *Sebenarnya.My*, an online portal launched by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to allow Malaysians to check on the reliability of news delivered by social websites. This platform is part of a government initiative to mitigate the spread of fake news, and to ensure the public's access to credible news. As mentioned by the Communication and Multimedia Minister, any information received would be investigated and then uploaded to *Sebenarnya.My* for the public's reference (Star, 2017). Moreover, the minister advised the public to verify the authenticity of any information they come across on the *Sebenarnya.My* portal before sharing and disseminating to others (Habibu, 2020).

New Straits Times on 19 May 2020 reported that MCMC confirmed that a total of 268 investigation papers on COVID-19 fake news have been opened by the national police (PDRM). Out of this number, 18 people were charged under section 233 of the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998. Another 178 cases are still under investigation, and 30 cases have been charged in court. In an official statement, Datuk Seri Ismail Yaacob urged the public to verify any news before sharing and disseminating, as the MCMC and PDRM have the authority to impose legal action on those who spread fake news (Daim, 2020)

Amid this climate of widespread fake news even prior to the pandemic, the Malaysian government tabled the Anti-Fake News Act on 27 March 2018, which was passed and gazetted on 11 April 2018. Under the Act, fake news is defined as “any news, information, data and reports, which is or are wholly or partly false, whether in the form of features, visuals or audio recordings or in any other form able of proposing words or ideas. The word ‘publication’ was also determined to insert any written or digitally or electronically produced (Mahyuddin, 2020). A report from the New Straits Times on 13 April 2020 mentioned that social media such as Twitter, Google, YouTube and Facebook have taken steps to fight against fake news on COVID-19. For instance, Twitter deletes any tweet containing fake news on COVID-19, whereas YouTube does not post any video with questionable facts on COVID-19. Facebook, on the other hand, ensures the public receives the right information by putting a label on posts that help to mark the information as credible. Moreover, Google launched Google Discovery that permits a user to report to the platform of any wrong information circulating on COVID-19 (Chinnasamy, 2020).

A novel Corona virus was found in Wuhan, China. After further tests, the World Health Organization (WHO) proceeded to label this Corona virus strain as Corona virus 2019. On 11 February 2020, a corona virus group study suggested SARS-Cov-2 as the new name (Guo, 2020). On 12 March 2020, following the outbreak of the virus in many parts of the world, including Japan, Italy, Singapore, United Kingdom, Taiwan, and South Korea (Elengoe, 2020), WHO classified COVID-19 as a pandemic. In Malaysia, the MOH reported that by 17 April 2020, Selangor recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases nationally at 1138 cases. The government then announced that 27 districts would be classified as red zones due to their high number of cases. These red zones included Lembah Pantai, Hulu Langat, Petaling Jaya, Seremban, Kuching, and Kluang (Terkini, 2020).

#### *Movement Control Order (MCO)*

The MCO phases was officially implemented in Malaysia from 18 March 2020 until 31 March 2020. The news came following the prime minister’s first official announcement about COVID-19 on 16 March 2020. The second phase of MCO in Malaysia was implemented on 14 April 2020, which was continued in the subsequent weeks. On 29 April 2020, MCO entered the fourth phase as the government announced its continuation. Following optimistic developments with regards to the spread of the virus, the government announced on 1 May 2020 that the MCO would transition into a conditional phase that allowed selected businesses to resume operation (Tang, 2020).

MCO was launched to reduce the movement of people and at the same time to prevent and reduce the rate of infection caused by human interaction (Peter, 2020). The MCO is governed by three acts and rules as outlined by the government. First, both government and private premises were closed. During this period, authorities only allowed essential services to operate, which included industries dealing with machinery and equipment, selected construction projects and services, as well as the aero space industry. Second, the government imposed a travel ban, which prevented Malaysians from leaving the country, and foreigners from entering the country. Third, social restriction was imposed, which meant that social gatherings, religious meetings, and recreational activities were prohibited.

### *Media Consumption*

Media consumption refers to the quantity of information and leisure media that are consumed by a person or group. It involves diversion, such as the consumers' interaction with new media, and the use of old media such as books and magazines, television, film and radio (Khan, 2017). According to Khan (2020), a report by the Global Web Index in the United States and the United Kingdom estimated that 80% of consumers had consumed more variety of content and information during the COVID-19 as people attempted to pass the time during lockdown. At least 80% of people, of various genders and generations consume social media such as Tik Tok and YouTube. On the other hand, the Gen Z is more interested in listening to music compared to reading news.

