



Media dependency, interpersonal communication and panic during the COVID-19 Movement Control Order

*Ali Salman

Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia

asalmanphd@gmail.com

ali.salman@umk.edu.my

ABSTRACT

With the accelerated spread of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world continue to experience fear and panic which are manifested in diverse behavioural changes. Digital media, conventional media and interpersonal communication as mediums of information on COVID-19 might play a role in spreading panic among the population. The paper aims to determine the extent of panic caused by information about COVID-19 obtained from media and interpersonal communication among Malaysians. The paper also traces the dependency of people on online media while confined to their homes during the Movement Control Order (MCO). The study employed a quantitative approach. An online survey using Google doc was used to collect data from 253 respondents across Malaysia. The data collected comprised of closed-ended, interval and open-ended questions. The findings reveal that most of the respondents' source of panic was exposure to reports from online media (Internet and social media). The themes that emerged for online activities during MCO include buying and selling online, reading and searching for information online, teaching and learning online, working from home, spending time with family, house and compound cleaning, and gardening. Essentially, it is ironic that the online media which contributes to the general public panic is also a vital source of information on COVID-19 and a means of carrying on life routines in a lockdown.

Keywords: *Media dependency, interpersonal communication channels, COVID-19, Movement Control Order, panic*

INTRODUCTION

In late December 2019, a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was reported in Wuhan, China which eventually spread to 200 countries worldwide (Xu et al., 2020). With the ongoing worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world are still experiencing fear and panic. Confirmed cases and death toll have been on the rise, whereby as of 9 April 2021, have surpassed 133 million and 2 million cases, respectively (WHO, 2021). The pandemic has not only affected the economy of many countries but also impacted social values and caused psychological stress worldwide. These effects tend to influence human behaviour, for example, panic buying (overbuying) and non-compliance with official regulations (Hoh, 2020). Panic and fear are emotions that can harness considerable energy to deal with threats by triggering safety behaviours. For instance, excessive fear can have detrimental effects both on the individual and the society (Mertens, Gerritsen, & Duijndam, 2020). As an example, global panic as a result of the COVID-19 infodemic has caused disruption to the supply chain and triggered food insecurities in low socio-economic and other vulnerable populations (Tasnim, Hossain, & Mazumder, 2020).

Malaysia and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand and Singapore, were among the first few countries to report COVID-19 cases outside of China (Mohd Hanafiah & Wan, 2020). In Malaysia, the first wave of infections started on 24 January 2020, with the detection of 22 cases. After the first wave, 11 days went by with no cases, from 16 to 26 February 2020 but the World Health Organization (WHO) cautioned the Malaysian health authorities to be prepared for a larger wave of outbreak and ensure that health facilities were equipped to treat the most susceptible and serious cases (Shakeel, Ahmed Hassali, & Abbas Naqvi, 2020). As cautioned, the second wave began on 27 February 2020 and is still ongoing (WHO, 2020). Malaysia was one of the first countries to respond swiftly in reining in the second wave. The main objective was to minimise economic and social impacts, to limit the virus' transmission and to provide vital healthcare for those infected (Shah et al., 2020). Lockdown measures were perceived as necessary to curb the spread of the virus and the first Movement Control Order (MCO) was enforced in Malaysia on 18 March 2020. The hashtag *#stayhome* was trending in the social media urging the population to help contain the spread of COVID-19 (Shah et al., 2020). The MCO prohibited all foreigners and residents from traveling abroad, restricted movement, banned mass gatherings, closed public spaces such as places of worship and halted all business sectors except essential services.

