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The aim of the *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research* is to promote and enhance research development and debates in the field of media and communication research. It also serves as a forum for researchers and industry players who use research as the frame for social awareness and change. We welcome any submission of manuscripts throughout the year. Authors are invited to submit scholarly works on communication such as International Relations, Media Management, Film and Media Arts, Digital Education and Communities, Communication and Policies, Globalization and Social Impact, Youth and Media, Audience and Perception Analysis, Democracy and Integration, Media Literacy and Education, Media and Development, Health Communication, Politics, Hegemony and the Media, Gender and Sexuality, Social Media and Subcultures, Popular Culture and Society, Media and Religion, Media and Identity, War/Peace Journalism, Conflict and Crisis Communication, Strategic Communication and Information Management, Digital Media, Advertising and Persuasive Management, Public Relations and Crisis Management, Global Journalism and relevant areas from the standpoint of media and communication research.

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Moviegoers in Malaysia: The mediating effect of brand recall on product placement and purchase intentions

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ABSTRACT

This deductive research investigated brand recall effect as a mediator in the relationship between plot-integrated product placement, auditory-stimulated product placement, and the consumer purchase intentions of the multi-ethnic cinema patrons in Peninsular Malaysia. Product placement has been a significant factor in shaping the purchasing decisions of moviegoers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia. The theoretical framework for this research was derived from Tripartite Typology of Product Placement and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The research respondents were Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic groups that frequented movie theatres (cinemagoers) in Peninsular Malaysia. All the states that make up Peninsular Malaysia were represented, except for Kelantan and Perlis. This was because both states did not have any theatres that are currently operational. Respondents were approached by interviewers after they had finished watching movies at the theatre. In total, 513 respondents participated in the survey. For this research, the survey questionnaire was adapted from the research instruments of past studies. To analyse and evaluate the relationship between the study hypotheses, data was analysed with the Smart (PLS) Partial Least Squares: Structural Equation Model (SEM) software using the Multi Group Analysis (MGA). The findings demonstrate that brand recall does play the role of mediator in the relationship between plot-integrated product placement, audio-stimulated product placement, and the consumer purchase intentions of all ethnic groups from Peninsular Malaysia.

Keywords: *Product placement, consumer purchase intentions, cinema patrons, brand recall and movies*

INTRODUCTION

Product placement marketing, which inserts products into movies and TV shows, has a tremendous impact on consumers, according to Srivastava (2020). Over the last two decades, various studies have investigated product placement in movies (PQ Media, 2020). Natarajan et al. (2018) found that affinity for movie stars and inventiveness are two important factors affecting product placement efficacy, and Hollywood films tend to be enjoyed by many people. Further, product placements in creative, plot-related movies have been shown to increase brand awareness by 29% (Chaney et al., 2018).

Thus, product placement in Hollywood films is becoming more popular as a cost-effective (though not the greatest) approach to sell to a worldwide audience (Yee Chan, 2016). Li and Deng (2020) stated that Hollywood produces the highest number of movies per annum. Further, Hollywood films have had many successful product placements (Vogel et al., 2021). In terms of product placement, sales of Reese's Pieces surged by 65% in three months following the 1982 debut of *E. T.*, sales of Ray-Ban sunglasses jumped by 40% after *Top Gun*, and Audi demand increased by more than 30% after *Iron Man 2* in April 2010. Hood (2022) highlighted that after *Top Gun: Maverick* came out, Ray-Ban RB3025 Aviator has risen to become the most popular pair of sunglasses. This includes sales in Malaysia.

To appeal to audiences, Abdul Latif and Abu Hassan (2020) contended that a movie must be cinematic and creative. According to a Concavebt (2021) survey, Hollywood films have had a substantial amount of sponsored product placements, and the figure has been rising significantly over the years. Malaysian viewers have seen more product placements in Hollywood films than in any other media. Malaysians like Hollywood movies, as illustrated in Table 1, which presents income from Hollywood movie screenings in Malaysia (2016–2020).

Table 1. Revenue generated from Malaysian screenings of Hollywood movies

Year	Amount	Notes
1 2016	USD \$ 144,203,434	
2 2017	USD \$ 145,089,098	
3 2018	USD \$ 147,857,237	
4 2019	USD \$ 151,326.685	
5 2020	USD \$ 51,326,685	(Figures from the 1st quarter of the year. Cinemas ceased operations temporarily from the 2nd quarter onwards due to COVID-19 restrictions).

Source: National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (2020)

Based on the figures in Table 1, one can agree that Malaysian viewers spend a lot of money on Hollywood films and are unwittingly exposed to product placements. In this regard, product placements in Hollywood films are a powerful marketing tool that can influence Malaysian viewers' shopping decisions. According to Nielsen (2018), the more a client watches movies containing product placements, the more likely they are to buy the products shown (Vogel et al., 2021).

Filmmakers and marketers use auditory and visual effects to boost product placement and brand recall. As such, only cinemagoers can experience these sound and visual effects in the placements within movies in cinemas with Dolby stereo, DTS, and Panavision systems. Movies watched on television and computer cannot provide these similar experiences with extraordinary effects. As such, Peninsular Malaysia moviegoers of various ethnicities were the target group for the study, and they were surveyed as they left the cinema after watching a movie.

Studies show that ethnicity influences customer attitudes and behaviours (Nguyen et al., 2020) and clients with similar ethnic backgrounds have similar buying habits. For instance, Hashim et al. (2018) found that ethnicity affects home gadget purchases. Kristanto & Brahmana (2016) also found that ethnicity and products affect purchasing decisions differently, and therefore, marketers may target different ethnic groups with different products. Khan et al. (2015) found that ethnic signals increase brand and commercial likeability among ethnic customers (Armstrong et al., 2014; Hedstal et al., 2022). Therefore, marketing strategies must include unknown aspects like ethnic-based promotion and marketing (Armstrong et al., 2014; Hedstal et al., 2022). Culture also affects behaviour while community influences values, beliefs, goals, and behaviour. Thus, marketers must deliberate how much to change their goods and campaigns for distinct markets. Ethnic marketing helps firms to sell their products as corroborated by Armstrong et al. (2014) and Moro et al. (2019) who found that ethnic factors, including social, emotional, cultural, and physiological factors, can influence consumer purchasing. Based on this, marketers can find different appeals to attract multi-ethnic customers.

Consumer purchase intention involves the customer's choice to buy a product after evaluating it (Younus et al., 2015). A customer's willingness to pay and attitude towards buying determine his or her purchase intention (Zhang et al., 2020). Customers are different everywhere, and their buying habits and intentions are influenced by the region's prosperity as well as other social and economic factors (Boone, 2015). In this regard, this study examined how Hollywood product placements affect the shopping decisions of Peninsular Malaysia's main ethnic groups (e.g., Malays, Chinese, Indians & others). There are many studies that have investigated product placement in Malaysian cinemas. For example, Omar et al. (2017) discovered that product placement in Malaysian movies acts as a stimulant for consumer purchasing intentions. In another study, KPD Balakrishnan et al. (2012) explained the relationship between brand memory, brand choice, loyalty, and intention to purchase among Malaysian young moviegoers and brand placement acceptability based on consumers' views. Mohd Nordin and Baharom (2018) also examined Malaysian filmgoers' product placement awareness.

Brand recall also mediates product placement and purchasing intention. A mediator variable can explain how an independent variable and a dependent variable are linked (Calder et al., 2021). According to Calder et al. (2021), mediation research investigates whether the independent variable affects the (non-observable) mediator variable, which in turn influences the dependent variable. Brand recall is the mental recreation of a target product (Hertzberg & Rask et al., 2021). Corkindale et al. (2021) mentioned that "the proportion of customers who recall marketing and other communications provided about a brand." A buyer recognises a brand by memorising its facts while brand recall requires people to accurately recall a brand when provided brand-related cues (Sharma & Bumb, 2022).

Product placement, according to Balasubramaniam and Gistri (2021), has the compelling potential to elicit memory recall from viewers who have experienced the placement activity. Similarly, viewers can reliably recognise and recall things that have been prominently shown in product placement initiatives, according to Kuenang et al. (2022). Simply put, product placement causes brand recall, which triggers the audience's memory, allowing them to favourably recognise product placements in films and, in turn, influencing their buying intentions.

Pires and Stanton (2019) argued that consumer culture affects how they use goods and services. Thus, before establishing marketing strategies, marketers must research their target audience's cultures, languages, habits, beliefs, and experiences. "One size fits all" no longer applies to marketing. In this respect, the findings of this study can help advertisers and marketers to create personalised strategies, messaging, and programmes to engage with various ethnic groups, notably in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of planned behaviour

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) links thoughts and actions. According to Icek Ajzen (1985), an individual's behavioural intentions are determined by three main factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. TPB holds that human social behaviour is largely influenced by behavioural purposes. The theory has six constructs that reflect the true behaviour of an individual. The constructs are attitudes, behavioural intentions, subjective norms, social norms, perceived power and perceived behavioural control. This research used the idea of planned behaviour to describe and test its phenomenon. The construct of attitudes was measured, as this construct of the theory states that one may undertake a desired activity of interest, which supports the idea of cinemagoers, the respondents of this research who have watched movies in a cinema. The central thrust of this research is purchase intentions.

Multi-ethnic moviegoers' purchase intentions are supported by the theory's behavioural intention construct. Buyers want goods and services quickly (Shalender & Sharma, 2021). Dong et al. (2020) discovered that brand recall, as the mediator variable which triggers purchase intentions, is supported by the theory's perceived behavioural control construct. Essentially, numerous purchase intention studies have employed TPB (Liu et al., 2020; Jebarajakirthy & Lobo, 2014; Nimri et al., 2020; Aboelmaged, 2021; Dong et al., 2020; Lim & An, 2021; Shalender & Sharma, 2021).

The tripartite product placement typology

The tripartite product placement typology is a model for understanding the efficacy of product placement initiatives. Product placements have three primary qualities as a marketing approach. Tripartite typology divides product placement into visual, aural, and narrative integration (Russell, 2019). The three-dimensional or tripartite model refers to the combination of these elements. These three product placement dimensions can be used on their own or in combination.