Reports have also documented that consumers in the UK and US cited their trust on the WHO website to gain information and updates about COVID-19. For entertainment purposes, however, reports showed that subscribers to the popular streaming platforms, Netflix and Disney, have increased during the pandemic, by up to 30% and 20% respectively (Khan, 2020). According to a US internet equity research, Twitter, on the other hand, witnessed its active users increase to 164 million in the first quarter of 2020, which is a 23% increase compared to 2019. Traditional media have also reported increases. For instance, cable news channels reported over 10% to 20% increases in broadcast ratings. In Italy for instance, the penetration on application suite increased by 70%, whereas group calls increased by 100%. These developments are to be expected, as during a pandemic outbreak, human beings replace social gatherings with social media in order to remain connected to one another (Morgan, 2020).

### *Lens of Cultivation & Perception Theories*

This research focused on social media rather than television to examine the research focus. The cultivation theory represents the current phenomena on how media shape and influence the people's moral values and general beliefs toward particular issues. Cultivation theory (George Gerbner, 1960; 1970) emphasises the long-term effect of television that can shape people's moral values and general beliefs about the world. Eight basic concepts are highlighted in this theory, which include symbolic interaction, storytelling, symbolic function of television, television traits, cultural model, cultivation of value system, multi directional process, and the cultural indicators (Mosharafa, 2015). Riddle (2010) argued that the more time people spend 'living' in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality is congruent with television reality. The cultivation theory is relevant for this research that focuses on the role of social media in shaping public attitudes during the COVID-19 outbreak. Perception theory, on the other hand, is divided into two – self-perception theory, and cognitive dissonance theory. This research specifically applied B.F Skinner's self-perception theory, which states that by observing one's own behaviour and situation, one would be more aware of and gain increased understanding about not only their own attitudes and emotions, but also the personal states of others. Moreover, perception can be biased or be influenced by various factors including our experience, expectation, cultural norms and mood. Thus, people's perception are determined by their perception of their own environment (UKEssays, 2018).



### **Methodology**

The main purpose of this research is to explore public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19 related issues during the MCO period. Thus, the sample is selected based on informants' related experiences through in-depth interviews. The details of the sampling and data gathering process are discussed and elaborated, particularly on the sample size determination.

This research applied the phenomenology research design whose purpose is to investigate phenomena. The purpose of the study is to understand a person's perception, perspective, and understanding of a particular situation. The phenomenology research does not necessarily provide for an absolute explanation but it raises awareness and understanding about the phenomena (Astalin, 2013). This study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with selected Malay participants. The research scheduled appointments with the participants in order to conduct the interview session. As this research applied face-to-face interviews, it is believed that the findings of this study would be more precise, as the researcher has established a rapport with the participant that can garner genuine and reliable responses regarding public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19-related issues during the MCO period. This study emphasised the primary information collection instrument. These elements aim to ensure the reliability of the information collected from the instrument. The researchers were not involved in giving any comment, idea, or knowledge about public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19-related issues during the MCO period. The informant is thus not guided by the researcher's point of view, but rather the informants needed to reveal their own experience and perception.

Additionally, this research used an interpretive research design to understand and describe human nature. Interpretive paradigms refer to related concepts that perceive the understanding of the world as others' experience. The purpose of interpretive research is to understand people's experiences (Bagele, 2010). The interpretive social science stresses on how people communicate and gather with one another. The interpretive method is a systematic analysis to predict socially meaningful action through detailed observation of a natural setting to interpret and understand how people create and maintain their social work. This approach is deemed relevant, as this study attempts to understand users' media consumption habits, as well as their experience and perception, besides trust and accountability with social media on COVID-19.

As stated previously, the method of data collection for this research involved face-to-face interaction between researcher and participants. The interpretive research methodology takes place in a natural setting where the informant makes their living. The interview method involves several elements including asking questions, listening, and recording answers from the informant. In qualitative research, good questions should be open-ended, which require more than 'yes' and 'no' answers. The interviews ought to start with easy questions before gradually proceeding with difficult questions.