With unprecedented mass interruption of daily lives worldwide, the pandemic also put the spotlight on the importance of determining public perception to effectively introduce public health measures to stem the outbreak (Mohd Hanafiah & Wan, 2020). This crisis attracted intense media attention. In the modern age, the proliferation of online networks and social media has radically altered the distribution of information (Wen, Aston, Liu, & Ying, 2020). In this regard, a peculiarity of this pandemic is the coincidence of virology and virality; not only did the virus spread rapidly, but so did information — and misinformation — about the outbreak and in tandem, the panic triggered in the general public (Depoux et al., 2020). The rapid spread of information strongly influenced people's behaviour and the effectiveness of the counter measures deployed by governments (Cinelli, Quattrocioni, Galeazzi, Valensise, & Scala, 2020). The misinformation regarding the pandemic obfuscated healthy behaviours (such as hand washing, social distancing etc.) and instead, promoted misguided practices that increased the transmission of the virus (Tasnim et al., 2020). Further, the conspiracy theories that surfaced on various social media platforms regarding the prevention and cure of COVID-19 have affected the news ecosystem to sustain the dissemination of accurate information (Tasnim et al., 2020).

In efforts to contain the pandemic, numerous scientific clinical trials and medical research continue to be undertaken to develop vaccines to treat the disease, as well as control measures initiated by governments (e.g., social distancing policies, quarantines, movement control orders, travel restrictions, and lockdowns) to ‘flatten the curve’ and mitigate the disrupted economic environment (Hoh, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these control measures are highly dependent on the cooperation and compliance of all members of the society. This cooperation and compliance, in turn, are strongly related to the knowledge, attitudes and practices of people (Azlan, Hamzah, Sern, Ayub, & Mohamad, 2020).

The chronic nature of the COVID-19 epidemic and lack of cure resulted in a highly anxiety-ridden atmosphere, distressful for mental well-being. Financial challenges due to disrupted livelihoods and businesses as well as stress from isolation further exacerbated the well-being of individuals and families (Blustein, et al., 2020). Further, social distancing and self-isolation is challenging in all aspects of mental health, well-being, emotional health, psychological and social wellness, collectively (Mukhtar, 2020a). The fear and anxiety can be assuaged through simple, concise communication regarding the pandemic, rather than ambiguous pronouncements (Ventriglio, Watson, & Bhugra, 2020). Interestingly, while the crisis has had negative impacts on families, it has also presented them an opportunity to reframe their daily lives by allowing them to be more mindful, focus on personal growth, build resilience and adopt new behaviours, such as handwashing, healthy diet and physical activities (Mukhtar, 2020b). In fact, it is in times like this that we need social and emotional closeness with members of our family, our friends, peers and the community we live in (Ventriglio et al., 2020).

Malaysia, like many countries, also experienced the rapid propagation of false information, such as false reports of infected individuals in various locations and unverified remedies (Mohd Hanafiah & Wan, 2020). The source of these false information were mainly citizens as well as mainstream and social media.

The problems associated with misinformation regarding the pandemic motivated WHO to launch a “Mythbuster” page, as well as partnerships with social media platforms like Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube to manage and remove misinformation. Concise, accurate messages communicated clearly was deemed critical in controlling the spread of the virus (Ventriglio et al., 2020).

Thus, based on the given background, the objective of this research is to determine the extent of panic caused by information about COVID-19 obtained from media (online and conventional) and interpersonal communication (colleagues and families) among Malaysians. The paper also examines the dependency of people on online media for homebound activities during the MCO.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reactions to pandemics and COVID-19

The general population’s psychosocial reactions to outbreaks of infectious disease over the past two decades (such as the Extreme Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, H1N1 pandemic and Ebola virus epidemic) across the globe include fear and anxiety, sadness, uncertainty, shame, irritability, sense of alienation and stigma (Sim, Chua, Vieta, & Fernandez, 2020). Notably, the dramatic rise of social media usage and digital connectivity since the earlier outbreaks of SARS/MERS, H1N1 pandemic has further fuelled the conception and propagation of such psychological responses (Depoux et al., 2020). Today, media sources are critical for supplying accurate news reports to the public. Thus, objective and timely regulation of these outlets’ reportage of crisis or emergencies is required (Wen et al., 2020).

