

## Exploring the Perception of Postgraduate Students in Malaysia on Facebook as a Reliable COVID-19 Source of News

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### Abstract

As the globe enters a new decade, the global society is confronted with the formidable COVID-19 pandemic, a widespread outbreak of the coronavirus disease. To expeditiously disseminate pandemic response measures and news to the public, news media organisations are increasingly relying on social media platforms like Facebook. The demographic of social media users primarily consists of students, who are susceptible to the impact of news circulated through social media platforms. Whether social media users, specifically postgraduate students on Facebook, see the network as a credible source of COVID-19 information holds significant importance. Therefore, this research aims to fill the research gap by focusing on three main objectives, which are to explore the perceptions of postgraduate students towards Facebook characteristics as a reliable source for COVID-19 news, to describe the usage of Facebook as a news source for COVID-19 affects the perception of postgraduate students and to explain the perception of postgraduate towards the challenges of Facebook as a reliable source for COVID-19 news. A qualitative methodology was adopted, and in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data throughout the research process. The data collected from the interview was subjected to thematic analysis, namely Braun and Clark's thematic analysis, to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the data. In summary, this research elucidates the perspectives of postgraduate students on the reliability of Facebook as a news source, focusing on the platform's usage patterns, distinctive characteristics, and associated challenges. This study demonstrated that social media platforms such as Facebook are reliable in disseminating reliable COVID-19-related news and information.

**Keywords:** Exploring, Perception, Facebook, Reliable, COVID-19, News Source.

**Introduction**

The global landscape has undergone substantial changes in recent years due to the rapid advancement and widespread adoption of information and communication technology. During the 20th century, there was a significant acceleration in technological advances. Subsequently, numerous social media platforms have been created. Among them is Facebook, a social networking website established in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. It rapidly gained widespread popularity, establishing itself as a prominent social networking platform on the Internet (Gupta, 2022). Prior to the introduction of Facebook, the inaugural discernible social media platform known as Six Degrees was established in 1997. According to Gupta (2022), the platform facilitated user profile uploading and connections between individuals. In contemporary times, the Internet has facilitated the widespread availability of news and information, enabling anyone to conveniently access these resources online at their convenience and from anywhere. According to Flintham et al. (2018), the proliferation of social media platforms has had deliberate and unintended effects on individuals' news consumption habits and exposure.

Consequently, news organizations are placing significant emphasis on online platforms to distribute their material to a wide-ranging audience efficiently. This shift is underscored by the statistical data about Malaysians' news consumption habits across different channels. Based on the statistical analysis conducted by Shuraddin and Abdul (2022), a significant majority of the participants, precisely 86%, expressed their concurrence with sourcing news through online platforms, encompassing social media channels. From several perspectives, social media offers individuals news and information.

The year 2020 witnessed the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, which has brought about significant transformations in daily life, including a notable shift in the use of the Internet by individuals. The emergence of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) epidemic outbreak may be traced back to December 2019, originating from Wuhan City in Hubei Province, China. Subsequently, it rapidly disseminated to many regions across the globe. The World Health Organization assigned COVID-19 to this condition (Elengoe, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in the importance of the Internet as a source of information regarding COVID-19 (De' et al., 2020). The advent of digital media has had profound repercussions on the dissemination of COVID-19 news, which is heavily influenced by the global epidemic. Individuals are profoundly transforming the dynamics and user interactions of social media platforms.

With the rapid spread of information on social media, exploring postgraduate graduate students in Malaysia to view Facebook as a source of COVID-19 News is important. This makes it possible for them to understand if they trust this information as well and whether it impacts the course taken by a person. Moreover, it explains postgraduate students' media literacy and critical thinking skills. It may also serve to assess whether these readers are able to identify credible from incredible/incredulous sources in present-day circumstances. Postgraduate students are commonly regarded as a knowledgeable and well-informed group. It is important for academia since it implies a need to design proper media literacy programs in the universities when studying their response to using Facebook as a news source. This study concerns itself with Malaysia but provides insights that could be helpful in other jurisdictions. The perception of social media as a news source is not limited to one region, and lessons learned from Malaysia may be applicable elsewhere.