Research interviews are typically categorised into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. This research employed a semi-structured approach to conduct an interview, as it contain both the unstructured and structured interview styles. Semi-structured also offer advantages compared to unstructured and structured interviews (Pollock, 2019). This method

compares the answers between informants, and at the same time also provides an opportunity for researchers to further inspect topics suitable to that particular candidate. The question about the role of social media in shaping public attitudes during the COVID-19 outbreak is based on the response and tendency of the participant's perception of these issues. The interview focused on the natural interaction between interviewer and participant. The researcher selected the primary informants who have a fundamental knowledge of media, especially traditional media and social media. There were a total of seven informants, who were classified as (i) Gen-Z (Adult age of 19-23), (ii) Gen-Y (Adult age of 24-38) and (iii) Gen-X (Adult age of 39-54). Only three informants represented the Gen-Y, whereas three informants represented Gen-X, and only one informant represented Gen-Z.

The participants were categorised as such in order to better examine their experience and perception with social media during COVID-19. They were also categorised based on their salary and employment sector

The research about public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19-related issues during the MCO period is focused on a particular situation, which is the COVID-19 outbreak during the MCO period. Interview participants were primarily selected from the neighbouring states of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, because because the researchers wanted to identify and collect information from the informants who lived in the red zones during the COVID-19 outbreak, and also to gain information about public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19-related issues during the MCO period in those areas.

This semi-structured interview was conducted both in Malay and English as informants had no qualms about using both languages in the interviews. The structure of the interviews was developed based on this study's objectives. Part A contains participant demographic information such as gender, age, working sector and salary. Before conducting the interview, the researcher sent a question for all informants via email, hand over and application based on the request of the informant. Once the question has been delivered to the informants, the researcher proceeded to schedule a date for an interview with the participant. The interview was largely structured around these categories – Section A - Personal Information about the Informant; Section B - Media Consumption Pattern; and Section C - Experience and Perception. Section C was further divided into three sections: Information and Experience, Feeling and Trust, and Accountability.

### **Research Findings**

The objective of this study is to understand public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19 related issues during the MCO period. Specifically, this study examined the media consumption pattern on social media and traditional media during the COVID-19 outbreak. To obtain this research objective, several themes were develop for this research such as: (1) media consumption habits; and (2) the experience and perception of the public with social media on COVID-19. This theme was then divided into two main branches: (a) Information and Experience; (b) Public Feeling; and (c) Trust and Accountability. The five themes were able to address the outlined research questions. Nevertheless, the researcher focused on two main categories during the interview, which were media consumption patterns on social media and traditional media. Secondly, the experience and perception of the public as well as the feeling of the public in using social media and traditional media, were

emphasised. Lastly, the research examined issues of trust and accountability by the public on social media and traditional media about COVID-19 during the MCO.

### **New Media Consumption**

*Traditional media has been preferred as an official information platform on COVID-19*

Based on findings gathered from the semi-structured interview, most of the informants chose television as the preferred media platform compared to other traditional media when searching for information about COVID-19. Television was chosen because the content presented is easily understandable, and television also provides detailed news and information. The preferred television channels included CNN, Astro Awani and TV Al-Hijrah. Besides television, informants also stated that they listen to radio stations like Hitz.FM and Era.FM, as they consider the two channels to convey reliable information from the government:

*“My favourite television is CNN news because it is detailed and I rarely watch Movies, only twice a week mostly on the weekend.” (P7)*

*“I choose television which is Astro Awani and Era.fm because they confirm the Announcements made by the government and authorities.” (P6)*

*“Of course television because of the advice from the Prime Minister to stay at home, so the television is the only choice that I have. I prefer RTM as my main source.” (P3)*

*“I would prefer to watch TV because it will be easier to understand an issue or information. Astro Awani, TV Al-Hijrah and TV3 are the traditional media I use the most.” (P4)*

However, one informant did not choose traditional media as a preferred medium for gaining information on COVID-19. Another informant, on the other hand, chose to use both traditional and social media:

*“Not at all. I prefer social media compare to traditional media.” (P5)*

*“I don’t buy newspapers anymore. Even my parents are using the online version as a means to save the earth. But, I do listen to Hitz.fm for updates in the morning while I commute to work.” (P2)*

### *Priority Content and Information*

Before the emergence of new media, traditional media is the go-to platform used for the public to search for information and to access entertainment. But, latest developments in new technology provide a variety of platforms for people to seek information and content. Nevertheless, COVID-19 saw informants returning to traditional media to seek further information on the pandemic, whether on the national or global level. Traditional media is preferred because informants claimed that it is a form of media that prioritises news as its primary content:

*“Of course there are songs and also the updates about COVID-19 they give. Mainly traffic before this MCO, as for now, it is the real-life updates where they get audiences to come on air and share experiences which could make you think and ponder without being biased.” (P2)*

*“News because I can get updates on what happened around us and the world especially the latest news about the current news about COVID-19 on US and Italy.” (P3)*

*“The priority content and information is news especially the current news about COVID-19, and others is more for educational purposes such as Animal Planet.” (P7)*

Aside from using traditional media to obtain information on COVID-19, other informants also admitted that they use it to gain information about domestic and foreign politics. There are also others who use traditional media to watch infotainment content such as documentary and talk shows.

*“The content I watch and read on traditional media is related to news such as current politics, international relations and government policies. I use traditional media to search for information because they confirm the announcements by the government and authorities.” (P6)*

*“I enjoy watching a talk show or documentary because of the way they deliver the news or information, the discussion is really interesting.” (P4)*

#### *Preferences on Social Media Platforms*

Most of the informants chose Facebook as a preferred platform for gaining and sharing information, as it is considered by the informants to be more user friendly compared to other social media platforms. However, other informants admitted that they utilise a combination of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram for different purposes..

*“Facebook. The one-stop centre for all news and information related to COVID-19 and current views about the people’s update, comment and viral news.” (P5)*

*“Facebook. Their interface is more user-friendly compared to any other social media I’ve used. Facebook is like 3-in-1 premixed drinks to me, it has everything within a click.” (P1)*

*“I usually use WhatsApp application to received texts from others. But, to gain the information I am using Facebook because I’m actively using that account plus people are sharing information over there.” (P3)*

*“I usually balance between Facebook and Instagram. Instagram is more for leisure and beauty hacks, while Facebook is for news information and what’s trending in the country at the moment.” (P2)*

Other informants prefer to use Twitter and Instagram, because the applications are easy to use and simple, especially for delivering a message. YouTube, on the other hand, is preferred for purely entertainment purposes:

*"I would prefer to use Twitter and Instagram because they are easy to use."*  
(P4)

*"Instagram for my business comes from there. I choose Instagram because it's easier and simple to deliver a message. I also use YouTube for entertainment and leisure."* (P7)

*Type of Media Consumption before Movement Control Order (MCO) and During Movement Control Order (MCO)*

When asked about the type of media they consumed prior to the MCO, all the informants stated social media as their primary choice. They opined that social media provide a platform for two communicative functions, one of which is to contribute, and to give a comment or opinion about an issue. Informants also claimed that social media is less biased compared to traditional media, because anyone can access social media anytime and anywhere:

*"Social media because I have a limited time to sit back and watch television."*  
(P3)

*"Social media. Traditional media is not an option because I spend more time at work compared to my house."* (P6)

*"Have always preferred social media."* (P1)

*"I would usually prefer to use social media before the MCO, I don't really watch television or read a newspaper."* (P4)

*"Social media because most of my time is spent on the laptop."* (P5)

*"I prefer social media because social media provide a free space for everyone to seek the information they want compared to traditional media, which is more limited in sense of the contribution of people to give a comment or opinion about issues and news. Traditional media is only one-way communication."*(P7)

*"I would still go for social media as it is less biased, I presume."* (P2)

During MCO, most of the informants reiterated their preference for social media:

*"I barely use traditional media. It's more easy and fast to use social media to get access to the information."* (P6)

*"Social media because I have a limited time to sit back and watch television."*(P3)

*“More on social media especially for Instagram and Twitter. No changes for us even during MCO. Social media provide a platform for everyone to still be connected”. (P7)*

*“No, I did not. I scarcely watch television nor read a newspaper since social media offers better options and variance than these traditional media.” (P1)*

*“Before and after still the same which is social media. I rarely use traditional media because I use a laptop as a medium for seeking information.” (P5)*

*“Nope. I still use social media. I believe it is because I am already accustomed to it but I do have to check the references before I believe them. Because during the MCO, so many fake news have made their way through.” (P2)*

However, during the MCO, one informant stated that they switched their consumption to more traditional media than social media:

*“I prefer to use traditional media because I have more free time to be compared with before. Indeed I am also concerned about fake news and rumours on social media.” (P4)*