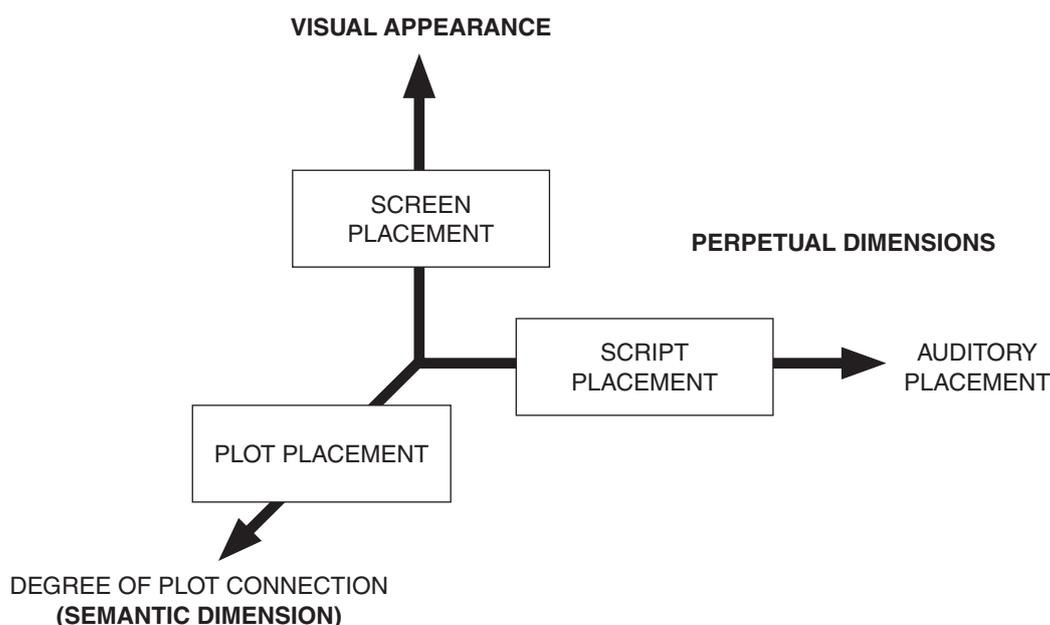


Figure 1. Russell's tripartite typology of product placement (Russell, 2019)

Product placement plot integration

This modality of product placement is extremely common in Hollywood movies, and multiple studies have shown that incorporating the product in the narrative of a movie considerably enhances the probability that the movie will be an economic success (Russell, 2019; Iyer, 2018). At one point, the plot of the movie centres almost entirely on the item being indirectly sold in the scenario. Gillespie et al. (2018) noted that a successful example of product placement that makes use of storyline integration can be found in the film *The Italian Job* which was released in 2003. The film centres on a bunch of crooks who intend to steal money from an old partner of theirs, and the film included the classic Mini Cooper as the getaway vehicles that the thieves used. The car serves as the focal point of the movie plot. Thus, the audience is tied to events that play a significant role in the narrative; connections to the storyline require the actual handling of objects and can have a significant bearing on the outcome (Russell, 2019).

Audio product placement

This concept takes place when a character in the movie audibly mentions the product's name as part of the dialogue of the movie (Laban et al., 2020). The product itself does not appear. Three elements have an impact on the significance of the audio placement: the area or context in which a brand is alluded to or acknowledged, the frequency of the brand being mentioned, and how important the brand name itself (Russell, 2019). Hearing information has a larger effect than viewing it since people may integrate information even when they are not looking at a television or movie screen. People are more intrigued in the character's conversation. "The public will pat themselves on the back saying, 'See how clever I am for using the same item as the hero,' when a celebrity promotes a well-known product," (Laban et al., 2020).

Visual product placement

When a company's logo, product, or service is displayed in the background or within the set of a television programme or in the movies, this element is known as visual product placement (Russell, 2019). As an illustration, a can of Pringles left on the kitchen table in a scene of one of the movies or television shows is a form of visual product placement (Seipel et al., 2018). It has been proven, however, that a bigger number of product placement displays on screen leads to a greater number of individuals being aware of the product. On the other hand, some marketers employ "screen placement strategies" to boost the product's recognition and reputation (Parengkuan et al., 2020). Most marketers believe that displaying the product repeatedly during presentations will increase customer awareness.

The tripartite typology of product placement was chosen since it supports the independent variables of this study (Gillespie & Joireman, 2016; Kristanto & Brahmana, 2016; Shen et al., 2018; Parengkuan et al., 2020; Hertzberg & Rask, 2021; Kembuan et al., 2021). For this study, plot-integrated product placement and audio stimulus product placement were tested as independent variables.

Plot integrated product placement and consumer purchase intentions

A key modality that needs to be given considerable amount of attention is plot-integrated product placement in movies. The incorporation of products into a film's plot or storyline is called storyline integration (Russell, 2019). In this respect, Gerhards (2019) discovered that product placement enhanced customers' purchasing intentions for the highlighted product.

Product placements that are well-integrated increase audience's attention and demand, according to a study by Russell (2019). A well-connected and integrated product placement plot indirectly generates a character for the film, and if it is well-developed, it may draw viewers' attention. Users like to relate to storyline items, especially if they have a big impact (Kristanto & Brahmana, 2016). According to Srivastava (2020), people like being linked with items inside the storyline, especially if the product has a strong effect, which may make them buy it or leave a lasting memory.

Audio product placement and consumer purchase intentions

According to Russell (2019), verbal or auditory placement involves the movie cast discussing the brand or product without the product appearing in the scenes. According to Kakkar and Nayak (2019), the more a product is mentioned, the more likely it is to impact viewers' purchasing intention. "Audible placement" means spoken placement. It is when a movie character mentions the product or discusses it with other characters. Frequent mentions of the product may influence viewer purchases (Sharma & Bumb, 2022).

Three factors that affect audio placement are brand mentions, brand name, and brand recall (Russell, 2019; Laban et al., 2020). Studies have shown that audiences do prefer products being mentioned within the dialogue of a movie. "When a celebrity promotes a well-known product, the general audience will be more inclined to purchase the product as it gives them a sense of satisfaction for utilising the same product used by their idols" (Laban et al., 2020).

Brand recall mediates the causal relationship between plot integrated product placement and consumer purchase intentions

Balasubramaniam and Gistri (2021) defined brand recall as the customer's capacity to recall a specific brand within a category. People will remember a brand when it appears in a movie and is integrated into the plot. Alternatively, brand recall is based on the viewer's memory ability, that is, the consumer's capacity to recognise and recall a brand in various scenarios (Gamble et al., 2014).

Apart from this, whenever a moviegoer sees a product, they will be able to recognise it in the future when the product is referenced. For example, Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses come to mind when one recalls *Top Gun* (Balasubramaniam & Gistri, 2021). Customers are more inclined to purchase known products and audiences' purchase decisions are influenced by the products they can recall (Parengkuan et al., 2020). Thus, customers' brand recall successfully mediates their brand purchase preferences (Calder et al., 2021).

Brand recall mediates the causal relationship between audio product placement and consumer purchase intentions

Pancaningrum and Ulani (2020) defined "brand recall" as consumers' capacity to mentally recall a brand within a category that they have viewed previously. In other words, consumers will recall a brand when a product is mentioned. Even though it should be easy, remembering a brand is not. Brand recall in the most basic degree of brand awareness and is characterised by a large amount of information used to identify a brand, according to Gamble et al. (2014).

Srivastava (2020) highlighted that marketers and companies may utilise several product placement tactics to sell a product in movies and TV shows. One of the most famous audio placements in movies is: "Get your hands off my Jordans," which Jamie Fox tells an assailant in *White House Down* (Guo et al., 2019). Brand recall helps moviegoers remember promotional spots and purchase the related goods. Thus, audio placement and

purchase intention depend on brand recall to have a significant impact on the viewers' purchase intentions (Srivastava, 2020).

The following hypotheses were developed from the literature discussed earlier:

- H1: Product placement plot integration has a positive relationship with consumer purchase intentions.*
H2: Product placement audio placement has a positive relationship with consumer purchase intentions.
H3: Brand recall mediates the causal relationship between plot integrated product placement and customer purchase intentions.
H4: Brand recall mediates causal relationship between audio placement product placement and customer purchasing intentions.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

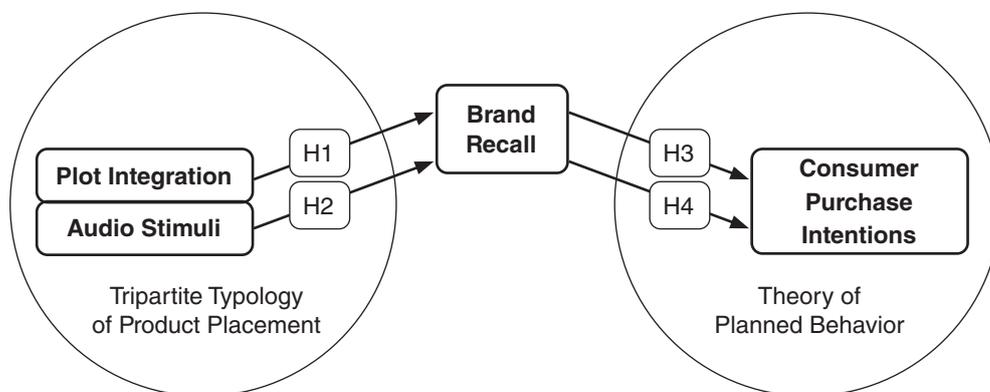


Figure 2. Research framework for study

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a quantitative method, using statistical data. This approach is used to find patterns, forecast outcomes, explore causal links, and derive results for numerous populations (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019).

Data collection

The study's target group was moviegoers from all Peninsular Malaysian states except Perlis and Kelantan, which do not have any operating cinema theatres. To determine the sample size needed to generalise the outcome, this study employed the sample size guidelines set by Krejcie and Morgan (1970, as cited in Rahi, 2017). These guidelines are still used by social science researchers today (Wahab et al., 2019). Moviegoers who were leaving a screening were approached to participate in this study. They were given a cover letter and briefed about the study's objectives and the protection of their data (Mukesh et al, 2013). This study used stratified sampling, a probability sampling approach to sample moviegoers from several states. This approach used strata to randomly choose individuals from a range of dissimilar groupings. Each individual represented a particular stratum (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). A total of 283 women (55.2%) and 230 men (44.8%) were sampled. Of these, 52% were full-time workers while 36.5% were Malay, 34.9% Chinese, 26.9% Indian, and 1.8% other ethnicities.