Many of us probably have never experienced a pandemic during our lifetime. The COVID-19 pandemic is the first to occur in the age of hyper-connectivity (Mohd Hanafiah & Wan, 2020). According to Shearer, Moss and McVernon (2020), planning plays a crucial role in mitigating the sudden and potentially catastrophic impacts of an infectious disease pandemic. They also observed that national pandemic policies cover a wide variety of control options, often with non-specific recommendations for action. Despite advances in analytical methods for obtaining early situational awareness (i.e., of a disease's transmissibility and severity) and for predicting the effectiveness of interventions, a major gap exists globally in terms of integrating these outputs with the recommendations formulated in policy documents. The researchers contended that decision models provide an effective approach to defining and evaluating alternative policy options under complex and changing conditions. Thus, a decision model for infectious disease pandemic is an appropriate method for integrating evidence from situational and intervention analysis tools, along with the information in policy documents, to provide robust recommendations on possible response options (including uncertainty). However, a decision model for pandemic response cannot capture all the social, political, and ethical considerations that impact decision-making. Such a model should therefore be embedded in a decision support system that emphasises this broader context.

A cross-sectional online survey of 4,850 Malaysians showed that most of the participants held a positive viewpoint on the way the Malaysian government was handling the crisis and the ability of Malaysia to overcome it. The results also revealed that most of the respondents demonstrated a good working knowledge of COVID-19 because health authorities consistently disseminated information since the disease was first detected in Malaysia. In contrast, those who did not were probably misled by inaccurate information. Additionally, the results of an analytic study identified 15 Facebook postings with positive messages, posted by Malaysians during the MCO. The findings suggested a high degree of solidarity and empowerment among Malaysians. This suggests individual efforts to positively communicate accurate information with common goals and hopes have acted as a strong buffer against negative discourse (Azizan, Ismail, & Qaiwer, 2020). Furthermore, an anonymous survey was conducted to examine public knowledge, perception and communication behaviour among Malaysians in the early stages of MCO in Malaysia. The results showed that Malaysians demonstrated a high level of knowledge regarding risk perception and positive communication behaviour. A majority (95%) of the respondents agreed that the information they receive strongly influences their behaviour. This raises concerns as a majority of the population have been receiving inaccurate or questionable information (Mohd Hanafiah & Wan, 2020).

Pandemic panic and exposure to media and interpersonal communication

Information and news reports about COVID-19 have been rapidly posted and shared on social media and social networking sites that the pandemic is now referred to as the first social media infodemic (Ahmad & Murad, 2020). However, not much is known as to whether and how the social media infodemic has spread panic and affected the mental health of netizens. It is crucial that only reliable sources of information are accessed on social media as this can intensify fear, frustration, panic and paranoia (Ventriglio et al., 2020). The researchers sampled 516 netizens to determine how social media affects self-reported mental health and the spread of panic about COVID-19 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The participants reported that social media played a significant role in spreading fear and panic related to the COVID-19 outbreak that can negatively affect mental health

and psychological well-being. Facebook was the most used social media network and there was a significant positive statistical correlation between self-reported social media use and the spread of panic related to COVID-19. This implies that during lockdowns, people use social media to gain information about COVID-19 but at the same time, this also heightens anxiety.

A similar study in China found that consumption of digital media (social media, mobile social networking apps, online news media, and social live streaming services) encouraged preventive behavioural changes—directly or indirectly. People were washing their hands more regularly with soap and water, staying away from crowded places, disinfecting household surfaces and wearing face masks in public. However, the same consumption also triggered worry among individuals which then led to continued acceptance and conduct of preventive practices (Liu, 2020).

Panic caused by media coverage was also experienced during the Ebola outbreak. During times of intense crises, traditional news organisations have contributed to public fear and panic by emphasising on risks and uncertainties (Kilgo, Yoo, & Johnson, 2019). The extent to which digital and social media platforms contribute to this panic is an important consideration in the new media landscape. False information on social media often consists of intentionally fabricated stories that are routinely generated to publicise certain agendas (Mohd Yusof, Muuti, Ariffin, & Tan, 2020). Kilgo and this team (2019) examined news coverage of the 2014 Ebola crisis, to determine differences in presentation between newspaper coverage and news shared on the social media news platform, Reddit. Results suggest that news shared on Reddit amplified panic and uncertainty surrounding Ebola, while traditional newspaper coverage was significantly less panic-inducing.