### **Experience and Perception of Traditional Media and Social Media on COVID-19-related Information**

#### *Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading and Sharing Information on Social Media about COVID-19*

Informant data show both advantages and disadvantages when it comes to the reading and sharing of information on COVID-19. One advantage cited by informants concerns their awareness of the rules and regulations set forth by the government. Moreover, sharing news about COVID-19 on social media also encourages the constructive argument among social media users, and can encourage users to share tips and advice for a collective benefit:

*“The advantages are that people are aware of it and they tend to follow the dos and don't.” (P3)*

*“The advantage is spread only the real facts. So, everyone will get the real info. First-hand news. Not based on opinion.” (P7)*

*“Advantages would be it's fast and could reach thousands and millions of users within seconds.” (P2)*

*“In my opinion, the advantages are; first, it adds knowledge value. Secondly, it encourages people to actively participate in combating the disease and finally, it encourages healthy arguments on what's best for everyone during this pandemic.” (P1)*

*“The advantages of reading and sharing information about current news to people around the world to be more alert.” (P4)*

*“Advantage of using social media is it’s fast and up to date.” (P5)*

Despite these perceived advantages, informants also stated what they believed to be disadvantages when using social media to share information. This especially refers to the spread of fake news, rumours, as well as manipulation of information from other uses:

*“The disadvantage is that we are exposed to more fake news.” (P4)*

*“Disadvantage if people spread rumours. Based on their opinion that can cause misunderstandings and chaos.” (P7)*

*“The disadvantage of social media is fake news.” (P5)*

*“The advantages would be that some of this information is being manipulated by certain people which causes unnecessary panic, and this at the same time Public Experience and Perception with Social Media on COVID-19 Related Issues during the MCO Period putting unneeded workload to the authorities since they have to rebuff this false information.” (P1)*

*“Disadvantages would be it’s not accurate nor official, hence need users to be careful when dealing with any piece of uncertain information.” (P2)*

*“The disadvantages are the reliability of the source and the information given can be questioned. Sometimes, the news and the title can be misleading that can bring chaos to the public.” (P3)*

*“The amount of information on the Internet and social media about the Corona virus is overwhelming, relentless and a lot of it is from a negative/distressing perspective.” (P6)*

#### *Comparison between Traditional Media and Social Media in Disseminating COVID 19 Information*

As was stated previously, most informants cited social media as their preferred medium compared to traditional media:

*“Personally, I prefer social media because it is readily accessible as long as you have an Internet connection and the method in which the information is being disseminated is very fast and timely compared to traditional media.” (P1)*

*“Social media. Positively engaging in social media can ease stress, anxiety, and depression, boost feelings of self-worth, creativity and a sense of personal relaxation during a time when we can feel extremely helpless.” (P6)*

*“I prefer Facebook to be honest. Because of its outreach and also because of its users come from different backgrounds. You can reach out practically everyone via Facebook and its news updates are fast and many reputable media has their own Facebook page as well.” (P2)*

*"If compare to social media and traditional media, I prefer social media especially Facebook because it's up-to-date and fast. I can access social media anytime and anywhere." (P5)*

Even though social media platforms are preferred, some informants still rely on traditional media to obtain COVID-19 information. Issues concerning reliability, credibility, and ethics that plague social media are the reasons behind this choice:

*"It is undeniable that news on social media is more updated, convenient, and fast. But, we must be alert and careful in selecting information because not all news is correct or reliable. So, I would personally choose traditional media because of the credibility of the news and I can also share the news with ease. I don't have to check the facts on the governments' page or *Sebenarnya.My*." (P4)*

*"Traditional media because it is trust-able. I seek accurate information and more credibility compared to social media." (P3)*

One informant, however, prefers to use social media and traditional media. But, they clarified that the information on social media tends to be misleading and that traditional media are more ethical.

