

Social Media Approach to Crisis Communication during COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis from Malaysian Perspective

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Abstract

Social media is becoming the best platform for any communication during the new norm era. Nowadays, the government uses this platform in delivering messages to citizens during a crisis or disaster. Governments who are involved with a crisis such as an outbreak of the virus pandemic must have a plan to face the issue, especially a way to communicate with their people who may get a panic attack. *Aims and Objectives:* Thus, this study will prove about social media usage by the government in message deliveries during the COVID-19 pandemic is the best method in handling crisis communication. For this research, researchers will focus on how the Malaysian government used social media in delivering information highlighting the importance and creating awareness among the public. *Methodology:* Three months of content analysis data from social media platforms such as Twitter will be collected for this qualitative research. *Results and Findings:* The research findings show that governments used Twitter not only to deliver information but also to highlight the importance and create awareness among the public.

Keywords: *social media, crisis, communication, COVID-19*

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1.0 Introduction

Social media is a communication method that enables users to create and share their content or to be involved in social networking. It is a technology that is computer-based and facilitates the sharing of thoughts, ideas and information through virtual, networks and communities. The term social media also refer to the new form of media that involve interactive participation (Manning, 2014).

Information dissemination via social media is one of the options used by the organization or even government in delivering important messages to their target audience. This platform is one of the channels used by the Malaysian Government because it allows for information exchange, such as conversation and interaction (Olanrewaju & Rahayu, 2018). When the COVID-19 pandemic attacked Malaysia at the end of 2019, government agencies such as the Ministry of Health and National Security Council (MKN) had taken initiative to report the cases via social media such as Facebook, Whatsapps, Telegram and Twitter. This step was taken since social media is the channel that can reach citizens to deliver important messages and updates faster.

The rate of COVID-19 infected, which occurred in recent years, can be considered high, and it did not leave Malaysia untouched. This became a world pandemic and was considered a crisis. To manage the crisis, proper crisis communication needs to be planned, thus the flow of information is correctly delivered, which will help in calming the worried citizens. A valid message is required to make sure that the people get the right information to avoid any panic situation. Hence, the government needs to find an effective way of crisis communication because it is the lifeblood of crisis management.

2.0 Problem Statement

The Malaysian Government has chosen Twitter as one of the social media platforms to update information related to COVID-19 pandemic status, disseminating the do's and the don'ts during the crisis and reminding citizens about hygiene routines to avoid virus transmission. Since traditional media like television and newspapers are no longer popular, thus, the government has to find alternative ways to communicate with citizens. Communicating via Twitter seems more convenient because it can target younger and older generations. The feedback was overwhelmed when the Twitter users do give feedback, contribute in online discussions, comment on the status or live video streaming and tweet the news as well as share the posting with their networking. Therefore, using social media in crisis shows instant feedback compared to traditional media. Any query, criticism or even confusion among the public also can be posted on an official page of the government's agencies to get quick responses. Furthermore, communication during a crisis could be smoother and faster. This research will explore the effectiveness of using Twitter as a medium of communication cum message delivery to citizens during the crisis. Even though there were researches on using social media during a crisis (Tampere, P., Tampere, K., & Luoma-aho, V., 2016; Lin, X. et al., 2016; Eriksson, M., 2016) little research have addressed how different communication roles via Twitter affect sensemaking during crises situations. Thus, this article will look at how Twitter is used as an information source in crises, because it provides fast and easy access.

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Social Media

Social media have had profound impacts on the modern world (Alcott, 2019). These mediums are generally defined as "Internet-based, distained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p.5). The high level of intensity for social media place a great impact in today's world. The development from traditional media changes quickly to social media one by one. This rapidly changes, leaving the traditional media behind. As time goes by, more and more new social media are replacing traditional media. Some like Twitter has replaced the traditional newspapers, and Instagram and Facebook have replaced several types of magazines. McGregor, Lawrence and Cardona (2016) have seconded this by stating that tweets were deemed equally newsworthy as headlines appearing to be from the AP wire, and Facebook allows people to connect with friends, family members, and acquaintances and gives people the opportunity to post and share content such as photos and status updates (Stec, 2015) which convey the messages that they do not need another medium for this purposes. As human beings, we chose the one, which will deliver the fastest and most reliable sources. It also changes aligned with the necessity and development. The changing nature of social media makes for an interesting comparative analysis of the leading platforms (Alhabash, 2017).