Moreover, the dissemination of inaccurate information during a pandemic can lead individuals to resort to any measures, which in their opinion, will protect them. Left unchecked, the wrong information that reaches the public can cause social unrest and may generate unnecessary fear (Mohd Yusof et al., 2020). Thus, only verified sources and organisations should be referred to for information. In Malaysia, the public can now easily access official updates from the relevant authorities via social media platforms such as the Facebook pages and Telegram channels of the Ministry of Health (MoH), Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) and the National Security Council (Mohd Yusof et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, Malaysians have also displayed a variety of behaviours including panic buying, mass travelling during movement restriction and even absconding from treatment facilities as a result of exposure and influence from media and interpersonal communication (Koh et al., 2020). Further, behaviour changes are often influenced by the company and associations of the individual as well as shaped by the goals of the individual, be it to avoid illness, avoid anxiety and panic or to live by important life values.

Information sharing and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

In regard to the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been an active involvement of netizens in both the production and distribution of information in the form of videos and social media messages, in addition to the conventional authorities (public) and specialists, who also use various media such as social media and live streaming (Mohd Hanafiah & Wan, 2020). Social media should be used to disseminate reliable information such as when to get tested, what to do with the results, and where to receive care (Merchant & Lurie, 2020). An analysis of headlines regarding the COVID-19 outbreak showed that many of them carried negative sentiments and emotional weight (Aslam, Awan, Syed, Kashif, & Parveen, 2020). Due to this, the fear associated with death cases has created emergency and panic not only in Wuhan, but outside the borders of China.

The COVID-19 pandemic also raised challenges in information sharing by the public and the authorities. Using a systematic literature search for studies that used online social networks (OSNs) to detect and track a pandemic, researchers found that OSNs have rich information that can be utilised to develop an almost real-time pandemic surveillance system (Al-Garadi, Khan, Varathan, Mujtaba, & Al-Kabsi, 2020) .

In light of the lockdowns and movement restrictions brought about by COVID-19, social media has been a boon for individuals and communities to stay connected even while physically separated. With the recent advancements, social media is not only useful for the latest news updates, but platforms like Facebook and Twitter can provide personal and business updates (Kushner, 2020). For businesses, this means leveraging social media's functionalities to support employees and customers like never before. For governments, this means efficient sharing of factual and up-to-date information. In observing how individuals, businesses, and government agencies have been sharing information and interacting with others on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kushner (2020) outlined four primary roles that social media platforms played during the outbreak. This includes, as a source of information (and misinformation), an influence on public response to the outbreak, a marketing platform, and a powerful way to bring positivity into a very uncertain and fearful time.

However, during the Covid-19 outbreak, the term “fake news” has become so common; fake news refers to incorrect information or false tips and advice. Circumventing traditional news media like print and television, fake news found its own means of communication and exploded online through social media platforms. According to the Malaysian Correspondence and the Multimedia Committee, 99% of the identified false news distributed in Malaysia originated from local netizens who used fictitious or anonymous accounts. This negative phenomenon can be reined in through more stringent regulation of social media platforms, educating the public to fact-check all information they come across and avoid being influenced by others easily (Mohd, Muuti, Ariffin, & Min, 2020).

The means of sharing information today has been taken over from older and more traditional media by giant social media platforms, that have incredible speed, reach, and penetration (Merchant & Lurie, 2020). To illustrate, the Facebook Preventive Health tool provides individuals with vetted guidelines about health recommendations and then directs users to geo-targeted locations where these services are available (Merchant & Lurie, 2020). The researchers however, posited that the current understanding of how these platforms can be harnessed to optimally support emergency response, resilience, and preparedness, is still lacking. They outlined a framework for integrating social media as a critical tool in managing the current evolving pandemic as well as transforming aspects of preparedness and response for the future. The framework includes the use of social media to direct people to trusted sources, to counteract misinformation, as a diagnostic tool and referral system, to enable connectivity and psychological First Aid, to advance remote learning, to accelerate research, and to enable a culture of preparedness.