*"Actually, it's 50-50. Because socmed can be misleading and not all well informed. In traditional television, they are very ethical in delivering news. So, I can trust at least 90%." (P7)*

#### *Informant Impressions after Information-sharing on COVID-19 on Social Media Platforms*

A majority of the informants admitted to experiencing positive feelings after sharing information on COVID-19 on social media. Specifically, they reported feeling relieved, happy, comfortable and updated:

*"I do feel relieved to share useful information rather than a hoax and untrusted information." (P6)*

*"I like to spread positivity. So, I always feel positive when I want to post something. I feel happy. If only something useful for people." (P7)*

*"I feel comfortable and updated. I do not do it for likes, but for the community purpose. To share and be concerned about people around my community especially." (P5)*

*"Engaging. Because I share the information with my family, friend and followers." (P1)*

*"I feel great. At least I can share things that are informative to my friends." (P4)*

*"I just share information from reliable sources, so when I do so, I feel proud because the information I shared is very useful and helpful." (P3)*



Yet, some reported on having mixed feelings and feel cautious when sharing share information on social media:

*“Cautious and very careful. We have to always be mindful of what we share on social media as people have access to it and could penalise you later on even when you have put down the post, someone could have screenshot it and saved it.” (P2)*

*“Mixed feelings. There’s oversharing information etc. Oversharing is when people share too much information with the public or a stranger. It can happen both online and offline. However, it is a big problem on social media sites in line with fake news and wrong information.” (P6)*

#### *Favourite Social Media Platform and the Type of Information Searched on COVID-19*

Most of the informants chose Facebook as their favourite social media platform, claiming that Facebook provides more accurate facts and information compared to other social media platforms. This is especially true considering that most government agencies have their respective official Facebook page that actively updates and disseminates information on COVID-19:

*“Our Ministry of Health’s Facebook page actively writes about Malaysia’s current situation such as the cases, related information, or research on COVID-19 and preventive measures for COVID- 19 all the time. Besides, our local news portal pages also take part in disseminating information about COVID-19 all over the world.” (P1)*

*“Facebook. More fast and focused on the society point of view.” (P3)*

*“Facebook. Because it’s fast and I can get accurate information from various government agencies sources.” (P5)*

*“Definitely Facebook. If I were to repost anything on Facebook, I will also have to think twice regarding its accuracy.” (P2)*

However, other informants chose Twitter, Telegram and Instagram:

*“Easy and fast as there are many people on the platform. Through Instagram I can easily access and communicate with people, especially to share the latest information and news.” (P7)*

*“Most of the time Twitter. I also join in the KKM channel on Telegram. Because it’s updated on current news and I can see the various comment and reflection from viewers.” (P4)*

*“I use Twitter because it’s fast, easier and in real-time. It’s a place for the new generation seeking news and information.” (P6)*

Most informants use social media as a platform to search for information on COVID-19. The information includes the latest cases, government action and regulation, plus posts shared by other users that reflect on their own experiences during COVID-19:

*“Announcement regarding the dos and don't to cut off the COVID-19 and latest statistics in Malaysia and around the world.” (P3)*

*“Daily cases of numbers such as death, new cases, areas affected and also government action and regulation.” (P5)*

*“Mostly, facts and experiences so I can see the whole picture of this unprecedented situation. Also, the experiences shared are very heartfelt and makes you reflect more.” (P2)*

*“Mostly statistics on local or imported transmission cases. Dos and don't for COVID-19 prevention in Malaysia. During RMO, I would check for an update on police roadblock so I can plan my journey.” (P1)*

*“Usually, statistics of COVID-19 in Malaysia and around the world. At the same time, I compare the progress of each country's government strategy in facing this outbreak.” (P7)*

*“Hmm... most of the time I would search on statistics, new rules and regulations, preventive steps, and patients' experience.” (P4)*

*“Information about the COVID-19 in Malaysia and other countries, daily statistics from the Ministry of Health, especially on health recommendation and the government officials' action towards the pandemic.” (P6)*

#### *Reasons for Using Social Media Platforms to Search for Information on COVID-19*

Informants stated that they use social media to search for information on COVID-19, as they provide fast, up-to-date, reliable, and varied sources of information:

*“You can easily search for any information including COVID-19 by just a click. And another reason is you can access it at any time.” (P4)*

*“I use social media because it is easier and faster. Most of my time on social media because I'm dealing with my client through social media. Social media is the best platform because I can compare local news and international news about COVID-19 from various sources.” (P7)*

*“I choose social media because it is fast, up-to-date and reliable.” (P5)*

*“Social media interface makes it easier for the user to be updated on current news, and in a fast manner as well. Facebook for example, once you log into it, new posts on COVID-19 situation in Malaysia and globally would be readily available on your timeline. In addition, social media are easily accessible as long as you have a mobile phone and good Internet connection, thus everything is within a click.” (P1)*