Readers have social media options to range from Facebook to Instagram and Twitter. The choice is not according to preference but necessity. In the United States of America, 670% of its people chose to receive the latest news and updates from social media and 74% from Twitter (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). This proves that social media is an important source of news. Twitter, for example, is a major source of up-to-date information which arises from the fact that anyone can instantly post, share, and gather the information that is related to breaking news (Alkhodair et al,2018).

The advantage of implementing social media is enormous (Obermaer, 2016). Individuals are able to use it at its best. Compared to the physical newspaper, news on Twitter came in almost each second and people are able to read the first publications the whole day. The most crucial time, which enables readers to do this, is during a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. Readers do not just appreciate the most updated news coverage and publication through Twitter, but they also depend on them. In Malaysia, Twitter is one of the social media channels that Malaysians opted to receive daily updates during a crucial time like the Covid-19 pandemic for the most updated news coverage.

Information spread on social media like Twitter can influence people behaviour and alter the effectiveness of the countermeasures deployed by the government (Cinelli, Quattrociochi, Galeazzi, Valensise, Brugnoli, Schmidt, Zola, Zollo, & Scala, 2020). In Saudi Arabia for example, the government used Twitter to announce curfew implementation during Covid-19 more than other social media. The dynamics of communication changes and Twitter has taken the storm by being the main source of information during a crisis like this. While, in Malaysia, the government has been up to

date in delivering messages to the public through several social media. This is specified with the Malaysian government leaders themselves who recognized the advantages of using social media to interact with the citizens (Hasbullah et al., 2013). Social media allows people to receive valuable information (eyewitness reports, pictures or video) from social media (Kaufhold, 2020). There are no better resources than Twitter during a pandemic like Covid-19 to deliver government messages to the public and to solve the crisis communication like this.

3.2 Crisis Communication

The rise of social media is becoming increasingly important during crises, where it has changed the landscape of crisis communication (Austin & Jin, 2017). Twitter, one of the channels of social media is also useful for learning about public perceptions (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Lin, Spence, Sellnow, and Lachlan (2016) summarize their research on social media technologies, which can represent government, who involved in the crisis to reach the public in facing major crisis or disaster.

In this era of technology, the use of social media in crisis communication should be considered. Social media during a crisis can become one of the best strategic communications because it allows more than two-ways interaction between government, media and the public (Lin et al. 2016). Austin and Jin (2017) agree with other theory-based crisis communication researchers who focus on crisis responses. Both researchers, Austin and Jin (2017) built a model of crisis communication to see how individuals or organizations use social media to communicate in the vent of organizational crises.

Crisis communication handled by an organization or government, which used social media as a platform can help to increase communication opportunities between the government and the public. Social media can help the government to quickly learn what the public is saying about them or issues in which they are involved. Social media such as Twitter offers more opportunities to communicate and new avenues for outreach in crisis communication (Veil et al., 2011).

According to Austin, Liu, and Jin (2012) crisis practitioners should be careful when using social media because the messages updated via this platform is exposed to both high risk and high reward. As a communication practitioner, information updated in social media need to be validated continuously, this is parallel to the new media nature where gatekeeping is no longer suitable but gate watching (Lin et al. 2016) is the new term that suit this media.

3.3 COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic of the Covid-19 outbreak was first notified to the World Health Organization (WHO), which had hit China in 2019 (The News Strait Times, 8 April 2020). Since then, the WHO has constantly pleaded for global unity and commitment at all levels in fighting the pandemic. Tracing back to the initial diagnosis of the disease, the early cases were reported in December 2019 for pneumonia of unknown aetiology (cause). These cases were all linked to the Huanan (Southern China) Seafood Wholesale Market

in Wuhan, Hubei Province (Li, Guan, Wu, Wang, Zhou, Tong et al, 2020; Lu et al, 2020). Early studies predicted the onset of a possible coronavirus outbreak (Hamid et al, 2020) and soon after, by mid-January 2020, it was clear there was substantial person-to-person transmission (Macintyre, 2020).

The novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) is one of the major pathogens, which targets primarily the human respiratory system. Earlier coronaviral outbreaks (CoVs) include the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS)-CoV and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-CoV which have significantly caused a great threat to human beings (Hamid et al, 2020). According to WHO, coronavirus is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the Covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease; diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illnesses (WHO, 2020).