Therefore, concerning Facebook as a dependable COVID-19 news reservoir is vital owing to its potential repercussions for public health, information credibility, media literacy, and policy

formulation. It can facilitate us in gaining a deeper comprehension of how individuals, particularly those in postgraduate education, involve themselves with information in the digital era and its aftermath.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***The Perception of Postgraduate Students on News Sources on Social Media***

The advent of social media has facilitated virtually limitless communication and unparalleled availability of information. Seguin et al. (2018) assert that many adolescents, namely those enrolled in educational institutions, heavily depend on social media platforms, notably Facebook. As the readership of newspapers experiences a fall, there is a corresponding increase in the utilization of social media platforms. In contemporary times, cellular phones and other technological devices have supplanted all preceding modes of communication. As the accessibility and availability of online news continue to grow, the importance of the quality of information on the internet diminishes. Hence, it is imperative to evaluate how students interpret Internet news and Facebook as sources of news (Seguin et al., 2018). Facebook serves as a digital platform that facilitates the expansion of social networks by establishing connections between the profiles of individuals and groups across different geographical locations. In the pursuit of excellence, media outlets and news websites engage in a competitive environment, leading them to disseminate news and information through various social networking platforms, including Facebook (Sismeiro & Mahmood, 2018). Without a doubt, the allure of such news generates a significant reaction among readers, yet it is necessary to contemplate the matter of veracity (Saxena & Shamsi, 2020). The prevalence of Facebook usage among students has experienced a notable rise. According to a study conducted by Shearer (2018), it was discovered that 35% of individuals within the age range of 18-29 discover social media as their primary source of news. The findings of this poll indicate that younger individuals are almost four times more inclined to obtain news from social media platforms than older individuals. Previous research conducted on similar or younger age groups has arrived at the same findings, emphasizing the significance of social media to access news among the youth (Edgerly et al., 2018).

Marchi (2012) conducted a study wherein the news consumption patterns of college students were investigated, revealing that social media emerged as a significant source of news for this demographic. Based on the findings of this study, well-established media platforms have the potential to offer students with non-traditional news content. Inadvertently, individuals may encounter news content through television or radio. Furthermore, how individuals engage with online news consumption has incredible intricacy and sophistication. This is evident as they can go further into the subject matter by accessing additional material through hyperlinks or perusing other users' comments. According to Marchi (2012), students perceive opinions and humor as crucial elements in factual explanations within the realm of news.

#### ***COVID-19 News as a Reliable Source on Social Media***

Research indicates that social media platforms have contributed to a rise in young engagement in protest activities, particularly among students. Additionally, social media has facilitated news dissemination through diverse channels, as evidenced by studies conducted by Sihombing (2017). Recently, there has been a significant rise in the utilization of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, as a means for individuals, particularly the younger demographic, to pursue information-seeking endeavors actively. Based on the data provided by Flintham et al. (2018), it can be inferred that a significant proportion, precisely one-third,

of individuals between the age range of 18 to 24 depend on social media platforms as their primary news source. As stated by Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2019), more individuals utilize social media platforms for news consumption compared to the combined usage of online news sites, television news, and printed news. Utilizing unconventional platforms, such as Facebook, as a news source presents a convenient means of accessing a wide range of information encompassing gossip blogs, health matters, sports events, political affairs, and corporate matters. Using Facebook as a news source obviates the necessity to peruse multiple websites and articles in search of a singular source containing relevant information. Nevertheless, managing the consequences associated with utilizing Facebook as a news source can present difficulties. The utilization of social media as a news source needs to be improved by several noteworthy concerns. These include the proliferation of fabricated news stories, the perception that news is effortlessly delivered to individuals, biased news pieces, and the dissemination of distressing visual content inside news reports. An additional consequence of utilizing social media as a primary news source is the amplification of biased news reporting (Martens et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2020).

According to a recent study conducted by Ebrahim (2020), it has been found that social media users tend to cultivate an online ecosystem in which the content and individuals they choose to engage with align with and strengthen their existing beliefs and perspectives. According to Menczer and Ciampaglia (2022), users might be influenced by the postings and personal views of the pages and people they follow on Facebook. Properly monitoring false news on social media platforms is crucial due to its ease of sharing and broad accessibility, allowing many individuals to ingest such content (Jang, 2021). When individuals rely on social media platforms as their primary news source, they are more inclined to encounter content that aligns with their beliefs and preferences, exacerbating the issue by disregarding pressing societal concerns that require attention and resolution. The reliability of social media as an information source is a subject of debate. In light of the swift expansion of social media platforms, such as Facebook, in contemporary times, scholars from diverse fields have examined the ramifications these sites have on media enterprises and digital journalism. Social media platforms such as Facebook have emerged as prominent channels for accessing and disseminating information (Lamprou, 2021). Hence, it is imperative to acknowledge that social media platforms are only occasionally dependable news providers. While direct access and search engines remain the primary sources of traffic for online news sites, social media referrals have become increasingly important for many visitors (Mitchell & Page, 2014). In addition to its significance for media organizations, sharing news content has the potential to alter the level of audience engagement with the news. The act of observing the news-sharing behavior of others results in increased incidental news exposure and, ideally, the potential for encountering conflicting viewpoints.

