Disseminating Information Through Social Media During Covid-19 Pandemic Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The current rate of technological innovation makes it easier to convey data from one person to another. As technology progresses, it becomes easier for everyone to access social media, to the point where some news organisations seek to exploit it as a news source. Meanwhile, in order to avoid public panic, it is critical to educate society at a young age about the impact of fake news on social media. The purpose of this study is to explain the purpose of social media usage and to investigate whether the use of social media platforms to disseminate information has increased the spread of fake news in Malaysia, as well as the effect of information disseminated among university students during the COVID pandemic. Social media is well-known for its ease of use, particularly among young people, in sharing and expressing their opinions on domestic and international topics. Using social media has become second nature to us, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the strength of social media, the public's opinion of finding information during a lockdown is quite positive. The study was carried out in a qualitative manner. The researcher gathered all of the data by asking the participants general research questions. The method employed to obtain the results was an in-depth interview. The findings revealed that information disseminated via social media was successful in raising awareness during the pandemic, particularly among university students. According to the findings, certain scientific and technical advancements should benefit the global community rather than be manipulated in order to obtain accurate and true knowledge; society must be astute. False knowledge would have negative repercussions, and society would inevitably exist in a state of deception. Obtaining reliable information during the COVID-19 pandemic is critical to ensuring that individuals become social media literate in the future.

Keywords: *Social media, fake news, effectiveness of information, university students, COVID-19.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of technology makes it easier for anyone to access social media until some media choose to use social media as a source of news. The media has been tasked with providing accurate information and assisting citizens in their comprehension (Gesser-Edelsburg, Diamant, Hijazi, & Mesch 2018). According to Frenkel, Alba and Zhong (2020), after the WHO claimed that social media companies were fueling misinformation about COVID-19 around the world, some social media companies attempted to remove false information from their platforms. The rapid development of technology that is happening now makes it easier to exchange information from one party to another. One form of information exchange is the product of journalism, which is news. With the advent of multimedia journalism, conventional media later transformed into new media. Woody Lewis (2009) echoes these ideas when it comes to the definition of a "social journalist." He says that listening and communicating with others are both important aspects of social networking.   New media comes from the word medium which is defined as a means of disseminating information and new which means new.

Nowadays, in addition to transforming into new media, conventional media is also beginning to penetrate towards social media to disseminate and obtain information. Indirectly, social media helps the media to exchange information. Through the news, we can find out a lot of information from various angles.

According to Yates and Paquette (2011), social media consists of tools that enable open online exchange of information through conversation and interaction. They further stated that social media is one emerging technology with the potential to allow for the flexibility, adaptability, and boundary spanning functionality demanded by response of organisations for their information systems. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social media as web-service that allow people to construct a profile either public or semi-public within a bounded system, then that web-service allows people to share connection between each other and enables them to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Social media, when combined with conventional information, do not replace traditional sources of information, but promote the development of the best source of information through their complementary data (Al-Garadi, Varathan, & Ravana, 2016). Social networks have played a significant role as platforms for disseminating knowledge about the coronavirus COVID-19 epidemic and health authorities are publishing social media guidelines to the public (Merchant & Lurie, 2020).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Social media is commonly known in this era of modernisation. The use of social media has become ingrained in us especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due the strength of social media, the public's opinion of finding information during a lockdown is quite positive. Because everyone will locate the most reputable source of information, social media is an enticing source of knowledge. During this pandemic, the difficulties of accessing authentic and true news has proven to be a barrier. We can say that 'false news' was present during the distribution of COVID-19 material. In contrast to traditional media such as television, radio, or newspapers, where substantial cash and a large crew are required, social media is fast developing since anybody may hold an account. Now that social media users can access it, they are more likely to utilise it as a substitute for two-way communication. Because there is a common interest in something, such as the epidemic, this communication quickly builds a community. Because ongoing media reliance can be exhibited in a variety of day-to-day activities, social media dependency is significant during the pandemic (Crolic, Stephen, Zubcsek, & Brooks, 2019). The purpose of this study is to explore the public opinion about social media usage in disseminating information among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The researcher of the study proposes to formulate the following research based on these two research questions:

RQ1: What are the purposes of social media usage by the university students during COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How effective is the dissemination of information during COVID-19 among university students?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Previous research has helped narrow the focus of this study and has shown what questions still need to be asked. This study seeks to:

i. To understand the purpose of social media usage by university students during COVID-19 pandemic.

ii. To explore the effectiveness of dissemination among university students during COVID-19 pandemic.