WHO stated that the number of cases outside China had increased 13-fold in two weeks. This alarming situation has led to the announcement by WHO that the coronavirus outbreak has been labelled as a pandemic - is a disease that is spreading in multiple countries around the world at the same time (www.bbc.com, 11th March 2020). This current outbreak of viral pneumonia, which started in the city of Wuhan, in December 2019 is now spreading not only to many places in China but also to many other countries and regions around the world. Researchers believe that this emerging viral infection continues to pose a major threat to global public health (Luo & Gao, 2020).

4.0 Methodology

A qualitative method by using content analysis was used. Content analysis was chosen because it was the most suitable method of studying content from social media, as well as to achieve the objectives of this research. Therefore, data were gathered from the Twitter account of the Ministry of Health (MOH), Malaysia to see the dissemination of information related to COVID-19.

The data from Twitter administered by MOH were gathered in April 2020. This date was being selected as the most suitable date for this study because the COVID-19 was being declared a pandemic around this time. In addition, the Malaysian government announced a movement control order to the citizens to prevent the virus from spreading in March 2020. Then, data were analysed by using thematic analysis. This method also enables the researcher to explore the strategies used by the government to confront the crisis communication during COVID-19 that cannot be addressed by using statistical data alone. According to Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2008) content analysis is the methodology that is most suitable for studies involving messages from media such as newspapers, television, websites or social media.

5.0 Result

5.1 General Information

MOH tweeted information related to the current situation of COVID-19 in Malaysia such as reporting the recorded cases including the death, new cases, discharged cases, intensive care unit cases and the confirmed cases per day. This information is to update citizens about this new disease to alert people to be more cautious.

Table 1. Content Tweet and Theme Derived from the data transcripts

Content Tweet	Themes	Indicator
Information related to COVID-19 in Malaysia	General information	Record of new cases, death, warded patient

From the data collected, Twitter also reported the COVID-19 cases in Malaysia, which increased by 10.37% per day categorized to death, confirmed infected, warded, admitted in ICU, discharged and new cases. On the 1st of April, Malaysia recorded 2,945 cases of COVID-19 while on the 30th of April, the cases rose to 6057 cases, which show about 3,112 cases reported. On 1st April 2020, MOH tweeted:

*TERKINI #COVID19Malaysia
2 April 2020 (Khamis)*

*Kes baru 208
Keseluruhan 3,116*

*Rawatan di ICU 105
Bantuan alat pernafasan 54*

*Kematian terbaru 5
Keseluruhan 50
@DrAdhamBaba
@DGHisham
[with infographic]*

During a crisis, people cannot think clearly, are confused and feel disorientation. They need to rationalise what to do even the decision need to make fast. Individuals, members of the affected public, professionals, media and organisations increasingly use social media services such as Twitter to communicate during crises (Stieglitz, S., Mirbabaei, M, Swchwenner, L., Marx, J., Brunker, F., 2017). To make a rational decision, individuals need information to connect different cues and draw a picture of the crisis.

5.2 Precautious Advocacy

The advice and precaution steps recommended by MOH to citizens were tweeted several times a day to alert people to the steps that can be avoided from being infected.

Table 2. Content Tweet and Theme Derived from the data transcripts

Content Tweet	Themes	Indicator
Tweet on advice to be extra pre-caution from the virus.	Precaution advocacy	#stayathome, #washhands, #sanitize #facemask

The data showed that MOH posted around 164 posting in their Twitter account related to the advice and precautions steps of COVID-19. The findings showed that the government had uploaded a total of 546 posts on its Twitter. Hence, the government had taken a responsibility to remind the citizen to be careful with the virus of COVID-19. One of the posting recorded about the red zone, where high cases were traced and extra-precaution need to be taken for those who lived close to that area:

#COVID19Malaysia Pecahan kes mengikut daerah.

Anda di zon merah, perlu lebih berhati-hati. Jika kes naik mendadak, kawasan anda mungkin dikenakan Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan Diperketatkan (PKPD).

Bagi zon hijau, terus amal langkah pencegahan.