Based on scholarly investigation, it has been found that social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, provide access to news content that individuals may have yet to encounter through traditional means (Mitchell & Page, 2013). This finding has significant implications for how we understand and evaluate news consumption and exposure within the context of online platforms. According to Jeljeli et al. (2021), social media platforms like Facebook provide opportunities for individuals who need formal journalistic qualifications to engage in news creation and reporting, particularly concerning events that may not receive coverage from traditional mainstream media channels. In 2017, Facebook introduced "The Facebook Journalism Project" to enhance its interactions with journalists and the news reporting community. The project involves collaboration with publishers and educators to

explore ways Facebook can empower individuals with the necessary skills to be well-informed readers in the digital era. Additionally, the project aims to mitigate the dissemination of false information and prevent Facebook from becoming a hub for such problematic content (Hutchinson, 2017).

Social media users may be exposed to a distinct set of news articles compared to the ones emphasized by newspaper editors in traditional print media. Users of Facebook and Twitter have a greater propensity to disseminate visual media, as well as news about politics and current affairs. Social media users have the potential to distribute a greater quantity of negative news. According to Teigen's (2022) research findings, it was seen that optimistic and neutral postings exhibited a comparable likelihood of expressing certainty or uncertainty. However, pessimistic posts were approximately twice as likely to transmit confidence rather than doubt. The results of this study indicate that posts expressing gloomy views, when written with a tone of confidence, are more likely to be shared or propagated inside Facebook groups. Based on internal documents obtained from Facebook, it has been revealed that an algorithm specifically developed to foster "meaningful social connection" inadvertently incentivized authors to disseminate destructive and sensational content (Duval, 2022). In examining the efficacy of new media, it is imperative to consider negative biases, given the propensity for human subjectivity to disproportionately amplify particular news narratives, notwithstanding overall advancements in this domain (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010). According to Blank (2022), identifying an unreliable source involves carefully reading the statement and verifying its veracity. Furthermore, it is imperative to attribute the source correctly. In cases where the identity or provenance of information is widely recognized, it is reasonable to assume its reliability. Conversely, if the source is questionable, more confirmation may be necessary.

Kayumovic (2020) states that conventional print and broadcast media offer distinct avenues for individuals to engage with news and information compared to social media platforms. By implementing this approach, they offer customers supplementary assessment mechanisms for news sources. Social networking sites have become an essential aspect of news consumption among consumers. The social media newsfeed encompasses public and private posts, wherein news and various activities are disseminated across the platform. Their networked peers influence users' exposure to such content (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). Hence, the assessment of the reliability of news sources holds significant importance. Blank (2022) provided an extensive compilation of methodologies aimed at discerning trustworthy news sources on the Facebook platform. Blank recommended that purchasers ascertain the origin. The reliability of a source is frequently assessed based on its characteristics of being direct, transparent, and verifiable. In addition to traditional media outlets, institutions and organizations have the potential to serve as credible sources of information, particularly in the context of health and COVID-19-related subjects. The Malaysian Health Organization (MHO), also known as Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia (KKM), is a reputable and trustworthy entity that provides valuable information and updates about the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Blank (2022) proposed the importance of verifying the veracity of news by ascertaining the credibility of the source, whether it be an individual or an organization of repute. Relying solely on cross-referencing the material to ascertain its accuracy based on the views of others is an inadequate means of establishing the veracity of the information. The assessment of reliability necessitates the exercise of caution. According to Bryanov and Vziatysheva (2021), as individuals evaluate content, they enhance their ability to exercise discernment and effectively differentiate between reliable and unreliable Facebook posts.

***Facebook and its Characteristics***

According to Roberts (2019), Facebook can be characterized as an immediate communication medium. Due to the swift dissemination of news by journalists and media outlets through social media platforms, consumers are no longer required to rely on conventional news broadcasts for obtaining information. Social media platforms facilitate the establishment of a communal atmosphere and interpersonal bonds by enabling individuals to engage with one another through online means, regardless of their geographical location. Furthermore, news stories have the potential to be shared on many social networking platforms. Furthermore, a significant aspect of Facebook's functionality is including a like button, indicating the number of likes garnered by a specific social media page (Roberts, 2019). According to Puneja (2020), social media serves as a dynamic platform for users to actively exchange information, share experiences, receive news, and provide expert opinions and reviews based on their individual knowledge and personal experiences. Facebook plays a significant role in facilitating the development of a unified viewpoint and initiating substantial discussions on pertinent subjects. Facebook is a versatile and ever-changing platform that offers a wide range of materials and features. It is accessible through various channels and mediums, in contrast to the limited channels used by print and news media. Facebook utilizes diverse modalities, encompassing audio, video, text, private forums or groups, public discussion forums, and chat (Puneja, 2020).