SCOPE OF LIMITATION

The primary goal of this research is to learn more about public perceptions of social media's ability to disseminate information and its usefulness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Malaysian university students between the ages of 22 and 23 will be included in the survey, with distinct gender, ethnicity, and other demographics segmentation. Several restrictions must be addressed throughout the investigation, which limit the conclusions. The lockout has made it impossible to get more representative data collection. For some people, especially those with restricted internet access, conducting the data collection via social media may be a barrier to participation. This research, on the other hand, will investigate how people perceive social media in terms of spreading information during the COVID-19 epidemic. During COVID-19, it will be critical to acquire a better knowledge of the potential of media consumption and credible information, as well as to compare official authorities' thoughts with real facts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2020), social media is defined as "a collection of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow for the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". The findings of this study will benefit society because every discovery and development of science and technology should benefit the global community and not be misused. In order to receive true and authentic information, society must be astute. The spread of false information will have negative consequences, and society will eventually live a lie-filled life. Meanwhile, the government and the agencies involved can assess the reliability of the information they disseminate to the public. They will be able to control the flow of information on social media in the event of any future phenomena or event. Finally, the researcher can comprehend social concerns and always consider how to better or resolve them, as well as explore implementation to improve specific features.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The coronavirus epidemic has disrupted the teaching-learning process in higher education institutions and has had an impact on teacher-student interactions. Universities were forced to conduct all of their activities with students totally online as a result of the risk during the pandemic. Because of the unprecedented circumstances generated by the Coronavirus epidemic, the impact of the pandemic on education, universities, and educators has become a hot topic among academics. As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, online teaching and learning has become the dominant educational paradigm around the world. One of the most pressing concerns about online learning is its effectiveness, especially in comparison to face-to-face learning.

SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1.1 Social Media as a Tool of Information

Research has exposed that university committee are using social media for professional and teaching intentions (Awidi, Paynter, & Vujosevic, 2019). A study found that the uppermost-ranked social media used for academic communication are Facebook, WhatApps, and YouTube (Klein, Junior, Barbosa, & Baldasso, 2018). Meanwhile, the most frequent tools in higher education used in related academic drives are Facebook and WhatApps (Manca, 2020). The studies explored by some researchers have identified the value of social media for informal scholarly communication, connectivity, community building, maintaining trust and satisfaction as well as developing social life of the students themselves (Dyson, Vickers, Turtle, Cowan, & Tassone, 2015). To be precise, the study conducted on higher education showed the comprehensive benefits of social media usage. Previous research also showed the value of social media usage for student engagement and influencing positive student learning experiences (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

Social Media Dependency

One of the world's most powerful waves is social interaction. It has an impact on our societal perceptions and will continue to do so in the future. It has existed for thousands of years, and we continue to thrive in order to improve our social standing and self-esteem. We can now communicate with people all around the world thanks to social media. People are influenced by social media because they rely on it to achieve their daily goals. Research has shown that reliance on social media influences people's individual goals (Kim, & Johnson, 2016.; Kim, & Shin, 2013). Our viewpoints on contemporary events are greatly affected by social media. On Facebook, posts from tendentious sources are consistently updated with that appear on anyone else's timeline. Social media users view and express their views about these articles. The information on social media likely attracted 88% of millennials (American Press Institute, 2015). While some people believe that social media keeps them up to date on current events, we rely on it far too much for this information. The Millennial age consumes information and news in a very different way than prior generations, and their acquisition paths are far more sophisticated and diverse than most people believe. Previously, social media usage was thought to be large. The number of monthly active members on Facebook, the world's most popular social network, demonstrates this. Facebook has a massive user base of 1.55 billion monthly active users (Dixon, 2022). Many people turned to social media while hospitalised or quarantined at home to stay in touch with family and friends and to share their personal stories and experiences (Ahmad & Murad, 2020).

DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

Transmitting, Sharing and Prevention

While the dissemination of media content through social interaction has always played a role in the diffusion of media, a growing body of work suggests that sharing is becoming central to the way people experience media content (Hermida, 2010). Sharing is a word that describes well participation in social media in general; it can be both an act of distribution, communication, and consumption (Belk, 2010; John, 2013). Sharing in the digital age is about social exchange on the one hand, and about distribution and dissemination on the other. The sharing of news, or what we can call the social consumption of news, is becoming an important part of news consumption (Wittel, 2011).

The Covid-19 pandemic is certainly an immense problem now and people's fear is escalating. The knowledge about Covid-19 has risen rapidly in social media, according to a report by (Auer, Cornelli, & Frost, 2020), and we are aware that it is unpredictable whether the cases stay higher. The study shows that an outbreak of infectious diseases in a specific population, area or time cannot be predicted (Oh, Lee, & Han, 2020). Social media is a convenient medium for exchanging information on the virus, as the key source of the most recent update (Gao et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the growing numbers of users of social media are creating false news and misinformation. A research by Park, Park and Chong (2020) found that social media has been used as a convenient solution to disinformation and false news in the context of an issue as the COVID-19 pandemic. The sharing of information in disaster contexts has increased globally at many levels since the introduction of social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Park, Park & Chong, 2020). In the context of the severe COVID-19 pandemic, the social media offer an opportunity to exchange public opinion and opinions that can be volatile and sensitive (Han, Wang, Zhang, & Wang, 2020). Misinformation about COVID-19 spreads quickly through the Internet and the media, changing the epidemic's actions. This misinformation requires attention to raise consciousness of emotions, boost emergency response and promote decisions (Han, Wang, Zhang, & Wang, 2020).

RELATED THEORY

Uses and Gratification Theory

The theory of Uses and Gratification (UGT) was developed to evaluate user motivations and gratifications of a specific media (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). This theory gives the audience more trustworthiness and holds that people actively seek out specific media and specific content to generate specific gratification. The theory of uses and gratification view people as active because they can examine and evaluate various types of media to accomplish communication goals. UGT is a useful theory for explaining why people share information on virtual networks (Ruggiero, 2000). It is thus appropriate for the context of this study because evidence suggests that the phenomenon of fake news can be considered an individual level issue (Hartley & Vu, 2020). In this research, the theory will relate on how the public university students use social media as sources of information during Covid-19 pandemic. Individual audience members can bring different levels of activity to their use of media. Meanwhile, Denis McQuail and his colleagues identified several ways to categorise audience needs and gratifications in 1972. They include diversion, which is defined as escaping from routines or daily problems; personal relationship; which occurs when people substitute the media for companionship; personal identity, or ways to reinforce an individual's values; and surveillance, or information about how media will help individual accomplish something. Social media tend to collect reliable and accurate information from media. The basic premise of uses and gratifications theory is that individuals will seek out media among competitors that fulfils their needs and leads to ultimate gratifications (Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011)

METHODOLOGY

The method adopted by this research will be clarified in this chapter. Every part involved in conducting this research from the population, population structure and sampling techniques used for the interview will be listed in this section. Finally, this chapter offers a detailed description of the chosen mode of analysis used and data collection process.