Table 2. Sampling size according to states

State	Population	%	Respondents	B	C	I	O
Johor	3,318,283	16	105	73	24	7	1
Kelantan	1,890,098	9	59	41	13	4	1
Kedah	1,459,994	7	46	31	10	3	1
Malacca	788,706	4	26	18	5	2	1
N. Sembilan	997,071	5	33	23	7	2	1
Pahang	1,443,315	8	52	36	12	3	1
Penang	1,520,143	8	52	36	12	3	1
Perak	2,258,428	11	72	50	15	5	1
Perlis	227,025	1	7	4	1	1	1
Selangor	5,411,324	26	170	118	38	10	1
Terengganu	1,015,776	5	33	23	7	2	1
TOTAL	20,360,213.00	100	655	452	148	44	11

Note: B*(Bumiputra), C*(Chinese), I*(Indian) & O* (other ethnicities). The figures in the table above are based on the population size of Peninsular Malaysian states and then divided into various ethnicities.

Table 3. Number of operating cineplexes in Malaysia

Location	Total cineplexes
Peninsular Malaysia	145
Eastern Malaysia	21
TOTAL	166

Source: National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (2020)

Sampling method

The sampling process was divided into two parts. The researcher adopted the following sampling methods for this research.

Sampling method 1: Stratified sampling

In the first part, Malaysia's total population of 32,047,698 was calculated based on the results of stratified sampling percentage. Stratified sampling was used to obtain a random proportionate sample size. This method was used to randomly identify participants from a variety of unique groups by establishing strata and selecting individuals at random from each tier (Rahi, 2017). This technique organised the population for research purposes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). A stratified sample refers to a sample that has been separated into groups, examined, and sampled using a stratified methodology, gender, and ethnicity, for instance. Then, a random sample of each will be collected (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Sampling method 2: Random sampling

The second component of the sampling was a compilation of strategies for selecting an appropriate research sample. An example of this would be a baseline sample where samples were selected from those who meet the baseline requirements. In the context of this research, the baseline requirement was moviegoers of multiple ethnicities (Rahi, 2017). This sampling strategy was used since the respondents were accessible and within the vicinity of the researchers (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Random sampling was carried out to randomly select the sample (Rahi, 2017). This technique offers an advantage in that all those eligible have equal opportunities of being selected from the complete region. While time-consuming and costly, this approach ensures a representative sample (Rahi, 2017).

Methods of approaching the target population

As stated earlier, the study's target group was Malay, Chinese, Indian & other ethnicity moviegoers who went to see Hollywood movies of their choice at cinemas. Since the data was collected in the public space outside the cinema, no formal authorization from the cinema operators were required.

Data collection location

Data was collected at TGV, GSC, MBO, and Lotus Five Star movie theatres in several states, including Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Malacca, Johor, Pahang, and Terengganu (newly opened cinema).

Data collection time frame

All the data needed for the study was gathered prior to the execution of the Movement Control Order, and in person. Data collection was carried out from July 1, 2019 to February 26, 2020.

Translation and content validity

The study questionnaire was first evaluated in two stages before it was administered to respondents. In the first stage, the questionnaire was evaluated by English language experts. In the second stage, an assessment of the instrument was conducted by a marketing expert. A pilot test was also conducted.

Measurement scales

The Likert scale is suitable for analyzing a person's ideas, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and other personality characteristics. Positive (Strongly Agree, Agree), negative (Strongly Disagree, Disagree), and neutral (Undecided) Likert scale options offer unbiased responses (Willits et al., 2016). Ho (2017) noted that Likert-type scales also save time and money in research. Further, closed-ended questions are better because respondents and researchers favor them (Omwancha, 2020). It improves questionnaire responses and aids researchers in data analysis. All respondents understood the study's survey and provided correct responses. Only respondents who understood product placement were given the opportunity to participate in the survey. The data obtained validated the hypothesis.

Research instrument

A closed-ended survey questionnaire was utilized for data collection. The questionnaire was developed by adapting survey instruments from previous research. It was designed with questions to help the researcher obtain data pertaining to the research phenomenon. Appendix A presents the list of questions in the survey.

Survey questionnaire

Table 4. Adaptations of study constructs

Construct	Adapted from	No of Items
Plot Integration	da Silva Oliveira Barroso (2011); Advincula et al. (2021);	4
	Abrahamsson & Lindblom (2012)	4
Audio Stimulation	da Silva Oliveira Barroso (2011); Advincula et al. (2021);	4
	Abrahamsson & Lindblom (2012)	3

Table 4. (con't)

Construct	Adapted from	No of Items
Visual Stimulation	da Silva Oliveira Barroso (2011); Advincula et al. (2021);	4
	Abrahamsson & Lindblom (2012)	3
Brand Recall	KPD Balakrishnan et al. (2012); Abrahamsson & Lindblom	6
	(2012)	1
Purchase Intentions	KPD Balakrishnan et al. (2012); Abrahamsson & Lindblom	6
	(2012)	2

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table 5. Demography of respondents

		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Age	20-30	263	51.3	51.3
	31-40	141	27.5	78.8
	41-50	69	13.5	92.3
	51-60	40	7.7	100.0
		513	100	
Gender	Male	230	44.8	44.8
	Female	283	55.2	100.0
		513	100	
Academic Qualification	SPM	111	21.6	21.6
	STPM/Foundation	104	20.3	41.9
	Diploma	166	32.4	74.3
	Degree	97	18.9	93.2
	Masters	23	4.5	97.7
	PhD	12	2.3	100.0
	513	100		
Race	Malay	187	36.5	36.5
	Chinese	179	34.9	71.4
	Indian	138	26.9	98.3
	Others	9	1.7	100.0
	513	100		
Marital Status	Married	187	36.5	36.5
	Single	287	55.9	92.4
	Divorced	28	5.5	97.9
	Widowed	11	2.1	100.0
	513	100		
Employment Status	Fulltime	267	52	52
	Part-time	52	10.1	62.1
	Contract	17	3.3	65.4
	Freelance	35	6.8	72.2
	Unemployed	142	27.8	100.0
	513	100		
State Of Origin	Kedah	42	8.2	8.2
	Penang	53	10.3	18.5
	Perak	85	16.6	35.1
	Selangor	77	15.0	50.1

Table 5. (con't)

	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Negeri Sembilan	45	8.8	58.9
Melaka	71	13.8	72.7
Johor	51	9.9	82.6
Pahang	10	1.9	84.5
Terengganu	17	3.3	87.8
Kuala Lumpur	62	12.2	100.0
	513	100	

Table 5 provides details of respondents who participated in the survey. Respondents came from all Peninsular Malaysian states except for Perlis and Kelantan due to lack of operating cinemas in these states. Malays contributed 187 responses out of 513 (36.5%), 34.9% or 179 of the 513 respondents were Chinese, 138 out of 513 (26.9%) were Indians while other ethnicities represented just 1.8% of responses (9 respondents).

Measurement model

The researcher analyzed vital information using SMART PLS. The study hypothesis was tested using the PLS SEM software which computes research data statistically. Hair et al. (2014) explained that the PLS outer model is used to determine reliability, content validity (loading and cross loading), AVE, and discriminant validity. The common method bias of this study was calculated at 38.88%, below the 50% threshold, which suggests that this research fulfills the common method bias requirement (Sarstedt et al., 2014). Table 6 shows that the measurement model's loadings are larger than 0.70, which is Hair, Sarstedt et al.'s (2017) criterion. The composite reliability score and AVE of all constructs also surpass 0.5 (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). Thus, convergence is achieved. The variance inflation factor determines multicollinearity (VIF). Hair et al. (2018) found no collinearity with a variance inflation factor (VIF) of five or less. Multicollinearity across constructs makes evaluations unstable and makes it hard to differentiate the effects of different dimensions on the construct (Ramayah et al., 2018).

Table 6. Results of measurement model analysis (reliability of constructs)

Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE	VIF
c1pi2	0.754	0.824	0.828	0.877	0.588	1.626
c1pi3	0.802					1.993
c1pi4	0.811					1.988
c1pi6	0.714					1.511
c1pi8	0.748					1.561
c3as1	0.746	0.857	0.862	0.897	0.637	1.791
c3as2	0.823					2.174
c3as3	0.801					1.847
c3as6	0.818					2.066
c3as7	0.798					1.947
d1br1	0.793	0.885	0.886	0.912	0.634	2.073
d2br2	0.82					2.432
d4br4	0.802					2.09
d5br5	0.785					2.011
d6br6	0.807					2.178
d7br7	0.77					1.895

Table 6. (con't)

Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE	VIF
e1cpi1	0.789	0.918	0.921	0.934	0.638	2.296
e2cpi2	0.817					2.62
e3cpi3	0.834					2.733
e4cpi4	0.776					2.209
e5cpi5	0.861					2.985
e6cpi6	0.821					2.501
e7cpi7	0.734					1.914
e8cpi8	0.749					2.022

Note: Audio Stimuli (c3as1-c3as7), Plot Integration (c1pi2-c1pi8), Brand Recall (d1br1-d7br7) and Consumer Purchase Intentions (e1cpi1-e8cpi8).

Ghozali (2014) suggested that reliability tests should produce values of more than 0.70 to meet the required standards for reliability. Based on the outcome of the reliability test, all variables achieved loadings greater than 0.70. Thus, the results are trustworthy and satisfy the requirements. For discriminant validity, it was determined that all constructs are different from one another. When the HTMT value exceeds 0.85 (Ramayah et al., 2018) or 0.90, discriminant validity becomes problematic (Falahat et al., 2020). Table 6 demonstrates that every build value was less than 0.85. Therefore, this study demonstrates discriminant validity between all constructs and most items.

Table 7. Results of (HTMT) ratio

	AS	BR	PI	PLI
AS	0.798			
BR	0.723	0.796		
PI	0.699	0.681	0.799	
PLI	0.624	0.548	0.621	0.767

The results of direct relationship and mediation effect presented in Table 7 demonstrate that all hypotheses are explicit from H1 to H4, and the table also includes the T-statistics value for each hypothesis. When the hypothesis is significant, the *t*-value is more than 1.64 at $p < 0.05$, 2.33 at $p < 0.01$ for a one-tail test, 1.96 at $p < 0.05$, or 2.58 at $p < 0.01$. The table indicates that there are eight significant hypotheses, H1, H2, H3 and H4 as both the lower limit (LL) and the upper limit (UL) have positive values.