Dwivedi et al. (2020) assert that the Internet has brought about significant changes in the behaviors and patterns of humans. Human beings possess an innate inclination and longing to engage in interpersonal communication, facilitating the exchange of thoughts, knowledge, and current events. The advent of the Internet has facilitated individuals' ability to communicate with their immediate family members and others residing in various parts of the globe. The Internet has undeniably eliminated geographical boundaries on a global scale. Chi (2021) asserts that Facebook operates under the management of an algorithm that can discern the preferences and interests of individual users. Consequently, this algorithm selectively presents users with a curated selection of photographs, status updates, information, and news sourced from friends and organizations to cater to the user's interests. The primary objective of Facebook is to foster user engagement, facilitate the consumption of valuable information, and promote the sharing of such content among its users. According to Richard and Guppy (2014), a user clicking the "like" button on a webpage or website can be interpreted as a voluntary expression of agreement for ongoing online communication and relationship with the page owner. This suggests that the visitors showed a keen interest in conducting a comprehensive website exploration and expressed a need for prompt access to similar information. Furthermore, it is commonly seen that those who engage with social media platforms are often swayed by the number of likes received by a specific page. A page garnered numerous likes, which signifies its prominence and credibility. According to Richard and Guppy (2014), contemporary individuals are more inclined to engage in online activities and place their confidence in the quantity of Facebook 'likes'.

Therefore, drawing upon the insights provided by previous research, the distinctive attributes of Facebook might influence how individuals perceive and comprehend news and information on this platform. Including features such as like, share, and comment sections is absent in mainstream media platforms, yet these functionalities are readily accessible on Facebook. Users can voice their agreement or disagreement by leaving comments on Facebook posts containing specific information and news. In addition, the algorithmic functionality is a distinguishing characteristic of Facebook, as it enables the platform to comprehend the

preferences and interests of its users, hence facilitating personalized content recommendations. The Facebook above features possess significant use, catering to students and individuals in pursuit of news and information.

### **Methodology**

The present study employed a phenomenological approach to get deeper insights into postgraduate students' perceptions regarding the reliability of Facebook as a source of COVID-19 news. Therefore, a qualitative methodology is employed throughout the research endeavor as it enables the researcher to delve into informants' responses and pose subsequent enquiries to gain a deeper understanding of their reasoning and feelings. Consequently, in-depth interviews are done as part of this approach. Given the primary focus of this study on social media and individuals' perceptions, the most suitable guiding theory is the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). The careful selection of informants plays a crucial role in ensuring the validity and pertinence of data while attempting to get insight into the perceptions of news among social media users. An in-depth interview is a method researchers employ to gain a comprehensive understanding of individuals' opinions. Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter can only be achieved when the individual is intimately attached to or affiliated with it and has concurrently experienced the phenomena. This pertains to acquiring news and information regarding COVID-19 using social media channels, such as Facebook. To have a comprehensive understanding of social media and news consumption, it is essential to recruit informants for the study. The researcher defined the criteria that reflect the purpose of the research to achieve the research's objective:

- Students at postgraduate level which have background in communication fields.
- Postgraduates from universities in Malaysia, notably those from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Malaya (UM).
- Malaysian postgraduate students that utilize Facebook and possess fundamental understanding of its functionality.

Upon completing the data-gathering process, the researcher opted to restrict the number of informants to seven (R1= Informant 1). The determination of the sample size is contingent upon various factors, such as the progress and effectiveness of the interviews, the quantity of data being gathered, the extent of data analysis completed, and the availability of adequate resources to support the study (Merriam & Tisdle, 2015). The data collected from the interview was analyzed using Braun and Clark's thematic analysis method. This involved organizing the data based on the identified themes, which proved advantageous for the current study. In this particular method of non-random sampling, the researcher utilizes purposeful sampling. This process entails the identification and selection of informants who possess expertise and experience in the subject of communication. The researcher's objective in this particular context was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Consequently, the researcher sought out persons with expertise in the field of communication, as their knowledge and insights were deemed essential for the study of the specific topic at hand. Considering the aforementioned study examining the reliability of Facebook as a source of news about COVID-19, the researcher intends to employ a purposive sampling technique to select postgraduate students who actively utilize Facebook and possess a comprehensive understanding of its functionalities. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the study, the researcher employed the Triangulation method. Triangulation,

as posited by Cloutier and Ravasi (2021), validates data by employing cross-verification from many sources. Using the triangulation approach in the study facilitated the researcher in mitigating bias and enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Coleman, 2022).

## Results and Discussion

The results of this study gathered three primary themes based on the research questions. These three themes are: (1) Facebook Characteristic (2) Facebook Usage and (3) Facebook Challenges. These three themes are derived based on the research questions: (1) *“What are the perceptions of postgraduate students towards Facebook characteristics as a reliable source for COVID-19 news?”* (2) *“How the usage of Facebook as a news source for COVID-19 affect the perception of postgraduate students?”* and (3) *“How does postgraduate students perceived the challenges of Facebook as reliable source for COVID-19 news?”*

### 4.1 What are the perceptions of postgraduate students towards Facebook characteristics as a reliable source for COVID-19 news?