Paradigm and Methodology

For this research, the researcher used the humanistic/interpretivist paradigm of research methodology. The paradigm was chosen due to suitability for qualitative approach and the researcher is interested in describing students' experience in using social media to deliver information during COVID-19 pandemic. Next, a qualitative methodology was chosen because qualitative approaches are particularly helpful in discovering the profound significance that people offer to the events, they encounter (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Moreover, the qualitative approach will provide richer and more in-depth data which helps the future researchers. The qualitative method of study involves non-purposive sampling, in-depth interview interviewing and systematic and parallel data collection technique to analyse whether social media in the current scenario communicates coronavirus-related knowledge or disinformation to participants during COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Design

Generally, research design means a structure to plan and execute a particular research. Research design is the crucial part of the research as it includes all the four important considerations: the strategy, the conceptual framework, the identification of whom and what to study on and the tools and procedures to be used for collecting and analysing data. The phenomenological approach was used primarily to explain how participants make sense of the studied phenomenon, for instance, whether social media is an efficient method for the exchange of key information during the pandemic of Covid-19. Phenomenology approach is referring to an individual's point of view regarding the phenomena that exists. It helps the researcher to understand more about people's perceptions, perspectives, and a good understanding of current situations especially during this COVID-19 pandemic. Social networking advances have paved the way for user-generated content that in certain situations, leads to early-level alerts, awareness and precautions equally disseminated with misinformation and disinformation. Many social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are working together to help promote legitimate content to generate awareness from credible sources and to suppress fake news or disinformation that would generate public fear.

Method of Data Collection

In this research, in-depth interview was chosen to explore the depth of social media usage in disseminating information during COVID-19 pandemic among the university students. The groups were chosen by certain characteristic like pursuing studies in Malaysian universities and social media users. Those characteristics will help the researcher to get more data analysis according to the target audience. In-depth interviews resemble observational interviews in that by asking them questions, a researcher can plan a guide in advance and communicate with participants. In-depth interviews are scheduled discussions aimed at creating group engagement and "obtaining perceptions about a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger, 2014). The interviewer plays a different

role in in-depth interviews than in a one-on-one interview. The goal of the researcher is to get participants talking to each other, to track participant behaviours, and to moderate the conversation during the interview.

For this research, the interview was conducted using Google Meet for convenience of the participants. The usage of Google Meet in this research served as an efficient way to conduct the interview, making it possible for students with busy schedules to participate in the study without the necessity for face-to-face in person. The huge constraint of meeting face-to-face is for safety measurement during COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone needs to think about the consequences of interviews in a large group in restaurant or some other places. Further, Google Meet is the only practical ways for the researcher to connect with participants from across the country especially during this pandemic. During the interview sessions with few groups, the researcher recorded the entire thing by pressing the Record button inside of it to make sure no crucial details is left out. After that, the researcher transcribed the interview into a transcript. Next, the researcher compared units to find similarities among the participants' point of view. Then, the researcher simplified and integrated the data into a coherent theoretical structure.

Population and Sample of Research

Population in this study stand for a group of subjects, objects, concepts, or any phenomena. It can be investigated on how the researcher generated the research based on the problem statement at first. The target population refers to the total number of subjects or the total environment of interest to the researcher. The researcher should describe the characteristics of the population in terms of size, sub-groups, and all other variables of interest. To conclude what is a sample in a research, it is a subset of the population that is representative of the entire population. The sampling method used in this research was non-random sampling whereby purposive non-random sampling took place. Non-probability sampling involves non-random selection based on convenience or other criteria, allowing the researcher to easily collect initial data (Battaglia, 2008). The participants in this study were Malaysian university students, and the samples were social media users, whose gender assisted the researcher in investigating information transmission in social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this research, 20 students were interviewed for the purpose.

Research Instrument

Qualitative interviewing tries to substantially deepen the surface of superficial answers to acquire actual meanings, the completeness of attitudes, actions, and experiences assigned by individuals. Depending on the nature of the research issue and the population researched, quality interviews may take many shapes.

3.5.1 Semi structured in-depth interview.

An in-depth interview is a qualitative research approach, in which a few participants do rigorous interviews to examine their ideas about a certain topic, program or issue (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are defined by theme guides that contain important questions that are used in every interview in the same way, but the sequence of the questions and the amount to which the interviewer assesses for knowledge may vary. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate, if the researcher has a sense of what is happening on the study subject in the sample. However, the researcher would like to ensure that there

is no risk of loss of meaning because a conventional approach is imposed. This might be done by pilot interviews prior to data collection.