Table 8. Hypothesis bootstrapping results

Hypothesis	Beta value	Std. error	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	LL	UL	R^2	F^2	Decision
AS → BR	0.584	0.073	8.052	0	0.458	0.698	0.541	0.325	Decision
AS → PI	0.291	0.077	3.809	0	0.17	0.421	0.591	0.069	Supported
BR → PI	0.313	0.073	4.299	0	0.187	0.427		0.11	Supported
PLI → BR	0.144	0.059	2.424	0.008	0.051	0.245		0.026	Supported
PLI → PI	0.244	0.055	4.482	0	0.154	0.334		0.082	Supported
AS → BR → PI	0.373	0.056	6.664	0	0.275	0.46			Supported

Table 8. (con't)

Hypothesis	Beta value	Std. error	t-value	p-value	LL	UL	R ²	F ²	Decision
PLI → BR → PI	0.082	0.042	1.966	0.025	0.016	0.15			Supported
PLI	0.624	0.624	0.624	0.624	0.624	0.624	0.624		Supported

Several empirical thresholds, such as effect size and R^2 values, should be used to assess the structural model (inner model). According to Hair, Hollingsworth et al. (2017), there are various phases in analysing the structural model, starting with collinearity, then path coefficients, R^2 value, f^2 effect size, and Q^2 (predictive relevance). They also proposed a t-statistics threshold of 1.65 with $p < 0.1$ as the confidence interval.

R -squared (R^2) reflects the number of variances accounted for in a relationship between two or more variables and the coefficient for determination in dependent constructs. According to Hair, Sarstedt et al. (2017), endogenous R^2 values are 0.75 (substantial), 0.50 (moderate), and 0.25 (weak). On the other hand, Ramayah et al. (2018) claimed R^2 values of 0.67(substantial), 0.33(moderate), and 0.19 (weak).

Hair, Sarstedt et al. (2017) used 5,000 subsamples to establish significance using consistent PLS bootstrapping. According to Dijkstra & Henseler et al. (2015), based on Table 8, R^2 is modest at 0.552 and 0.463. Cohen offered a significant model with R^2 values of 0.552 on BR and 0.463 on PI above 0.26 (1988).

Next, we should comprehend the F square (effect size) value to establish a good model's power. Results in Table 8 show 0.281, 0.018, 0.019, and BR is 0.863. Hair, Sarstedt et al. (2017) found a high effect size based on Cohen's standards. Henseler et al. (2016) interpreted impact sizes as 0.02 (small), 0.15 (medium), and 0.35 (large). Thus, the model satisfied the measuring requirements of the structural model.

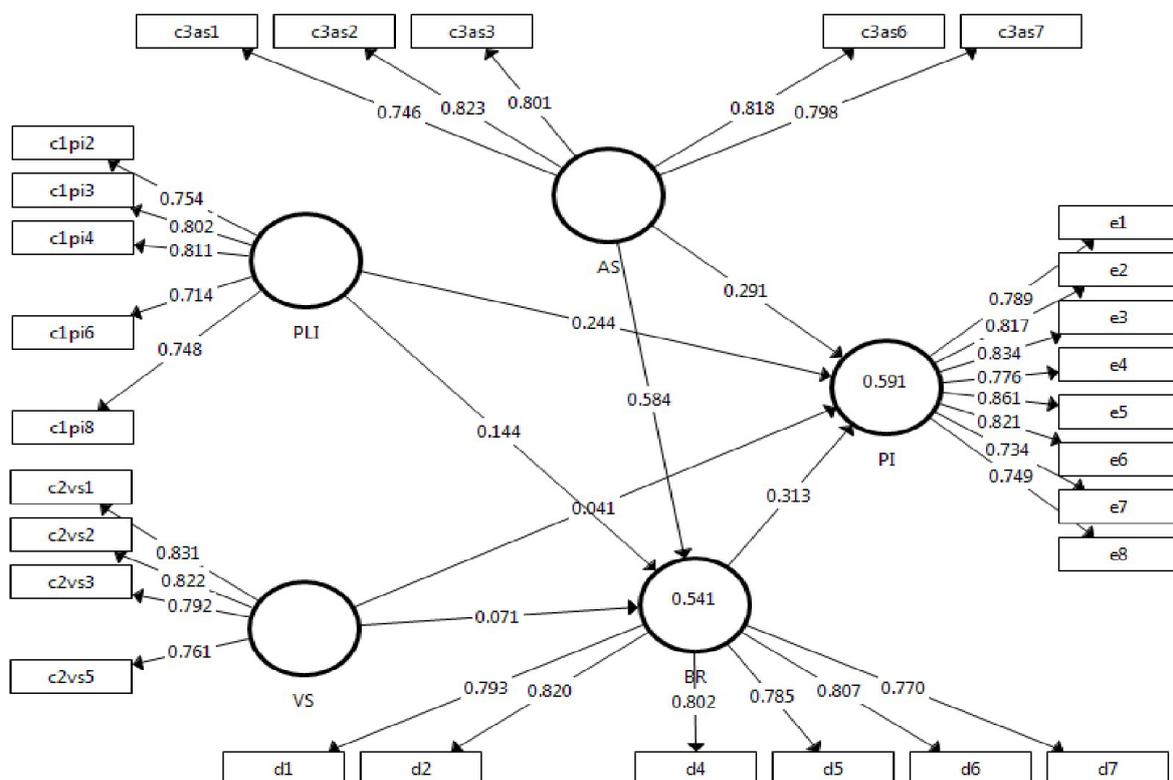


Figure 3. Measurement model

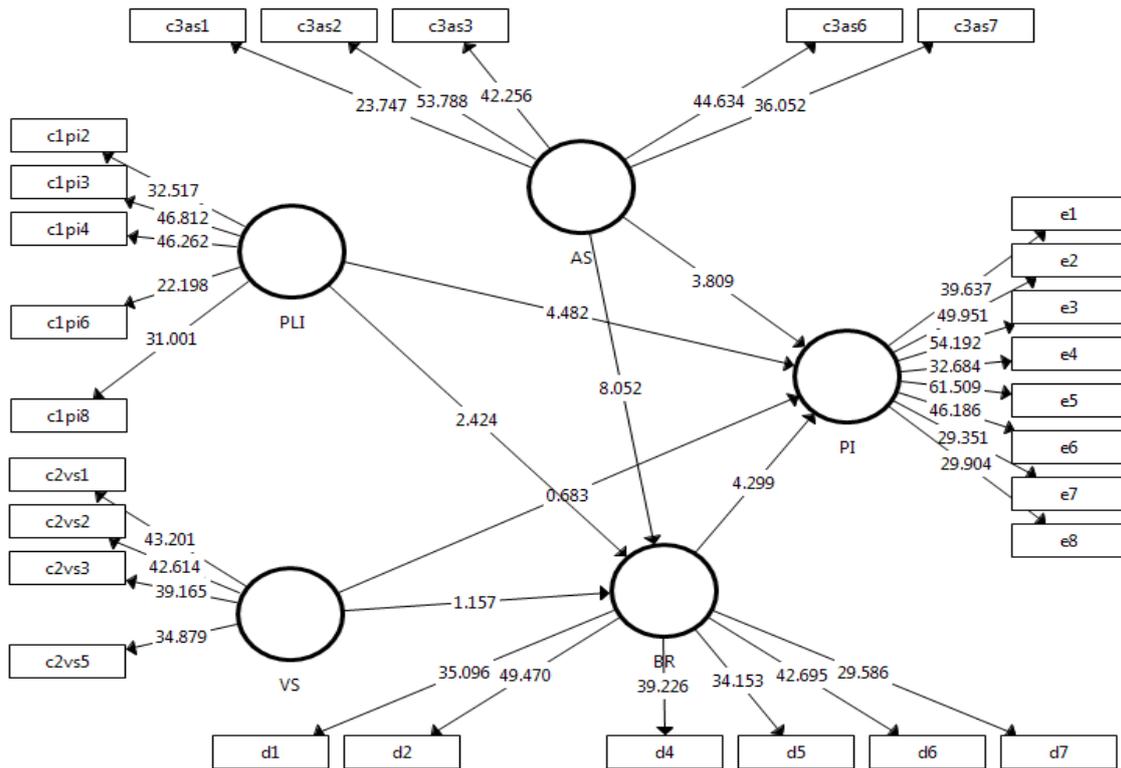


Figure 4. Structural model

Discussion

This study aims to help marketers to better engage with Malaysia’s multi-ethnic target segments by investigating and evaluating the effectiveness of brand recall in product placement (for example, plot integration and auditory stimulation) in Hollywood movies, as well as how they affect the purchase intentions of various ethnicities in Peninsular Malaysia.

The results for hypothesis 1, as illustrated in Table 8, demonstrate that consumers’ purchase intentions can be influenced in favour of a product by using the plot-integrated product placement modality. The fact that these placements are included and embedded in the storylines of the movies has impacted the respondents’ behaviour regarding the marketed product. The theory of planned behaviour explains how humans are influenced to behave in a certain way. The findings of this study are in line with that of Natarajan et al. (2018) who discovered that in the most prominent case of plot-integrated product placement, where Ray-Ban’s Aviator sunglasses appears in *Top Gun*, resulted in an increase in sales of Ray-Ban aviators.

An additional technique of product placement that may be utilised by marketers is known as audio stimuli product placement. In this type of placement, the product is mentioned verbally in the movie’s dialogue, although it is not featured physically as part of the placement and demands the audience to pay careful attention to every line of dialogue in the movie. The results for hypothesis 2, as shown in Table 8, suggest that the positioning of audio placement has a positive effect on the respondents’ intentions to make a purchase. The respondents indicated favourable benefits from the use of audio positioning on their intentions to make a purchase. This conclusion is corroborated by Parengkuan et al. (2020), who found that auditory product placements might affect customer purchases when the precise cinematic banter or placement is recalled. This also

serves as a representation of the subjective norm construct that is a part of Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour. This refers to the idea that anything may be normalised via repeated exposure and can affect the thoughts and actions of a person.