In filling the gap in literature with regard to panic due to infodemic, this study also determines how interpersonal communication contributes as well, apart from social media. Furthermore, in integrating social media in the framework of managing pandemic, the present study determines how social media provided information or served as a reliable source during the MCO. Hence, the second objective of this study is to explore the dependence of social media during the MCO.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study was guided by the media system dependency theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976, 1989). The theory refers to the effects of mass media on audiences and the interactions between media, audiences, and social systems. The focus of the theory is the relationship between media and audiences. Likewise, in the present study, the relationship between respondents and their dependency on online media in terms of source of panic and source of online activities are determined.

According to the media system dependency theory, there are potentially three types of effects that result from an audience's dependency on the media: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. Cognitive effects refer to changes in an audience's attitudes, beliefs, and values. Affective effects include, for example, the development of feelings of fear and anxiety about living in certain neighbourhoods as a result of overexposure to news reports about violent events in such areas. In the present study, panic represents the affective component where the respondents' dependency on media and interpersonal communication for information about COVID-19 and its relationship to panic is determined.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed a quantitative approach. An online survey containing both closed and open-ended questions was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The open-ended questions were included to obtain qualitative data which were categorised and analysed for emerging themes. Due to the MCO, the researcher was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions. Hence, interview-type questions were included in the research instrument in the form of open-ended questions which required respondents to write about their online activities while confined at home during the MCO.

Instrument

The research instrument was developed based on literature related to media and interpersonal communication and panic during pandemic (Sim et al., 2020; Kilgo et al., 2019) and the effects emanating from media dependency as postulated by the media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The questionnaire was developed on Google Form and distributed to respondents via WhatsApp and email links.

Sampling and data collection

The simple random sampling method was used to sample 253 respondents across Malaysia. Data collection was done from the third to fifth week of the first MCO in early 2020, known among Malaysians as MCO 1.0. In order to avoid skewing of data to a particular age group, five different age groups were identified, and each group represented about 20% of the sample (von Hippel, 2005; Doane & Lori, 2011). Thus, the age groups comprised 19 – 24 (n=50); 25 – 30 (n=52); 31 – 35 (n=51); 36 – 40 (n=50); 41 and above (n=50). The composition of females and males were 52 and 48%, respectively.

Data analysis

The quantitative and interval data were analysed descriptively using SPSS. The written responses for the open-ended questions were categorised under seven themes: buying and selling online, reading and searching for information online, teaching and learning

online, working remotely from home, connecting with family online, house and compound cleaning, and gardening. However, only the first five themes were included in this paper as per the objective of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

COVID-19 panic caused by media and interpersonal communication

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media took centre stage in the dissemination of pandemic-related information, which has been termed as social media infodemic. Table 1 shows that 43.5% of the respondents reported developing panic as a result of online media reports (Internet, social media). This finding concurs with Shah et al. (2020) whose study reported that social media had a significant impact on spreading fear and panic related to the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, the lack of proper communication and reports of an outbreak of a novel disease further fuelled the panic (Tasnim et al., 2020). Meanwhile, 31.2% of the respondents admitted their source of panic was their family members, followed by 27.7% who attributed their panic to reports by conventional media (TV, radio and newspapers). Colleagues and friends were the least source of panic (26.5%). These findings are in line with that of Kilgo et al. (2019) who found that during times of crises, traditional news organisations have historically contributed to public fear and panic by focusing on risks and uncertainties.

Table 1. Media, interpersonal communication and panic during the MCO (frequency and percentage)

No.	Items	Percentage*	Frequency
1	I panic because of the knowledge that COVID-19 is dangerous.	79.1	200
2	I panic because of curiosity to know more about COVID-19	51.4	130
3	I panic because of the online media reports (Internet, social media).	43.5	110
4	I panic because of reports by family members.	31.2	79
5	I panic because of reports by conventional media (TV, radio, newspapers).	27.7	70
6	I panic because of reports by colleagues and friends.	26.5	67

*N = 253 (The respondents can tick more than one item)

In addition to media and interpersonal communication, 51.4% of the respondents said they panicked because of their curiosity about COVID-19 which can be construed as unnecessary panic driven by curiosity. The “knowledge” that COVID-19 is dangerous was the highest contributor of panic (79.1%) among the respondents. As such, both of these factors are the main causes of panic, as shown by Table 1. These two factors also have the highest mean of 5.53 and 3.59, respectively as shown in Table 2. Knowledge about the pandemic can be implied as lack of knowledge which then is built up by media and interpersonal communication hype. This is in line with Tasnim et al.’s work which found that lack of knowledge and poor communication can lead to heightened panic.