Thematic Analysis
The researcher used thematic analysis as the method of analysing qualitative data in this study. It is usually applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly (Caufield, 2019). The researcher gathered the data from a group of relevant people and then analysed it to answer any of these questions. Thematic analysis provides you a great deal of freedom in data interpretation and enables the researcher to categorise them into broad topics, to handle enormous data sets more readily. However, the danger of overlooking intricacies in the data is also included. The themes are generally extremely subjective and are based on the judgment of the researcher, so the researcher's own choices and interpretations must be carefully considered.

DATA COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

The results section provides details of all the experiments that are required to support the conclusions of the paper. The validity and reliability of the instrument had been reviewed to show the trustworthiness of the research. The data collection management is chosen in which a group of interviewees are involved in the research procedure. The data that were collected are then analysed and discussed and the results are also displayed.

The interview transcripts are used to evaluate the similarities percentage among the participants. NVivo 12 software classifies the same data into separate nodes after extracting and uploading it, and applies coding, putting them together under similar themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section concentrates on the descriptions of the results, and for the study to be understood, discussions are presented. Two sources consist of in-depth interviews and document analysis were used to gain the data. During the interview, the researcher explains the objectives of the study more detail and provides the participants with questions to assist the researcher to get data from research questions clearer and start the interview. The researcher used the NVivo program to make the data analysis.

Major Findings
a)   Purposes of Social Media Usage by the University During COVID-19 Pandemic
Research Question One: What are the purposes of social media usage by the university during COVID-19 pandemic?

(i)   Theme: Social Media Usage
The theme of social media usage purposes used by the university implies on three subthemes that are (1) student engagement, (2) collaborative learning, and (3) maintaining trust. Each subtheme is addressed further in the following sections.

(ii)   Subtheme 1: Student Engagement
The analysis under this theme refers to the experience of participants in viewing the effort of university adopting social media usage during COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this

subtheme is to support the research question on the purposes of social media usage by university.

Data analysis exhibited all the participants experiencing the usage of social media platform provided by their university. Most of the participants are following the Facebook page, Instagram, and Twitter accounts of their university social media. For instance, here one of the answers from the participant:

> …I believe that er… every university have their social media account like my university, UPSI. UPSI have few social media platforms to visit like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and so on. Then, the best part of it…errrrr.. UPSI has a Facebook page named UPSI Confession. From there, students can share or interact or discussing of certain hot issues around them. When there's lot of confession posted there, mostly student engage with others there eeeerrr including me also hahahahahha…

(iii)   Subtheme 2: Collaborative Learning

Based on the research question, the purposes of using social media among universities were identified. The data analysis showed that the universities are adapting to the advancement of technology nowadays. With the assistance of social media, they are making the process of learning become more interesting especially during online distance learning (ODL). Refer to a participant's opinion below:

> …since the world of technology are getting advance, and people are tending to do everything within online platform…eerrrr…it is a wise choice for the academic department to create new surroundings for the students. Aaaahh.. For example, eeeerr… the academic department use social media like Facebook and Instagram to share notes and tips for exams. Furthermore, social media are more preferable to youngsters nowadays …

(iv)   Subtheme 3: Maintaining Trust

To speak about the usage of social media by the university, the researcher found that the essential of intention adopting it results on providing a secure platform for the university students. In this matter, social media functions as the source to obtain information during COVID-19 pandemic. This conclusion is supported by the answer below:

> …urmmmm the purpose of using social media during pandemic to communicate with students by sharing new updates on certain issues. As we know, lots of things happen during this ODL time. Aahh like how the university trying to reach out the students ahhh giving information about new schedule or issues regarding of COVID-19 and so on. Maybe the university want to provide secure social media platform for the student to get ahh information. So, students will rely on the university social media provided and of course ahhh students trust on them…

b) *Effectiveness on the dissemination of information during COVID-19 among university students*

Research Question Two: How effective is the dissemination of information during COVID-19 among university students?