#### 4.1.1 Facebook Characteristic

A reliable journalistic outlet provides a thorough and logically sound exposition along with a discourse on the subject matter. If Facebook exhibits the requisite characteristics to be considered a credible news outlet, it has the potential to function as a dependable source of information. Based on the derived theme, the researcher conducted an analysis of two sub-themes that can be classified within the overarching subject, which will be further elucidated in the following parts.

##### 4.1.1.1 Accessibility

Based on the interviews conducted with the informants, most news organizations employ social media platforms to distribute information. However, it is common for individuals to overlook readily available best practices. Consequently, this hinders individuals in the public sphere from obtaining crucial information. Most participants highlighted accessibility as a critical aspect of Facebook that influences their impression of its reliability as a source of COVID-19 news. This is because those utilizing the platform are granted access to a diverse range of news articles. According to informants (R1) and (R3), Facebook is perceived as a user-friendly platform that facilitates the dissemination of information transparently. Amidst the ongoing pandemic, those utilizing Facebook can promptly access the site, where they are immediately presented with news and information about the novel coronavirus. As mentioned earlier, the information will be prominently displayed at the uppermost section of everyone's newsfeed.

*“... During the pandemic, we were forced to stay at home and Facebook was one of the ways to keep connected to what's happening at the time regarding the COVID-19 cases and news. I used Facebook to look into various reliable sources of news such as KKM's page and WHO's page as those pages of Facebook is easier to use and accessible to many.” — Informant 2*

*“... when the pandemic is happening, I do look onto Facebook to get information about COVID-19 because all the people must stay at home and cannot go out to buy the newspapers like we used to. Plus, the spread of the viruses is becoming worse day by day, so I need to know any sorts of updates regarding this issue as soon as possible and Facebook is the accessible platform for that.” — Informant 5*



The prevalence of the "Stay at home" movement has emerged as the predominant factor contributing to the utilization of Facebook as a platform for information acquisition by informants. The user-friendliness and accessibility of Facebook contribute to the ease of accessing information and news. In light of the Movement Control Order (MCO) preventing individuals from leaving their residences, it is unnecessary for them to physically venture outside. Instead, they can conveniently access information pertaining to COVID-19 by logging onto the social media platform, Facebook.

*"... I can see and make an effort to find that Facebook does have some level of simplicity and easy accessibility..." — Informant 6*

Thus, according to the Informants (R1), (R2), (R3), (R5) and (R6), the researcher discovered that accessibility emerged as a significant factor in the theme explored in this study. This factor played a role in shaping the perceptions of postgraduate students regarding the reliability of Facebook characteristics as a source of COVID-19 news. The dissemination of news has become widespread through the utilization of easily available digital platforms, such as Facebook, which is commonly employed by several news organizations.

#### **4.1.1.2 Featured news link**

The finding reveals that one of the characteristics observed on Facebook is the presence of a featured link. During the interview, Informants (R1) and (R3) made a consistent assertion that a trustworthy news outlet on Facebook consistently provides readers with a clickable link to verify or obtain further information about the news. The provision of further context for the news article is facilitated by the inclusion of a hyperlink, allowing readers to access other information. The inclusion of a hyperlink within a Facebook post can serve two purposes: to provide readers with additional comprehensive information or to disseminate fresh findings. Both outcomes possess the capacity to influence the perception of graduate students regarding the trustworthiness of Facebook as a source of news pertaining to COVID-19.

*"... I usually compare the news with the official outlets, such as the Ministry of Health (KKM) official Facebook page. If they reported it too, then it's legit. They often provide a link where I can click that directed me straight away to their official website which shown more detailed information about COVID-19 like graphical statistics and all. It is important to read the news with a grain of salt." — Informant 2*

*"... Official governmental pages on Facebook always share a link featured under their post. So, when I read on random page that doesn't match with the news on the official governmental page with the featured link to verify, that can be considered as fake and not reliable ones for me." — Informant 5*

Considering the statements made by Informant (R2) and Informant (R5) on the aforementioned hyperlink. It may be inferred that Facebook has a functionality allowing users to include hyperlinks in their posts, directing readers to external websites. This capability helps users to give readers with further and in-depth information pertaining to the topic at hand. Therefore, a significant number of trustworthy news pages on Facebook, particularly official governmental pages such as the Ministry of Health of Malaysia, provide users with links to access more information related to the posted news. This serves the dual purpose of reducing bias and preventing the dissemination of incorrect information and news.

## 4.2 How the usage of Facebook as a news source for COVID-19 affect the perception of postgraduate students?

### 4.2.1 Facebook Usage

The advancements in technology in recent times have let a greater number of persons to disseminate information swiftly and extensively across diverse social media platforms. Nevertheless, individuals exhibit varying perspectives regarding the matter of utilizing social media, particularly Facebook, as a dependable source of information pertaining to COVID-19. Based on the identified theme, the researcher conducted an analysis of three sub-themes that can be classified within the overarching theme, which would be subsequently elaborated upon in greater depth.