Panic due to online media reports (Table 2) received the third highest value for mean ($m=3.04$, $SD=1.34$) followed by panic due to reports from family members and conventional media. Reports from colleagues and friends had the lowest effect on panic with a mean of 1.85 ($SD=1.42$).

Table 2. Panic due to media and interpersonal communication

No.	Items	Mean*	Standard deviation	Level of effect**
1	I panic because of the knowledge that COVID-19 is dangerous.	5.53	1.49	High
2	I panic because of curiosity to know more about COVID-19	3.59	1.24	Average
3	I panic because of the online media reports (Internet, social media).	3.04	1.34	Average
4	I panic because of reports by family members.	2.18	1.46	Low
5	I panic because of reports by conventional media (TV, radio, newspapers).	1.93	1.25	Low
6	I panic because of reports from colleagues and friends.	1.85	1.42	Low

**1 (Strongly Disagree) – 7 (Strongly Agree)

**1–2.99 = Low; 3– 4.99 = Average; 5–6.99 = High

Dependency on online media for activities at home during the MCO

In tracing and understanding the activities and behavioural changes among Malaysians during the lockdown, their responses to open-ended questions yielded various answers which were categorised into seven themes. The themes included, buying and selling online, reading and searching for information online, teaching and learning online, working online from home, online family bonding, house and compound cleaning, and gardening. In line with the objective of the paper, only the online activities will be discussed.

To combat the spread of COVID-19, countries and governments all over the world raced against time and implemented various measures. Besides the various standard operating procedures (SOPs) put in place, full or partial lockdowns were also imposed to curtail the transmission of the virus, halting many socio-economic activities. With businesses and shops closed or operating times shortened, many sellers and buyers went online for transactions.

“I bought goods online; shopping online”.

These responses fit in with the nature of the lockdown, pushing many shoppers to make their purchases online as many physical retail outlets were either closed due to lockdown or operated under limited capacity to maintain social distancing (Choudhury, 2020).

In addition to shopping online, other online activities undertaken by the respondents included reading and searching for information online. The respondents spent time searching for COVID-19 related information as related here:

“I am always aware of information related to COVID-19 and government press conferences online; Always be aware of COVID-19 developments in MKN’s official telegram; Read information and messages on the Internet about COVID-19; Read current reports and news about the pandemic; Looking for the latest info about COVID-19 online; I follow the online news all over the world, especially those with high cases.”

This finding corroborates with United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2020), which found that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift towards a more digital world and triggered changes in online shopping behaviour that are likely to have lasting effects.

Teaching and learning was among the top three online activities during the lockdown. Both educators and students went online for the teaching and learning process. The common responses from the respondents included:

“Studying online; I did limited activities like online classes at my residential college; lost focus to complete the assignment, due to the lack of support, the weak online network made it impossible to join and always missed classes online; helping year two children to learn online; guide children to complete assignments given by the teacher online.”

Apart from teachers who conducted their lessons and helped their students learn online, parents and guardians also took advantage of the work-from-home directive to spend time helping their children with their schoolwork. However, based on the responses, not all the respondents had a smooth online learning experience due to unstable or weak internet connection, particularly those living in rural and remote areas of the country. This finding is in line with *The Malaysian Reserve’s* report (“Limited internet”, 2020) that some students do not have access to internet or may have a weak connection, especially those living in rural areas or from poor families. In a similar news report (“Teachers face”, 2020), teachers, especially those teaching in rural and remote schools in East Malaysia, encountered many hurdles in ensuring that the Online Learning and Facilitating Process (PdPc) ran smoothly during the MCO period. The report pointed out that some students, especially those living on islands and plantations, in addition to not having internet access, had no or limited access to facilities like computers, smartphones or other digital devices required for online PdPc sessions.