(i) *Effectiveness Influences*

Subtheme 1: Student awareness on learning

The researcher wants to understand the influences of the effectiveness in disseminating information during COVID-19 pandemic among the university students. Due to the pandemic, institutional educations are likely to shut down the face-to-face classes among the students. Thus, the introduction to ODL is revealed to university students as an alternative to conduct an efficient teaching and learning process. Here is an example of the participant's answer below:

> …aaahhh …even though we are not face to face, but from online, we are like online also because you meet the lecturer. So, from technology, we can learn for example statistics, through social media, the lecturer can send their method. Sharing their tips on the Instagram. So, from social media we can also relate to our learning. For example, what percentage join ODL, what is the information about the announcement in the faculty or university. And one more, like me, Uitm students can find out current issues about other universities…

(ii) *Subtheme 2: Improving students' performance*

In this section, the researcher would like to see how the influence of the effectiveness of social media in conveying information during COVID-19 among the university students. The researcher found that the effectiveness of information delivery during a pandemic can improve students' performance. For instance, below is participant's opinion regarding this:

> …so … improving hurmm … before, we had a medium, which was a physical book only. But, right now use technology. And from social media, people also share their knowledge. Their content … Whatever the information or learning, drills are all we learn from books. In the past, books from my university used different modules and syllabi. But, at UM, use something else as well. But, through social media, student portals, you can find many things. Like we share what research is interesting and share into social media.…

(iii) *Subtheme 3: Increasing students' engagement*

The researcher conducted the interview to seek the opinion of effectiveness in social media transmitting information. Participants gave their view on this matter regarding on how the effectiveness is gaining more engagement between the university students. The participant's point of view is as below:

> …From engagement … urmmm …now it's easier. You just need to log into social media and be able to connect with other social media users regardless of what university, what age, where you live and so on…aahh …What I want to say is that it becomes borderless. It makes it easier for social media to get any information they want, including online medium, ICT, online library and so on. After all, there is no reason for

students to say they do not get information because everything is now at their fingertips. Even, on Facebook, many of them share content such as measures to control the ODL situation at home and so on....

CONCLUSION

People use social media platform during lock-down to get COVID-19 information. The significance of social media panic varies according to the sex, age, and degree of education of the individual. In increasing concern about the COVID-19 epidemic, social media plays an important role to spread information including for the education during the online distance learning (ODL). The analysis of various types of information transmitted by social media has been a major area in the research. Further investigation might thus investigate the outcomes within different universities in different fields in the different nations.

To Understand The Purpose of Social Media Usage by the University During COVID-19 Pandemic

According to the data obtained by the research, the study found that the purpose of social media usage during COVID-19 among university students are proven as they use the social media to seek information about the latest update from the government, entertainment, sources of communication within family, friends, lecturers, etc. Students use social media more to help other students by establishing the relationship, while university committee typically focus on the use of social media to promote the process of formal learning. The interviews with participants revealed that they are undergoing Online Distance Learning (ODL) under the instruction by institutional leadership in response of curbing COVID-19 and to discontinue conventional face-to-face learning in connection with their students online. In this section, themes are driven by subthemes such as students' engagement, collaborative learning, and maintaining trust.

To Explore The Effectiveness of Information Among University Students During COVID-19 Pandemic

Based on the data obtained by the researcher, to make appropriate use of social communications platform, it might encourage an interactive educational environment, promote social presence, and increase learning outcomes for official academic communication. Students viewed social media as a medium of communication more relevant than other platforms for communication online since it is easy to use, helpful and interactive. Therefore, they use social media efficiently for a pleasant learning experience. The data also analysed that social engagement between faculty members and students promotes online communication and involvement, stimulates social interaction online and provides an effective educational environment. This research shown that the theme led by subthemes like student awareness of learning, improving students' performance, and increasing students' engagement.

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