Plot-integrated product placement is the process of incorporating a product into a movie storyline (Russell, 2019) where the product becomes part of the film's identity. The product is neither used by the actors nor is a prop of the movie, yet it is crucial to the film's narrative (Nimri et al., 2020). As illustrated in Table 8, results for hypothesis 3 implies that brand recall is strongly linked to purchase intentions and suggest that participants' capacity to recall a plot-integrated product may affect their intentions to buy. Similarly, the finding is consistent with earlier studies on brand recall, which demonstrate that it can occur when a client is subjected to placement activity (KPD Balakrishnan et al., 2012; Coskun, 2021). When product placement is linked to consumer purchase intentions, a person's capacity to recall a product or service affects their ability to resist buying. This is compatible with the theory of planned behaviour, which analyses the motivating elements that affect human behaviour (KPD Balakrishnan et al., 2012; Coskun, 2021).

Another typology of product placement consists of unique audio stimuli (Russell, 2019; Nimri et al., 2020). Throughout the movie, a character or actor references the product many times, or the product is pronounced audibly. The product does not appear physically but is only verbally mentioned. The test results for hypothesis 4 confirm that when audio stimuli product placement is integrated with brand recall, it does have a significant influence on customers' purchase intentions. Therefore, while making a purchasing choice, buyers often evaluate their familiarity with the products. According to Coskun (2021), at the conclusion of a movie, the audience will be able to identify the product that has been mentioned or heard several times. This is also an example of the subjective norms construct, in which individuals accept or reject a certain action depending on their perception of whether an influential person values the action or object.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Contributions

According to Pires and Stanton (2019), ethnicity affects purchase intentions and marketing strategies. Moro et al. (2019) also confirmed that as a multi-ethnic nation, Malaysia's commercial market relies heavily on the various ethnicities that comprise its population. Each ethnicity has different beliefs, customs, feelings, traits, and tastes, therefore one-size-fits-all marketing may not work for all (Licsandru & Cui, 2019). All the aforementioned factors affect ethnicity-specific buying intentions (Nguyen et al., 2020). This is consistent with Russel's tripartite typology of segregating product placement into ethnic-based product placement marketing, finding the correct modality for each ethnicity, and expanding the concept of behavioural intent into multi-ethnic behavioural intent, although the theory is hardly used to study ethnicity. In this respect, this research will contribute to the ethnic marketing literature and assist Malaysian marketers in designing innovative ethnic-based marketing tactics. The research also illuminates the commonalities and key distinctions across ethnicities, allowing marketers to create ethnic-specific marketing efforts.

Managerial implications

Malaysian companies spent USD 1.30 billion on marketing in 2017, according to eMarketer (2017). However, not many organisation could evaluate nor identify which modality is suitable for the different ethnicities. Marketers desire product placement because many

famous movies have applied this approach (Russell, 2019) and product placements in Hollywood movies have helped viewers remember brands (Bajwa et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, product placement research is very scarce. While the majority of the available studies have researched the impact of product placement on consumer buying behaviour or intentions, none has addressed the impact of product placements on the purchase intentions of multi-ethnic moviegoers. Abu Bakar (2020) examined product placement in ads, while Mohd Nordin and Baharom (2018) examined product placement awareness in Malaysian films. Similarly, Omar et al. (2017) examined product placement and consumer behaviour in Malaysian films, while Liew and Lim (2014) examined adolescents' buying patterns. Most research examined product placement and consumer behaviour or purchase intent but none looked at how product placement impacts multi-ethnic moviegoers.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Since the study was investigating the special effects of auditory, visual, and storyline integration, which can only be experienced in a theatre due to improved screening and audio technology, only multi-ethnic cinemagoers (those who watch Hollywood films in theatres) were selected as respondents and this is deemed as a limitation.

Since most of the operating cinemas were in Peninsula Malaysia, the researcher did not include respondents from East Malaysian states like Sabah, Sarawak, and Labuan. Thus, the respondents were limited to Peninsular Malaysians only.

CONCLUSION

Brand recall is vital for the efficacy of product placement marketing since viewers should remember previous product placements. Brand recall tends to help audiences to recall product placements they have viewed. When it comes to influencing consumer purchase intentions, product placement audio stimuli, brand recall, and customer purchase intentions are all interrelated. In conclusion, brand recall does mediate the relationship between auditory stimuli, product placement and Malaysian moviegoers' consumer purchase intentions. The findings also advance the product placement literature and which academics, local marketers, academics, and industry can adopt, expand, refer to as points of reference to better target the multi-ethnic Malaysian target population for future marketing activities.

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Appendix A: Research Instrument Items

Plot Integration

- 1 The inclusion of real products in movies makes the scenes more realistic.
- 2 The use of products makes the movies more realistic.
- 3 Products play an important role in the story.
- 4 The products are well connected to the movie's plot.
- 5 I have no problem when a product is involved in the storyline of the movie.
- 6 The product that is placed in the movie should match the movie.
- 7 I buy products that I have seen movie stars using in movies.
- 8 I don't like when the product has a big part in the movie.

Visual Stimuli

- 1 I pay attention to the visual exposition of products.
- 2 The product is well integrated in movies.
- 3 The product interferes in the movie's plot.
- 4 Product position on screen distracts me from the plots of the movies I watch.
- 5 I have no problem with product placements that are visible in movies.
- 6 I like it when our favourite products are visibly used in movie.
- 7 I do not mind when a product appears too often in a movie.
- 8 I do not mind when a logo of a brand appears often.

Audio Stimuli

- 1 I pay attention to the audio mentioning product placements.
- 2 The audio mentioning the placements is well integrated in the in films.
- 3 The audio effects interfere in the film's plots.
- 4 The audio effects of the placements distract my attention.
- 5 I have no problems with product placements which is mentioned or heard (audio).
- 6 I like it when a character mentions a product name in a movie (audio).
- 7 I don't mind when a product is frequently mentioned (audio).
- 8 I can accept product placements which mention the product.

Brand Recall

- 1 I am more likely to remember a product placed in movies than placed in commercial formats.
- 2 I can remember what was said by the product that appears in movie/ what was done with the product/ where the product scene located.
- 3 I can recall at least one product placement in the movie I watched on the following day.
- 4 I can remember the product placement(s) a few weeks after I have seen the placements.
- 5 When a character that I like uses the product in a movie, I am more likely to remember the product.
- 6 When I see a particular product at a store or supermarket that had appeared in a movie, I would think of that placement scene in the movie.
- 7 Do you think that the repetition of a placement facilitates its memorisation?
- 8 Do you think that product placement in movies facilitates memorisation?

Purchase Intentions

- 1 I would purchase products I have seen in movies.
- 2 Product placements in movies make me want to buy the products being shown.
- 3 I started using a product after seeing them in movies.
- 4 I stop using the product that appeared in movie after watching it.
- 5 I buy products that I see movie stars using or holding in movies.
- 6 I would like to buy the products that appeared longer in length/ frequency in movies.
- 7 Could the vision of product used in a film influence your purchase intentions?
- 8 Could your affection for a film influence your purchase decision?



Building awareness for inclusivity through service-learning mass communication projects

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ABSTRACT

Inclusivity is not common when it comes to teaching a mix of children that are able-bodied and neurotypical. Tying with this idea coupled with the outcry of parents who have children with special needs but lack resources, the Inclusive Outdoor Classroom (TIOC) was established. TIOC was started in the front yard of the founder of the programme, Anne Sivanathan with a shoestring budget which came from donations. This is where a group of interested and caring parents, a cohort of volunteers, mainly university students, began their work. At its foundation, TIOC provides training of volunteers who assist with direct and indirect services, advocacy work to raise awareness about inclusion as well as engagement with parents and the community. Children with disabilities and young people who are enrolled would have an environment that would welcome them regardless of their disability of Down Syndrome, autism, and cerebral palsy, just to name a few. The action research done for this project was twofold, where two groups of students from the Advertising and Brand Management Program and the Digital Media Production Program joined forces to do projects to further assist in the idea of inclusiveness for TIOC. While the Advertising Campaign module worked on a fundraiser campaign and the creation of related advertising deliverables for TIOC, the Narrative Writing students took on the task of writing their stories as guided by the learning outcomes of the module. At the end of the semester, the advertising campaign successfully raised RM2,738 in a two-week period, exceeding their original goal of RM 2,000 while 29 short documentary scripts were explored and written about the children, their parents, and the volunteers of TIOC. The best take-away from this collaboration was the understanding and experience the students obtained in terms of teamwork, contributing their expertise for the benefit of a shared objective, which is to enhance the awareness for inclusivity.

Keywords: *The Inclusive Outdoor Classroom, children with disabilities, inclusiveness, awareness, engagement of parents, volunteers*

INTRODUCTION

Universities continue to evolve as institutions, not only for academic learning but also in helping to form holistic individuals (Lee et al., 2019), and service learning is part of this evolution. Universities need to help students learn to become “active responsible citizens” (Kagawa, 2007). But what is service learning? Service learning in a university happens when students take part in an organized activity under the aegis of the university aimed at not only gaining credits but also at meeting specific community needs and subsequently, reflect on the activity as part of furthering their understanding of the course content and their civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). In Howard’s (1998) synergistic model of the classroom, student experiences with community service are integrated with the course learning objectives and though this, produces new challenges for both educator and student, improved motivation and enhanced learning are rewarding payoffs for the challenges. Involving students in community projects and integrating these projects with academic learning objectives can improve civic responsibility in students as these projects “promote more powerful connections between theory and practice” (Coelho & Menezes, 2021).

Malaysian universities have begun to include service learning in various courses. As part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) — also known as the MEB (HE) — the Ministry of Higher Education launched the concept of Service-Learning Malaysia – University for Society (SULAM) in 2019 (Hanum et al., 2021). Though this initiative has been implemented officially mainly in the public universities, private universities like Taylor’s University are not far behind in encouraging the exploration of service learning as part of their courses.

This paper looks at the impact of service learning as implemented by two courses in Taylor’s University’s School of Media and Communication, with an emphasis on how it affected the students’ awareness of issues surrounding inclusivity of education between children with disabilities and neurotypical children.

The Inclusive Outdoor Classroom

The Inclusive Outdoor Classroom (TIOC) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes inclusive education by providing extracurricular activities for children of all abilities to learn through play together. TIOC prioritises human rights, inclusion, and education. TIOC also believes that all children, regardless of their abilities, deserve to have an opportunity to learn, and to learn in a diverse and inclusive environment. The organization provides extracurricular activities that facilitate an enjoyable learning experience through play for all children.