@DrAdhamBaba

@DGHisham

Using social media will be considered a reliable tool to motivate precaution taking (Sandman, 2006). Sandman stresses, “When people are insufficiently concerned about a small hazard, the task is to warn them” (p.1). As above finding proved that the government gave warnings to people who were in the Red Zone to take precaution steps to avoid infections. Government, through Twitter also keeps reminding the people to take precautionary steps wherever they are. Additionally, this precautious advocacy is needed when people are concerned about a serious hazard, the tweet is to help them bear it and to guide them through it. During infectious disease outbreaks, social media has served as an important information source, allowing users to stay up to current on the newest disease news at their leisure, as well as providing information and guidance for infection precautions.

5.3 Preventive measurement

COVID-19 preventive guidance is also tweeted by MOH to learn ways to prevent the virus.

Table 3. Content Tweet and Theme Derived from the data transcripts

Content Tweet	Themes	Indicator
Standard Operation Procedure (SOP) related to COVID-19	Preventive measurement	Highlighting SOP, the do and the don't for the citizen to take action during MCO.

The findings explained how important is preventive measures in order to make sure that the spread of the virus is contained. Daily, there were about 20 postings on SOP reminding Twitter users about SOPs such as office operations, shopping procedures, or social activities including in prayer house. The SOPs include all aspects in handling things during pandemic which to control the spreading of the virus, like garbage management:

#Operasi nyah kuman tidak ikut SOP KKM. Pihak yang berkenaan diharap merujuk kepada KKM sebelum menjalankan operasi nyah kuman.

[<https://t.co/NJY53DorbC?amp=1>]

During the pandemic, social media has proven to be an important information channel that may have a positive impact on the preventive measurement. The finding above showed that the government agency posted ways how to prevent this virus from spreading widely. Social media consumption especially Twitter, which has thousands of followers in Malaysia will be the suitable medium to disseminate this kind of reminder. Thus, it becomes the appropriate channel to cultivate preventive behaviour among users of this virus.

6.0 Discussion

Evidently, investigations through content analysis have led us to identify three themes, which are from the transcription notably: (1) general information, (2) precautions steps and (3) preventive measurement. All the themes had emerged from the subject tweeted most by MOH related to COVID-19. MOH as a government representative used Twitter as one of the media platforms to disseminate information to the citizens.

According to Austin, Fraustino and Jin (2018), media plays important role in the crisis. Mis-information will lead to difficulty in crisis management. Thus, proper media is needed in disseminating or communicating the right message to the targeted audience. General information could be interpreted wrongly if crisis information production and dissemination were handled improperly. Using new media such as Twitter is a good choice as it is considered one of the mediums that can engage with the citizens effectively (Austin, Fraustino & Jin, 2018). This is proven when MOH chose social media platforms as their channels to engage with the people in delivering the right information regarding COVID-

19 in Malaysia. Eriksson and Olsson (2016) concur that using Twitter in delivering important information during pandemics does benefit the users.

Precaution advocacy is needed to attract the concern of the citizens regarding the crisis that happened as an early warning before things get worse (Sandman, 2006). The warning needs to be alerted fast using a medium that can reach as many citizens as possible. Furthermore, crisis communication in the millennium faced a challenge, where people are more attracted to new media compared to traditional media. News delivery via new media such as Twitter is faster and more interactive. Citizens who doubt the news can directly comment and ask the truth.

Meanwhile, MOH used social media including Twitter as a medium to broadcast standard operating procedure (SOP) for things related to COVID-19 to citizens. By using the hashtag in Twitter, it is easy to refer to now and later. This is because the emergence and spreading of this virus are too fast, the government need to take faster action to deal with the virus (Poursadeqiyani & Feiz Arefi, 2020). In China, the rapid transmission of the coronavirus is prevented with the contribution of social media. Besides dissemination of SOP, China government also provide online mental health services. This service is also part of preventive measurement done by the Malaysian government to make sure the citizens are prepared mental and physical in facing the new norm that existed because of COVID-19.

Social media, such as Twitter offers a form of communication not only within affected areas but also between affected areas and the rest of the world. They provide platforms for rapid information dissemination and ways of keeping away from being infected by the virus. The hashtag does help in prioritizing information from credible organizations during the crisis, and convenient for citizens to search the info for later reference.

7.0 Conclusion

Social media in crises, such as health disasters, have been recognized by scholars and practitioners as key communication channels that can complement traditional channels. The results showed that MOH as a government representative used social media mostly for dissemination of information, in raising awareness, and as a medium to remind the citizens about the SOP. Finally, the key ingredients for good crisis communication are essentially no different from good communication in any setting, no matter what the challenges are.

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