#### 4.2.1.1 Awareness dissemination platform

The COVID-19 global pandemic has presented unparalleled challenges on a global scale. Maintaining a heightened degree of consciousness regarding recommended preventative health behaviours is crucial in mitigating the transmission of COVID-19 within the population. Conversely, digital health services have progressively assumed more significant responsibilities in reducing in-person interactions. According to the consensus among all seven informants, it is acknowledged that Facebook serves as a medium for the dissemination of awareness, particularly in relation to COVID-19. The informant (R3) explicitly noted that a majority of notable media organisations on Facebook disseminated information, notably during the outbreak, regarding measures to ensure safety from the COVID-19 virus.

*"... Facebook is now used by almost all major news organizations to distribute awareness especially during the outbreak where they share awareness on how to prevent COVID-19 by wearing mask and sanitized regularly." — Informant 3*

Meanwhile as for Informant (R5), they agreed that Facebook did play a significant role in disseminating awareness towards preventing the COVID-19 virus to spread. They mentioned that Facebook occasionally alerted them about the current cases for COVID-19 through the government's official Facebook page such as KKM.

*"Yes of course I am aware that Facebook occasionally alerts and give awareness to users, particularly during the COVID-19 outbreak, when they share measures to prevent the virus from infecting people.... I use Facebook to gain information regarding the latest news on what is happening on that day or what is the viral issue or breaking news of the day. For example, I always wanted to know regarding the COVID-19 updates, so I followed KKM's Facebook official account to know the fresh intel regarding the updates and usually they do give and share such awareness." — Informant 5*

Hence, the study's findings indicate unanimous agreement among the interviewed postgraduate students that Facebook serves as a reliable platform for disseminating knowledge, particularly pertaining to news and information related to COVID-19. In the contemporary era, communication has emerged as the most efficacious medium, enabling heightened social consciousness and unveiling the true nature of society.

#### 4.2.1.2 Reputable news media outlets

Reputable news media sites are seen as legitimate news organizations on Facebook, as they are trusted and reliable sources of information according to informed individuals. Three informants who were interviewed expressed the viewpoint that media channels play a vital role in the diffusion of news, especially during times of big events like the COVID-19 pandemic,

when there is a global need for timely information and news updates. The informants identified government bodies, health organizations, and mainstream newspaper media as exemplars of reputable news media outlets. According to informants (R1, R2, and R3), information that is sourced from reputable media outlets, including the official Facebook page of the Ministry of Health of Malaysia, the World Health Organization (WHO), and mainstream media publications such as *Berita Harian*, *The Star*, and *Bernama*, is regarded as reliable.

*“Facebook is a preferable social media to get latest news and information and they users can get the news in no time, as long as those kinds of news come from reputable accounts such as health agencies and conventional media outlets. I usually look up for COVID-19 news or anything related to the issue on credible account like the health agencies accounts such as Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia (KKM) or World Health Organization (WHO). — Informant 1*

*“... I think that Facebook is a preferable way to get news about COVID-19 as the number of users in Malaysia are still huge and people rely mostly on social media. People are familiar with Facebook too, so it is still a reliable platform for source of news since government agencies and newspapers outlets are now can be found on Facebook as well, and these reputable news outlets might lessen the fake news among users. As for me, I often get my reliable news from *Berita Harian’s* Facebook page and *Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia’s* page” — Informant 2*

Based on the obtained results, it is possible to come to the subsequent conclusion from the derived theme, which suggests that esteemed news media organizations have an impact on the perception of postgraduate students about the reliability of Facebook as a source for COVID-19 news. Given their origins in governmental and health institutions, as well as mainstream media organizations, it is indisputable that these news media channels possess a high degree of credibility and are widely regarded as reputable sources of news. This phenomenon can be attributed to the widespread popularity of various news media sites.

#### **4.2.1.3 Acquisition latest news**

According to most users, one of the primary motivations for utilizing Facebook is to access up-to-date news and information. The informants hold a consensus regarding the reliability of Facebook as a platform for accessing up-to-date information on COVID-19. Informants (R2) and (R5) reported that they utilize Facebook as a means to access up-to-date news and information pertaining to COVID-19, in addition to using the platform for socializing with friends. The assertion was made that receiving news updates on Facebook is likely to be significantly faster in comparison to watching news broadcasts on television.