TIOC was founded in January 2016 and is led by Anne Sivanathan with the aim of promoting inclusion in the community by encouraging interaction and play, specifically between typically developing children and children with special needs. The latter group of children often miss out on fun activities and TIOC hopes to rectify this through their goal of “development [sic] children to have fun through learning” (Simply Giving, n.d.).

In an interview with Impact Hub Kuala Lumpur, Sivanathan said that TIOC is meant to be a space where differently abled children can interact with neurotypical children. TIOC tries to accommodate different types of special needs, with “a mixture of children, such as those with Down Syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, as well as the typically developing children coming together in one class” (Our Quest for Inclusion, 2019).

This action research was conducted throughout the March 2021 semester (March–July 2021) as this was the first collaboration for either module with an NGO, thus the call for research. The study done for this project was twofold, where two groups of students,

from the ADV60106 Advertising Campaign module from the Advertising and Brand Management Program, and the BCA60904 Narrative Writing module from the Digital Media Production Program joined forces to do projects to further assist in the idea of inclusiveness for TIOC. This was also to enable changes and interventions to take place before the next round of collaborations with other NGOs for future semesters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service learning and inclusivity awareness

Dart (2006) noted that many people with disabilities face negative attitudes from society that often range from pity to fear. Research by Tavares (2011) on the Kids Are Kids (KAK) programme, where children learn about a classmate with a disability (specifically cerebral palsy in this study), indicates that efforts to educate children on disabilities can create positive changes in their attitudes towards their disabled classmates, which demonstrates that thoughtful engagement with people with disabilities provides necessary exposure for better understanding and more positive attitudes to develop.

Education is not just about the transmission of information or academic knowledge from a teacher to a student. Kemmis (2006, p. 462) described education as being:

The double process of (i) developing the knowledge, values and capacities of individuals, and their capacities for self-expression, self-development and self-determination; and (ii) through the preparation of rising generations, of developing the discourses and culture, social relations, institutions and practices, and the material-economic and environmental conditions of a society, in the interests of collective self-expression, self-development and self-determination.

Alper and Ryndak (1992) expanded upon quality education as also being an opportunity for students, and specifically children, to form and experience normal relationships with their peers. Teoh and Yap (2018) also concurred that students who are exposed to the experiential learning teaching approach possess a greater tendency to apply a deep approach in their learning compared with those who learn in the context of the traditional lecture-plus-discussion classroom. Lee et al. (2019) also highlighted mobile technology as a new way of integrating this in the academia. In this regard, many public universities are testing out the possibility of mobile technology implementation in teaching currently.

Furthermore, increased engagement with people with disabilities or special needs can decrease the stigma they face (Tavares, 2011). So, when it comes to ensuring the integration of people with special needs in society, education can and does play an important role. This is where service learning comes into play. The concept of service learning has been defined by Pritchard and Whitehead as “a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic studies to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities” (2004, as cited in Muwana & Gaffney, 2011). A study by Buch and Harden (2011) on a service-learning project by the University of North Carolina in collaboration with the Urban Ministry Centre to provide shelter for the homeless in winter demonstrated that it “promoted positive civic attitudes and student desire to ‘make a difference.’”

For service learning to work well, students need to have strong faculty support and access to the community and relevant agencies. The success of service learning hinges on the support students receive from faculty, the extent to which they gain access to community, the agencies’ tradition of service, and the individuals’ leadership roles in exerting the power to affect organizational change (Muwana & Gaffney, 2011).

Educators themselves are not exempt from the need to be more aware of the importance of inclusivity and how to interact with those who have special needs. According to Melekoğlu (2013), teacher candidates required to interact with special needs students as part of their training often start with lower motivation, but end up recognising its usefulness.

Mahadir et al. (2019) mentioned that service learning allows exposure of students to minority voices, something that is especially relevant in multi-ethnic Malaysia. This can potentially assist in deepening the understanding of other groups, as Tavares (2011) mentioned with regard to how engaging with different people helps mitigate stigmatization.

Service learning in Malaysia

Service-learning projects have been and are practiced by many Malaysian universities and colleges (Omar, 2019). With community engagement being a high priority in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, more and more higher education institutions have added or are working towards adding service-learning components in their courses, with some having specific electives offered “to enhance students’ community interaction and problem-solving skills” (Khan & Jacob, 2015).

Though the Ministry of Higher Education’s SULAM programme for public universities is still relatively new, Hanum et al. (2021) found that there are already positive impacts from early implementation, with reported improvements in the students’ soft skills such as time management and communication as well as their ability to demonstrate good ethics and social responsibility in their community service engagements. However, it must be noted that service-learning projects can be challenging. Feedback from faculty indicates that while the importance of service-learning projects is undisputed, time constraints, large class numbers and the lack of standardised guidelines increase the difficulty of implementation (Yusof et al., 2020).

Hudin et al. (2018) investigated students in a Social Entrepreneurship course in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and found that its service-learning project received positive feedback from the students but noted that such projects do need to be appropriately designed for specific learning objectives to be met. A 2019 study covering the implementation of service learning in four Malaysian public universities observed that this teaching and learning approach being integrated into the courses could boost self-confidence as the students work through the learning problems and internalise the information (Mamat et al., 2019). Mat Isa et al. (2022) reviewed an alternative assessment that replaced the final test for the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Engineers in Society course. This alternative assessment evaluated student performance in terms of critical and creative thinking through community service, and the study also saw positive results, which can be used to further improve alternative assessments in the future (Mat Isa et al., 2022). A technology integration framework for service-learning pedagogy was proposed by Salam et al. (2019) and the team recommended that academics need to properly assess the uses and limitations of technology before integrating them into a service-learning project.

Yusof et al.’s (2020) work in the Malaysian context is mostly limited to the measurement of efficacy and learning outcomes. Service-learning research in Malaysia largely involves students and faculty in the sciences. For example, Khan and Jacob’s 2015 study focused on pharmacy students as was Jacob et al.’s 2017 research. Similarly, Musa et al. (2017) and Salam et al. (2019) investigated service learning in computer science and information technology courses while Mat Isa et al. (2022) conducted a document evaluation of service learning that has been integrated into one assessment within an engineering course. There has been little to no research on service learning from the angle of arts- or social science-related courses at higher education institutes in Malaysia. In this

respect, this paper will be reporting on the effects of the integration of service learning into projects for mass communication students.

Action research and service learning

Kemmis (2006, p. 474) described the ideal action research as being “engaged with the substantial problems of societies and thus the substantial problems of education for changing times”. The process of action research involves inquiry into the problem, implementation in practice, and analysis of the data for the purpose of improving practice (Craig, 2009). It is a research strategy that involves a mixture of methods depending on the context and it concentrates on functionality or workability as a goal (Greenwood & Levin, 2007).

According to Schensul et al. (2002), action research for service learning is a “participatory approach to addressing social problems that uses the methods and tools of the social sciences to involve students in identifying, conducting research on, and working to resolve social and environmental problems that affect themselves, their peers, and their communities.”

Action research for service learning allows students to take concepts out from the classroom and apply them to a real-world problem that serves or helps a societal good. Action research has been used to study the applications and outcomes of service learning in education, such as Bettencourt’s 2015 research that found service learning does indeed support educational programmes by enhancing the student learning experience or Liu and Lin’s (2017) evaluation of how a service-learning curriculum improves the awareness, knowledge and skills of students.

METHODOLOGY

According to Clark et al. (2020), educational research provides a vast landscape of knowledge on topics related to teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment, students’ cognitive and affective needs, cultural and socio-economic factors of schools, and many other factors considered viable to improving schools. Educational stakeholders rely on research to make informed decisions that ultimately affect the quality of schooling for their students. Accordingly, the purpose of educational research is to engage in disciplined inquiry to generate knowledge on topics significant to the students, teachers, administrators, schools, and other educational stakeholders. Just as the topics of educational research vary, so do the approaches to conducting educational research in and outside the classroom.

Action research is an approach to educational research that is commonly used by educational practitioners and professionals to examine, and ultimately improve, their pedagogy and practice (Clark et al., 2020). In this way, action research represents an extension of the reflection and critical self-reflection that educators employ daily in their classroom. When students are actively engaged in learning, the classroom can be dynamic and uncertain, demanding the constant attention of the educator. Considering these demands, educators are often only able to engage in reflection that is fleeting, and for the purpose of accommodation, modification, or formative assessment. In this respect, action research offers one path to a more deliberate, substantial, and critical reflection that can be documented and analyzed to improve an educator’s practice (Clark et al., 2020).

This learning extension when taken out of the classroom and out into the open spaces of learning also give different challenges and results. The action research done for this study follows closely the model adapted from Lewin (1951) (Figure 1). In the case of

this paper, action research allowed the faculty researchers to examine how service learning, when integrated with the assessments of the courses, supported the learning outcomes, and enhanced the students' understanding and appreciation of the issue of inclusivity. The action research for this study was further broken down for both modules to facilitate in the (a) planning (identifying, informing, and organising), (b) acting (trailing, collecting, and questioning), (c) observing (analysing, reporting, and sharing) and (d) reflection (evaluating, implementing, and revisiting).



Figure 1. Action research model adapted from Lewin (1951)

A. Planning (identifying, informing, and organising)

ADV60106 Advertising Campaign

For the March 2021 semester, ten students of the ADV60106 Advertising Campaign module worked on a fundraiser campaign and the creation of related advertising deliverables for TIOC.

ADV60106 Advertising Campaign is the final project module for students majoring in Advertising. For the Advertising Campaign module, the learning outcomes are to:

- a. analyze marketing/advertising problems accurately, based on a thorough situation analysis.
- b. determine a realistic marketing, advertising, and promotion strategy and objectives.
- c. plan effective communication message/media/budgeting strategies and tactics that solve well-defined problems.
- d. plan, prepare and develop messages and media programs to reach target audiences efficiently and effectively.

The module requires the students to work directly with a client to produce an advertising campaign that consists of compulsory deliverables (e.g., print advertisements and a video commercial) and alternative deliverables that are chosen based on the needs of the client and the campaign (e.g., logo redesign, radio commercial, product brochure). The campaigns are not always put into use; sometimes the campaigns are purely conceptual,

based on existing or upcoming products from the client. The client decides whether the materials are used, although in general, it is hoped that the clients will use the social media content that the students produce for them.