*“To see updates about it. Specific to current issues involving people in Malaysia and overseas. The social media provide various perspectives on*

*human and COVID-19 that involve economic, social, and public diplomacy around the world.” (P3)*

#### *The Utilisation of Traditional Media to Gain Information on COVID-19*

In contrast with their opinions on social media, informants stated several reasons to explain their preference for social media over traditional media. Namely, they cite issues on safety, time, and accessibility as the reasons for their choice:

*“Not anymore. It’s safer to attain the news online nowadays with the less contact thing going on. Plus, you can get the same coverage from their online sources as well.” (P2)*

*“Not at all, I prefer social media because most of the time I’m spending on smartphones and laptops to search about current issues or information.” (P5)*

*“Not really, but sometimes. I prefer social media because I can access them everywhere and anytime.” (P6)*

Nevertheless, there are other informants who use traditional media to obtain COVID-19 related information. This is because there are continued issues on trust and accountability when it comes to social media:

*“Yes, television because they have to be accurate. Based on facts. Yes, easier to understand verbally more than reading.” (P7)*

*“Yes, because it is live and has credibility and provide reliable sources. I’m more confident in traditional media because there is no fake news and they do not manipulate the news from other sources.” (P3)*

*“Yes, of course. The news from traditional media is more accurate and trustworthy compared to other platforms.” (P4)*

#### *Verifying Information from Social Media Platforms*

Informants claimed that they verify any information obtained from social media by comparing it with various sources, such as other online news portals. This is because informants are concerned about fake news, and they label themselves as being part of a smart society:

*“Always. I verify and compare the information from various sources such as through government social media or website.” (P5)*

*“Yes. It’s crucial to verify before sharing the information. Usually, I cross check with other trusted government social media.” (P6)*

*“By cross-checking with other online official news stations. For example, if I read the post from my friend’s Facebook I will find or verify the information from official government agencies.” (P2)*

*"First, I would check if it is from an individual's point of view or the authorities'. If it is from authorities, then I would check the credibility of the page (in terms of number of followers, and whether it is a certified page or account)." (P1)*

*"Yes, of course, we have to be smart society. Everyone should consider verifying the information to avoid fake news on social media." ( P3)*

*"I would usually verify them on governments' official page, or *Sebenarnya.My* website." (P4)*

In terms of verifying the information from social media about COVID-19, informants demonstrated a similar pattern of being concerned with accuracy and responsibility. By verifying the news by checking with specific websites such as *Sebenarnya.My*, the Ministry of Health official website, and other official websites, informants are able to verify the information in order to avoid harm and panic among themselves and other social media users:

*"Find the right source of the information such as from official media platform and official government social media or a politician's official account. For example, the Prime Minister's Facebook account and the Ministry of Health's official website." (P3)*

*"Yes definitely, everyone should be responsible and be concerned about the news and information before sharing to the public to avoid fake news and panic among viewers." (P6)*

*"Yes. I would make sure that the information is from verified pages and authorities." (P1)*

*"Always. I verify and compare the information from various sources such as through government social media or website." (P5)*

*"Yes, if I can't find it then I won't bother posting or re-posting it to avoid issues in the future." (P1)*

*"Absolutely because it's a part of my social responsibility to make sure the information I share and post are true and do not harm other's feelings and cause panic." (P7)*

#### *Media Trust During the Movement Control Order (MCO)*

These themes explored the comparison among informants on the media platform that they trust the most during the MCO. Four of the informants from this study trusted both traditional and social media:

*"I trust both social and traditional media. It is just that they differ in the way information is being disseminated (social media is much faster than traditional media and provides more variance which encompasses audio and graphic all in one platform). Unfortunately for social media, since it does not have relevant authorities to monitor and regulate it like traditional media, users*

*have to verify the credibility of the information being disseminated on their own. Not everyone has the technical knowledge to verify certain information. Thus, this could be a barrier to certain social media users.” (P1)*

*“Both, as I used traditional and social media to search for official news, and media statements by authorities. We are in an era of disinformation. The excessive amounts of information (infodemic) surrounding COVID-19 hampers an effective public health response, creates confusion and distrust among the public.” (P6)*

*“Same because both of them will verify the data before publishing. But if it involve individual posting, I need to clarify [the information] first to avoid miscommunication.” (P5)*