*“My main purpose of using Facebook is to keep myself updated about the current issues like politics, entertainment and health issues like COVID-19, and information.... I find Facebook as a better social media to get quicker and latest news and information. — Informant 4*

*“... I also look at articles, latest news, and other information such as daily information through Facebook as Facebook is the best place to do all these things.... By using Facebook, I can acquire latest news and information in a blink of an eye. Besides getting to know about COVID-19 cases firsthand, I also can get latest information and news about my favorite artists as well. — Informant 6*

*“I use Facebook mainly for my cosplay news, games update, reaching out to my community, reading latest news, and getting latest information that I cannot get on the news on TV.... For me, Facebook really is an easy platform to get latest news and*

*information especially during the COVID-19 pandemic where my focus was on social media and any related news about COVID-19 will be reached to me so quickly.” — Informant 7*

According to informants R4, R6, and R7, a primary motivation for users to use Facebook is to access up-to-date information and news. Informants promptly accessed information through the utilization of Facebook, a globally acknowledged medium renowned for its ability to provide news in a direct and efficient manner. In conclusion, most of the interviewed postgraduate students expressed that Facebook is perceived as a credible source of COVID-19 news due to its ability to provide timely updates, as indicated in their responses. This factor contributed to their perception of Facebook as a trustworthy source. Facebook users are provided with up-to-date information and news, including content pertaining to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. One of the factors contributing to the perception of Facebook as a trustworthy source of COVID-19 information is the rationale under consideration.

### **4.3. How does postgraduate students perceived the challenges of Facebook as reliable source for COVID-19 news?**

#### **4.3.1 Facebook Challenges**

The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, is an ongoing challenge for Facebook in upholding its credibility as a media platform. Several actions ought to be implemented to prevent the emergence of the challenges. Hence, the investigator discerns a restricted set of obstacles, categorized into two underlying sub-themes, extracted from comprehensive interviews with prominent individuals regarding the way postgraduate students see issues associated with use Facebook as a source of news for COVID-19.

##### **4.3.1.1 Anti-vaccine group**

Based on the accounts provided by the informants, it was observed during the interview that Facebook encounters a significant obstacle in its role as a trustworthy platform for COVID-19 news, namely the presence of an anti-vaccine group. Amidst the global epidemic, an anti-vaccine faction emerged with the intent to mislead individuals and disseminate erroneous content, primarily pertaining to the subject of vaccination. In the context of Malaysia, the presence of anti-vaccine organizations poses a significant challenge to the dissemination and acceptance of accurate information among the populace. These organizations actively seek to exert influence and disseminate disinformation, so instilling fear and apprehension among the public. The informant (R1) specifically noted that the situation becomes complex when numerous conspiracy theorists and anti-vaccine groups on Facebook engage in disseminating misinformation and fostering irrational fear regarding the disease, in addition to discussing the strategies employed to mitigate its spread.

*“I think one of the challenges to accept COVID-19 news on Facebook is that the anti-vax people and to avoid from their agenda is that we can only get news from news organization like Ministry of Health (KKM) or WHO...” — Informant 2*

*“... I have to figure whether certain updates regarding the COVID-19 are the real ones or not because like I mentioned before a lot of irresponsible people love to create chaos among the society just so they could make the situation even worse, for example the anti-vax individual.” — Informant 5*

The informant (R5) asserts that Facebook holds individuals who exhibit irresponsibility, leading to societal disruptions, exemplified by groups that advocate against vaccinations. In

summary, the survey findings revealed that postgraduate students perceive anti-vaccine groups as posing a threat to Facebook's credibility as a reliable platform for information on COVID-19. This issue posed a challenge for Facebook. In order to mitigate the dissemination of anti-vaccination attitude and erroneous information pertaining to vaccinations, Facebook must implement proactive steps to identify and subsequently remove such content.

#### **4.3.1.2 Comparison of legitimacy**

As per the accounts provided by the informants, a notable issue they encounter while utilizing Facebook as a medium to get news pertaining to COVID-19 is the task of evaluating the legitimacy of the information presented. It is imperative for individuals to ascertain the authenticity and credibility of news sources prior to acquiring and disseminating information to others. Moreover, the informant (R2) asserted that it is necessary for everyone to possess the ability to discern between authentic news sources and those that disseminate false information, for everyone to have access to accurate knowledge. Educating the general populace necessitates a considerable amount of exertion; nonetheless, the investment of time becomes worthwhile when individuals acquire the ability to effectively navigate the vast expanse of knowledge available in contemporary society.