BCA60904 Narrative Writing

For this module, 29 students were enrolled. The task was simple enough — to write their stories as guided by the learning outcomes of the module:

- a. to identify the research, source, and use appropriate techniques to write for digital media.
- b. demonstrate the different styles of writing for the digital media to initiate social change.
- c. differentiate the digital narrative writing skill for the big and small screen for all mediums of communication—economic, politics and social.
- d. develop the power of digital narrative writing and its techniques.

This module outlines writing narratives and technical aspects for programs for the big and small screens. It also examines ethical issues in the production world. The learning and teaching approach for the module is discussion-based, with students engaging with vast ideas during the tutorial sessions and presenting their ideas and thoughts individually. For this study, the students were required to engage with the children and their families to dive deep into their stories. They were fortunate to visit TIOC before the lockdown where the students met, interacted, and got to know their subject matters. They were also introduced to the volunteers that help at the centre. This was a pertinent move as the parents especially, needed to understand what was required of them to make this project a success.

B. Acting (trailing, collecting, and questioning)

ADV60106 Advertising Campaign

The students are required to report to the lecturer on a weekly basis. This is done to track their progress and ensure that the project is moving smoothly. The weekly meetings also allow the students to receive guidance and advice if they encountered issues with their work or the client. The alternative elements are always discussed with the lecturer to be approved before the students can proceed. This ensures that the work meets the assessment requirements and is in accordance with the module's learning outcomes.

For this semester, the team was larger than initially expected; the class size was estimated at six or seven students but after the semester began, the number increased to ten and it was not practical during the pandemic time to split the class into two groups of seven students and three students. So, the decision was made to allow them to proceed as a group of ten, as they were scattered in different states in the Peninsular, while one student was in South Korea.

The main goals of the campaign were to raise RM2,000 for TIOC in two weeks, and to increase awareness for TIOC. TIOC advised the students to use the SimplyGiving website for the fundraiser as it is a platform that they have used before for similar purposes. The campaign materials therefore aimed to drive traffic.

i. Market survey and SWOT analysis

A market survey was conducted by the team, C10, to be able to better define the target audience for their project. They also conducted online interviews with several parents and children who participate in TIOC's activities to gain a better understanding of how TIOC

has positively impacted their lives.

C10 also did a SWOT analysis on TIOC and compared TIOC to other special schools, identifying TIOC's unique position as being different from other special schools as it is community-based and is firmly focused on inclusive activities for all neurotypical and children with special needs. Simple market trend research using Google Trends to look at and compare search activity for related keywords (“charity”, “special needs”, “children”, “Inclusive Outdoor Classroom”, “fundraising”) as well as observations of TIOC's existing social media activity helped the team form a clearer idea of the awareness and position of TIOC.

ii. Campaign execution

Following the initial research, C10 brainstormed a creative strategy that culminated in the tagline “Same opportunities for all.” Once this concept was approved by the lecturer and the client, they proceeded to develop the rest of the campaign materials based on their chosen design style, which was more childlike and hand-drawn for both typefaces and imagery (where photographs were not needed or not available). This was in accordance with the client's preferences and to follow the style of TIOC's logo, which was based on one of the children's drawing.

The fundraising campaign ran from May 31 to June 14, 2021. The students prepared a schedule of social media content that was published throughout the two-week period. This included 8 Facebook posts, 8 Instagram posts, and 5 Instagram Stories. The content was created with the aim of generating more awareness and to drive traffic to the fundraising page.

Other deliverables were completed but were not central to the campaign or were not put into use due to budgetary constraints. These included print advertisements, billboard ads, brochure, video commercial, radio commercial, TIOC website on Weebly (<http://ioc-my.weebly.com>) and a general information brochure.

BCA60904 Narrative Writing

For this semester, the students were a mixture of local and foreign students, with 25 local students and four foreigners who were based in their hometowns — China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia, respectively — but this did not pose any hindrance to complete the assignment. However, since the number of students was large, this required a bit of coordination with TIOC. Sivanathan worked closely with the class representative and the lecturer to coordinate and pair individual students with the families. Fortunately, there were enough children/parents for the entire class.

The next step was to make appointments to speak to the parents about the project. It would have been easier if the founder had done this for us as the students later found out that some parents were unaware of the project with TIOC. This proved to be a problem later when parents were too busy to accommodate the students' calls for appointments and were not willing to share pictures of the children, even for the purposes of the project. Some parents even transferred the interviews to the grandparents to handle. This was not a problem until the students found out that the grandparents did not speak English. Nevertheless, it was interesting to see the students working together to help in the translation of the interview transcripts.

Ultimately, all the information collected would be used to tell the stories from the perspective of the parents/grandparents, what the children have gone through and how they have evolved with the assistance of TIOC. The volunteers' stories also add an interesting angle as they tell of their work, the connection to the children they care for and the encouragement for others to join them.

C. Observing (analysing, reporting, and sharing)

ADV60106 Advertising Campaign

The compulsory deliverables that were agreed upon for this project were two newspaper print ads, a 30-second video commercial (in simple animatic format, if videos were not obtainable), a billboard ad, social media content (10 posts each for Facebook and Instagram), and a website for TIOC. TIOC does not have a website of their own and relies only on their social media pages on Facebook and Instagram. Alternative deliverables that were approved for the project were a bunting design (specifically requested by TIOC to be hung outside their centre), a brochure, a radio commercial, and 8 Instagram Stories.

The fundraising period was set in Weeks 10 and 11 of the semester, specifically May 31, 2020 to June 14, 2020. The students presented a summary of their work in Week 14 to the lecturer, the client (Anne Sivanathan and two TIOC volunteers, Aarathi Manokaran and Rishika Lazarus) and another lecturer, Dr. Nurzihan Hassim. The students also submitted their final group report and individual reflection reports in Week 14.

BCA60904 Narrative Writing

The interviews were done for the analysing, reporting, and sharing section of the writing where the information was dissected to fill in the narrative curve of documentary writing. This is a technique used to tell the stories of the children, parents, and volunteers at TIOC. It starts with the exposition or the introduction, followed by the rising action which tells of the challenges they face, leading to the climax of the stories. This could be the most significant event in their lives thus far and proceeded to conclude their scripts. The students can choose either to end with a profound quotation, either from the parents of the volunteers, their own reflections, or their hopes for the future of TIOC and the people there.

The students were given six weeks to write the scripts including the research and interviews. The discussions were good, and the scripts produced commendable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

D. Reflection (evaluating, implementing, and revisiting)

ADV60106 Advertising Campaign

In total, the team produced mock-ups for two print advertisements, one 30-second video commercial meant for YouTube along with a 5-second version of it, one billboard ad design, 11 Instagram posts, 11 Facebook posts, 11 Instagram Story posts, one website, one bunting design, one brochure design, and one radio commercial. With the exception of the website, which was created as an overall main page for TIOC, the other materials were based on an advertising strategy developed by the students. This strategy was to promote TIOC's primary aim of inclusivity and deliver the message that TIOC is a place where all children, regardless of abilities, could receive the same learning experience. The strategy was summarized in the tagline "Same Opportunities for All."

The experience and knowledge that the students gained through their collaboration with TIOC volunteers and founder was most evident in this strategic advertising direction and subsequently, in the content produced. Where possible, the images that the students selected for use in the various materials were those that depicted the sense of equality that is TIOC's focus, such as photographs of children with special needs and normal children interacting together during TIOC's events. The phrasing of the copywriting that accompanied the visuals was also designed to convey the message in the appropriate manner. TIOC's founder

and volunteers were regularly consulted to ensure that the most suitable words and phrases were used so as not to dilute their core message — e.g., phrases like “disabled children” in the advertising copy were replaced by “children with special needs.”

Some of the social media posts were aimed at educating the public about children with special needs, with a focus on Down Syndrome and autism. These posts were the result of the students’ own research and consultation with TIOC. There were also two social media posts that highlighted the individual children at TIOC, which added a sense of humanity to the campaign. This was a strong point, which was unfortunately limited to only a few of the children, as COVID-19 social distancing and lockdown regulations prevented the student team from meeting more of the children and parents to create more in-depth material along similar lines.

The limitations imposed by the pandemic did affect the process and the outcomes, as the students were largely restricted to images and videos from TIOC’s existing social media. The students also could not visit or attend activities at TIOC’s location, apart from the initial scouting visit. However, the students did still learn from the whole experience and their interactions with TIOC’s volunteers as well as some of the children via online video meetings.

Successful advertising campaigns need to be based on a creative concept that provides a strategy for achieving the intended objectives, and this strategic direction is in turn based on research and insights regarding the audience and the product derived from that research (Moriarty et al., 2018). In coming up with a clear advertising strategy that accurately represents TIOC in a way that appeals to their target audiences, and in creating the necessary advertising materials in the execution of that strategy, the students demonstrated that their awareness and understanding of the inclusivity causes that TIOC champions had improved.

As part of the project, the students were also required to write individual reflections on their learning experiences in it. Several commented specifically on how the project helped raise their own awareness of inclusivity:

“By helping the clients to fund raise in this project, I have better understanding about the special needs children and how TIOC helps them now. It is a great chance to learn more about them and I will pay more attention to those organizations in the future after this project.” (Looi Jia Yee, 0335398)

“One ‘memorable’ part of the project is when we showed the social media posts to TIOC, because that was the time, we realized that usage of language plays a huge role when promoting inclusion, especially to avoid any sensitivity to the children with special needs.” (Ng Yee Zhing, 0335234)

“The biggest gain from participating in this project is I have raised my awareness towards the topic of inclusiveness, which is usually overlooked by the society, and yet I have the opportunity to spread awareness to the public and organised a fundraising campaign to support the Inclusive Outdoor Classroom to help the special needs children to enhance their learning experiences.” (Tang Jia Chi, 0338511)

“I have increased awareness regarding the special needs community. Inclusiveness is not an option but a need. [...] I will also continue to try my best to help this community whenever the opportunity comes.” (Yeow Hoe Xuan, 0338184)

The students' reflections suggest that although they were uncertain at first, they learned more over the semester through their exposure to TIOC and its activities. By developing an advertising campaign for TIOC, they had to research and consider social issues which they had previously not given much thought. This supports existing research that demonstrates how service learning provides the much-needed exposure of minority groups (Mahadir et al., 2019) and thus generates a better understanding of these groups (Tavares, 2011). As reported above, two of the students also expressed enhanced awareness and said that they would continue to consider and support this community in the future, if possible, which shows that a service-learning project such as this can encourage a positive civic attitude towards the issue or community involved (Buch & Harden, 2011). The result of this project further supports service-learning concepts described by other researchers with regard to the positive effects of service learning on soft skills (Hanum et al., 2021) and how it can improve or encourage student involvement with various communities around them (Khan et al., 2015).