With fluctuating numbers of COVID-19 cases, “work from home” or popularly known as WFH has become the new normal in workplaces in an effort to break the chain of transmission. Aside from managing work tasks and responsibilities, working parents also helped in their children’s schoolwork. Among the common responses were:

“Work from home and monitor my child’s schoolwork online; I work online at home; doing work from home includes real tasks; doing office work at home and finding the latest information on COVID-19 as well as helping the government correct false information disseminated by social media users; take the opportunity to do work that is interrupted due to previous time constraints; carry out office work as directed; I get a lot of work from the company because the company is doing e-learning.”

However, WFH has its own set of challenges as offices and workplaces struggled to prepare and adapt to remote working as evidenced by these responses:

“Working from home online with limited resources and limited systems is very tiring; I panicked because I was instructed to create and submit an action study during restricted MCO by the principal.”

A study by Jaiswal & Arun (2021) found similar findings as the present study whereby employees reported an increase in working hours, major changes in their roles, reduced levels of productivity, and increased levels of stress. With regard to family bonding, family members in different states, who were cut off by the interstate travel ban, kept in touch through WhatsApp video calls during the MCO:

“Video call with family members in other states; regularly contacting parents and siblings via WhatsApp video call.”

Communication and social networking functionalities made available by digital media were fully utilised by the respondents to stay in touch with others. In a similar nationwide study in Australia, 58% of those surveyed said they used video calls to contact relatives (Carroll, Hand, Budinski, & Baxter, 2020).

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have theoretical implications by way of media dependence as posited by the media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). This dependency is a relationship with affective and behavioural effects. Affective effects include the development of feelings of fear, panic and anxiety as a result of overexposure to reports from media and interpersonal communication as posited in this study. An example of a behavioural effect is “deactivation,” which occurs when members of an audience refrain from taking certain actions that they would have taken, had they not been exposed to certain messages from the media. Not voting in political elections is an example of behavioural effect. Similarly, the behavioural effects on the respondents resulting from their dependency on online media during the MCO are reflected by their usage of online media for shopping, teaching and learning, and working from home.

In summary, the present study explicates the role of media and interpersonal communication in creating panic regarding COVID-19 during the MCO in Malaysia. It is ironic that while online media (internet and social media) amplified panic amongst users, it was also simultaneously a vital source of information on the pandemic and served as a medium that helped people to carry on with their lives even in a lockdown. The internet and social media played an important role in supporting and facilitating socio-economic activities such as buying and selling online, reading and searching for information online, teaching and learning online, working from home as well as family bonding and socialisation. Essentially, the present study added to the corpus of work on the media dependency theory by way of exploring the affective and behavioural effects of online media on a population during a pandemic.

Furthermore, this study suggests that understanding the social dynamics behind content consumption on social media and various communication channels is an important aspect, as it can help develop more efficient infodemic models that account for social behaviour and introduce more successful communication strategies in times of health crises such as pandemics. In the present circumstance where the pandemic has engulfed countries worldwide, forcing schools and workplaces to shut down, internet accessibility needs to be addressed by improving internet coverage and infrastructure. It is also suggested that in future pandemics, early implementation of MCO or lockdowns and more stringent measures should be adopted to safeguard the mental well-being of the public, thus alleviating panic. This would go a long way in reducing panic and unhelpful behaviour that can hamper the government’s efforts in containing a crisis. A proposed framework should include, but not limited to, the use of internet and social media to direct people to trusted sources of information during a pandemic.

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Ali Salman (Assoc. Prof. Dr)

is a senior lecturer and researcher at the Department of Humanities, Faculty for Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. Dr. Ali has conducted substantial research relating to new media, digital inclusion and new media and democracy. He has extensively published his work in SCOPUS and ISI journals throughout his academic career, which has spanned for more than a decade. Dr Ali is frequently featured in local newspapers where he shares his research findings. He has been invited as an external examiner for PhD and Masters' thesis and he is an external program reviewer for a few institutions. Dr Ali is currently the Chief Editor for *Journal Insaniah* and is also serving as an editorial board member and associate editor for various academic journals including *Journal of Asia Pacific Communication (JAPC)*. He has also served as a Chief Editor for *eBangi* in the past five years.