*“Facebook users must know how to compare the legitimacy of the news. As of now, in the era of pandemic/endemic, people use social media not only as entertainment and a source of social validation, but also for information searching and posting news-related content.” — Informant 6*

*“Honestly speaking, legit news source from NSTP and Sinar Harian pages on Facebook will always be the best news source than any source on Facebook. If users know how to compare legit news, legit news source are still the best news source if it is on online medium. As COVID-19 is a world phenomenon, it is important for everyone to know how to compare the legitimacy of the news.” — Informant 7*

It presents a difficulty due to the diverse demographic composition and cognitive dispositions of Facebook users. Not only senior users may require assistance, but younger users may also be affected by this phenomenon. In summary, the challenge of discerning between various forms of news becomes intricate for Facebook users. Both informants, identified as R6 and R7, concurred that individuals utilizing Facebook must possess the ability to discern and evaluate the credibility of news sources. This is because not all individuals utilizing Facebook may be deemed trustworthy. Facebook contains a multitude of inaccurate information and news that necessitate verification. According to the information provided by Informants R2, R6, and R7, the researcher posited that postgraduate students perceive a notable difficulty in using Facebook as a dependable source due to the complexity of discerning authentic COVID-19 news from the proliferation of misinformation. It is imperative for persons utilizing Facebook to possess the requisite knowledge and skills, as the absence of such expertise may provide difficulties users.

#### **Conclusion**

The need to pursue news and pertinent information has become increasingly important in the modern era, as it significantly aids an individual in gaining a deeper understanding of current issues such as COVID-19 through digitalized media such as Facebook. This is consistent with the Uses and Gratification Theory, according to which people, especially postgraduate students, are active social media users motivated to select media to satisfy specific needs; in this case, people use Facebook to obtain news and information about COVID-19. However,

people rely solely on social media for COVID-19-related news and information. In that case, they risk being misled by fake news or engaging in the time-consuming process of weeding out relevant news. This study sought to investigate graduate students' perceptions of Facebook as a reliable source of COVID-19 news. For this reason, graduate students were designated as informants. Several significant factors influenced postgraduate students' perceptions of Facebook as a reliable COVID-19 news source, according to the findings of this study.

Since the advent of social media, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted people's access to information and their ability to form opinions. Based on the findings of a study conducted by Liao et al. (2021), it was determined that a significant proportion of individuals, precisely 74% of social media users, depend on online social media platforms as a primary source of entertainment consumption. According to this study, however, polarization among Facebook users appears to be the norm regarding news consumption. Students, in particular, increasingly rely on social media sites such as Facebook to remain informed, which may be both advantageous and disadvantageous. People use Facebook not only for recreation and entertainment but also to obtain the most recent news and information. During the lockdowns, the number of Facebook users has increased substantially, and the platform and its users have exerted considerable effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19 misinformation. Consequently, while Facebook keeps people informed, it also misinforms many individuals. Facebook has many advantages and disadvantages, which makes it difficult to become a reliable news source, particularly for COVID-19-related social media platform news. Postgraduate students perceive Facebook as a trustworthy source for COVID-19 news due to the credibility of the news, which includes the use of reputable news media outlets. This study discovered that Facebook users, particularly students, hold various opinions regarding the platform's dependability in disseminating news, such as COVID-19-related news. Therefore, to ensure that Facebook is a trustworthy source of news and information, Facebook must adhere to the guidelines that can help it become a trustworthy news source. Only then will Facebook be able to ensure that its platform is a trustworthy source of news and information. Even after the COVID-19 pandemic, users rely heavily on Facebook for information. Because of this, both Facebook and its users must use the platform ethically and strive to make Facebook a source of trustworthy news that is accessible to all. In addition to originating from a credible and reliable source, such as mainstream news media outlets, the information must also be accurate and transparent. For health-related news and information, it is essential to rely on credible news media agencies, such as the Ministry of Health Malaysia (KKM) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

People who cannot differentiate between various types of news may trust questionable news and disseminate it to the public, which can lead to the spread of a hoax. If the news originates from an unreliable source, its credibility may be diminished. Numerous fake accounts disseminate false information about COVID-19. An example is the anti-vaccination group, which sows seeds of doubt and disorder among the populace by spreading misinformation and propaganda. The verification marks on verified accounts are one of the Facebook features that users must utilize to obtain credible information from reputable sources. Due to the abundance of false information regarding COVID-19, obtaining news from verified accounts and pages is essential. Typically, these accounts include a link that directs users to their official account, where they can obtain additional news-related information. Even though not all unverified Facebook accounts are untrustworthy, relying on a reputable source is still prudent. Users are also encouraged to utilize the remark section, which contains information

that can help them gain insight into the topic based on the comments left by other users. By reporting the accounts for publishing misleading content, Facebook users can reduce their likelihood of encountering false information and news. Facebook's susceptibility to hoaxes and the prevalence of deceptive information hinder obtaining COVID-19 news on the platform.

Facebook is an outstanding news distribution and collection platform. However, challenges will only persist if users can evaluate the reliability of the information they discover on the platform and exercise caution before accepting fake news. COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation are disseminated persistently by anti-vaccination groups. Imagine that users are unable to determine the legitimacy of the news. In this case, they could be readily swayed by the news, which could harm the perceptions of other Facebook users as a reliable news source for COVID-19.

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