The other informants chose traditional media to gain information during the MCO, claiming that it is more trustworthy because the information given is sourced from official sources, conveyed by professionals, and is updated frequently:

*“I trust information from TV because it is full of information, current, and updated frequently.” (P3)*

*“Traditional media as it's always the official ones, social media can either be faked or exaggerated at times.” (P2)*

*“I would trust traditional media because they are conveyed and delivered by professionals and experts. In social media, people can create lies just to get attention or create havoc.” (P4)*

#### *Social Media Information Trust*

Although most informants preferred social media in their search for COVID-19 related information, they admitted to not trust social media entirely, especially on facts and information they provide:

*“Social media are verified on average 80%. Especially from MOH. Because it's directly from them, and from expert and Doctor Noor Hisham Abdullah.” (P7)*

*“Depending on the source of that information. If the information is from an individual's point of view/individual's post, I rarely trust the source of information. But if it is from certified authorities, I wholly trust the information they disseminate (eg. KKM & WHO pages).” (P1)*

*“I can only trust about only 50 percent of the news because there is some fake news on social media that was used to downgrade or to create controversy.” (P4)*

*“Not much. The availability of vast amounts of information makes it challenging for us to answer specific questions. The difficulty in understanding scientific knowledge has led to missing messages in social media, many of which contain half-truths and have a strong bias.” (P4)*

*“Not trust at all because anyone can post their thoughts and links without hesitation.” (P3)*

*“Partially, because it might be fake plus it’s not even official. But, it let you think through what’s happening at current.” (P2)*

In contradiction to the majority sentiment, one informant claimed that he entirely trusts information gleaned from social media, as he would only be seeking news from official government agencies such as the Ministry of Health, Malaysian National Security Council, and the Malaysian Government Call Central:

*“100% because I followed the trusted and credible source from the government agencies such as MKN, MOH, MYGCC, etc.” (P5)*

Findings of this research indicate that social media platforms are preferred, before and during the MCO. Social media provide a huge platform to make comparisons between the news and information anytime and anywhere. Nonetheless, the government plays an important role to ensure that users share information from accurate sources to avoid panic and misinformation among themselves. Thus, the government needs to take more action on any website or individual who spreads fake and inaccurate news and information. One way authorities are addressing this issue is through promoting the list of official news and government websites, which has been crucial during the pandemic to avoid false information from reaching the audience.

The first objective of the research addressed the media consumption pattern of both social and traditional media. As discussed in the findings, the most preferred social media platform is Facebook. Meanwhile, for traditional media, the chosen platform is television. This suggests that media users need to have more varied use of social media in searching the news about COVID-19. Twitter, for instance, provides a large body of information on current perspectives on COVID-19 around the world. The findings also show a similar pattern of media consumption, though this can depend on the social media which are used by the informants. A balance between the use of social and media traditional media need to be achieved to help increase access to more accurate and reliable information.

On the other hand, the second objective of the research addressed the experience and perception of social media and traditional media on information related to COVID-19. This objective explores issues concerning media trust as well as on issues of credibility and accountability. The findings suggest that only one informant gave complete trust on the information gleaned from social media, whereas others still harboured scepticism. Despite their doubts, however, a majority of the informants still prefer to use social media as a medium for gaining and sharing news related to COVID-19. Based on the informant experience and perception, there is therefore a need for further research that can look at ways to build alternatives to build user trust for information taken from social media.

The third objective addressed public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19 issues during the MCO period, which differed from the other two objectives, as this concerned the advantages and disadvantages of reading and sharing of information about COVID-19 on social media.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that media users cite social media advantages as making them be more alert of the latest information, as well as increasing their awareness in combating diseases, besides understanding more arguments on issues of health. The disadvantages, however, involve rumours, fake news, and the manipulation of information. The most prominent issue concerns the need for media users to select credible sources. The percentage of bad impact of information on social media. The findings show that social media is beneficial as it helps in the sharing and disseminating of information about the pandemic, which then fosters a positive environment among the community, and prevents panic and unhealthy speculation especially during a pandemic. Future research could be extended to include different perspectives, for instance, from specific generations such as the Gen Y or Gen Z. On the other hand, further studies can be conducted after the MCO to determine any differences and similarities in the public experience and perception with social media on COVID-19. Moreover, future research could be conducted via a quantitative approach, and could also focus on foreigners' perspective and experience on media during COVID-19 in Malaysia.

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