BCA60904 Narrative Writing

Since this was an individual assignment. The students were asked to write reflection papers on the challenges faced while doing this assignment, benefits working with this NGO and benefits from this experience. Here are a few thoughts from the students:

“The process of writing the documentary script titled “Hands Out and Spread Love” provided me with a valuable opportunity to not just learn about writing a documentary script but to gain more knowledge about the non-profit organisation, the Inclusive Outdoor Classroom (TIOC). From the experience and the volunteer’s thoughts, it changed my perspective and thought that we should not empathize the children with special needs as they are good in their own way, they are human too. We should treat them equally.”

(Charmaine Choy Hui Lin, 0338996)

“Working with TIOC, I was exposed to a new world of how children with autism would be like. In my daily life, I do not know many children with diagnosed illnesses so being able to hear detailed opinions and stories from the families themselves and people who work with them was very eye opening. Being able to talk to Carmen, the volunteer, was also very interesting as we were able to gain insight on different perspectives of working with children with autism. It was also interesting to learn about the history behind TIOC and about how it was formed by Miss Anne.”

(Chong Faye Yoong, 0337954)

“Overall, I feel that this assignment and the opportunity to volunteer has broadened my perspective on life and how I should not be taking anything for granted. I feel that if I were given another opportunity to volunteer at TIOC again, I would gladly accept it. Through this assignment, it has helped improve my mental well-being since it allowed me to give back to the community by also improving the situation and I felt proud of myself for not lazing out of volunteering to visit and play with these children. Lastly, this assignment also gave me experience of writing a documentary script and I think it has opened my curiosity of how professional documentary script writers do their research out in the field.”

(Iman Amanda Binti Muhammad Adam Mikhail Lim, 0337600)

“Despite the challenges and stress faced during this assignment, I was glad that I was able to understand and personally talk to families that struggle to raise a child with disabilities. It made me gain respect for the parents since they undergo more hardships compared to parents who are raising typical children. My time at TIOC event has also tested my patience and communication skills when trying to build a bond with any children. I also realised that NGOs like TIOC do help contribute to the society as it helps Malaysians be knowledgeable and aware about children with disabilities. With the help of this NGO, it bridges the gap between the neurotypical children and the ones who are special. Expanding this NGO could encourage citizens to overlook their disabilities as a flaw and instead help them in tough situations and treat them equally with respect.”

(Irdina Damia binti Muhammad Adam Mikhail Lim, 0339011)

“One of the benefits of working with the NGO and Ms Anne would be gain of knowledge and new perspective as before this assignment I didn't have knowledge on autism and lack of school infrastructure for the kids, I also learnt that autism is not a disability it's just a different ability. Lastly, the major benefit from this assignment would be the new perspective I acquired through the tasks; it's certainly going to help me in the future.”

(Shaikh Mohammed Jaseem, 0342989)

“After working with this NGO and assignment, I got the opportunity to increase my knowledge of children with special needs; it allowed me to learn a lot about what special kids are, what down syndrome is, and how many types there are. I also learned to pay attention when we meet these kids and the parents, how we interact with them, what are the appropriate wordlaction to use, and what we shouldn't say. Speaking in a proper manner is certainly a must, we also must be friendly with the children and careful with the word choice when interviewing the parents. Asking the 'right' question is important because certain wordltopic may be sensitive to them, and they may feel upset or uncomfortable.”

(David Ong Yong Jian, 0343598)

Essentially, this assignment not only gave the students the opportunity to test their writing skills in storytelling but to do it in industry style, in line with the objective of the module. The main idea was to for them to harness an interest in writing and to further their talents.

The experience talking to parents and guardians of these special needs children, gave them an insight to challenges faced and solutions to overcome them. TIOC, with the help of volunteers played a big part in helping these families. One volunteer, Carmen Ng, who is also a special needs educator said:

“It might be hard for other people to communicate and manage the children at first, but we have a very capable team, so we were able to help each other. There are times where some of us are not able to handle the children due to tempers, but their parents are sometimes there to tell us what we should and should not do as well. Just as everyone is with everyday life, there were times where I felt like giving up because of how draining it was. But my passion and my mindset of wanting to give back to society pushed me forward and kept me going.”

Another volunteer, a student from Bangladesh, Mohammad Towfiq Jamil had this to say:

“I started seeing these kids like my own little siblings. There are kids that are almost my age and there are people that are very much younger. Through TIOC, I have developed love for the kids. There are many ways to support TIOC. You don’t have to physically be there; you can still help especially now with technology. Spread the word to your friends, family. Introduce them to TIOC so they too can take part in helping. It will mean a lot to the kids. The parents always say this, “you don’t have to feel sorry for my kid, I am happy with my kids. You just have to support the kids and just tell them that they have it. That their dreams matter. They just need moral support. Before making any assumptions, get to know the community first. Don’t be too quick to judge them. Don’t be too quick to think that you need to feel sorry for them or they are just a bunch of useless people. That is the worst thing that you can do as a human being. They are very creative. Their body might not be able, but their mind is very sharp. They are brilliant people.”

Overall, the students have benefitted greatly from this experience in terms of understanding of what special needs and special children are. Although saddled with challenges, the overall outcome of the assignments was good, the knowledge received valuable, and the learning outcomes achieved successfully.

It is our hope that these emerging stories derived from these narratives would be able to assist TIOC to enhance inclusivity in education and service learning. It might not be on a big scale, but it is a big step for these special needs children and their families because these narratives matter.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we concur with Pritchard and Whitehead’s findings, where this teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic studies can enrich learning, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities within Malaysia. As for service learning, the faculty provided students with strong support and access to the community and TIOC to carry out two projects simultaneously. This approach agrees with Muwana & Gaffney (2011) who contended that students develop leadership roles in exerting the power to affect organizational change.

The campaign successfully raised RM2,738 in the two-week period, exceeding their original goal of RM2,000 plus 30 stories produced of the TIOC family. The best takeaway from this collaboration is the understanding and experiences the students obtained in terms of teamwork, contribution of expertise and ideas for the benefit of a shared objective, which is to enhance awareness for inclusivity.

The success of the projects in both courses demonstrated that there is a place for service learning in the mass communication field. While existing research mostly looks at service learning where students are more directly engaged with the community by serving in various organisations (Khan & Jacob, 2015; Muwana & Gaffney, 2011), the coursework evaluated during this research required students to produce media deliverables about the organization and the community it serves. This meant that it was not mandatory for the students themselves to participate directly with the community, so their involvement was comparatively minimal, although they did have to spend time speaking to various

stakeholders to better understand TIOC's goals and activities as well as the experiences of the children and families associated with TIOC. Based on the students' reflections, they were still able to experience the benefits of service learning as described in previous research by Hanum et al. (2021), Mahadir et al. (2019)) and Tavares (2011). The students completed the courses with a better understanding of the challenges faced by children with disabilities and the importance of such children having an inclusive space where they can interact with neurotypical children.

This action research was also aimed at assisting in enabling appropriate changes where necessary for the next student-NGO collaboration. For ADV60106 Advertising Campaign, the following August 2021 semester involved another collaboration with a different NGO. In that semester, two of the student teams were assigned to create advertising campaigns for Fugee School, an NGO that provides education for refugee children. Based on the experience from the student project with TIOC, it was observed that no major amendments were required to the general project brief for the module as the brief already has some flexibility built in for the accommodation of NGO clients as opposed to retail clients. However, further alterations may be made as and when required for future NGO collaborations, possibly in different modules, depending on the module learning outcomes and the assessments. But it is noted that collaboration with an NGO does assist in expanding the students' awareness and understanding of various social issues, and if such collaborations can be continued, it would be to the benefit of the students and the faculty.

In multi-ethnic Malaysia, service learning exposes students to minority voices, something that is especially relevant, according to Mahadir (2019), and by this, the students have achieved in giving voices to the TIOC family. This also proved important in assisting to deepen the understanding of other groups, as Tavares (2011) highlighted that engaging with different people helps mitigate stigmatization.

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Shame and shamelessness: Changing discourses in Najib Razak's social media campaign

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ABSTRACT

After his political fall, former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has industriously worked to reinvent his public persona to regain political mileage. His campaign, “*Malu Apa, Bossku?*” (What is there to be ashamed about, my boss?), has allowed Najib to refashion himself as an everyman, a rebranding which resonated with and garnered support from certain segments of society, particularly younger Malay-Muslim supporters. While it is tempting to draw parallels with other right-wing authoritarian leaders, we observe that what Najib did is different. By “misappropriating” his public shame in the wake of the 1MDB sovereign fund scandal and his political losses in 2018’s 14th General Election, he has achieved a certain degree of success through his campaign, albeit by subverting his original political messaging. By utilizing a critical discourse analysis of Najib’s social media output, this paper proposes a theory for assessing the effects of subverting shame to rehabilitate the image of a disgraced politician. This was achieved through the humanizing of Najib’s public persona to make him more relatable to working class Malays, utilizing social media to drum up and amplify public support, and misappropriating shame as a shield from criticism and weapon against his political foes. By reframing his corruption charges as baseless slander, he draws similarities with the same negative stereotypes associated with urban Malays and a means to subvert political shame commonly associated with corruption. Through the strategic and targeted use of social media, this has resulted in remaking Najib as an influential voice in Malaysian politics where his popularity rivals that of the two recent sitting Prime Ministers.

Keywords: ***Populism, political shame, social media campaigns, Najib Razak, digital demagogues***

INTRODUCTION

In the early morning of May 10, 2018, hours after the official end of Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14), then Prime Minister Najib Razak officially conceded the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition's defeat to the opposition, *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), losing control of the federal government for the first time since independence ("Pakatan Harapan wins", 2018). BN had been one of the few remaining authoritarian coalitions, having retained power for over 60 years (Dettman & Weiss, 2018). This was the culmination of years of scandals involving the state-run Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) sovereign fund, missing public funds, and allegations of gross kleptocracy (Nadzri, 2019). Najib then resigned as the president of his party, the *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO, the primary component of BN), followed by the raid of his properties which unearthed millions of ringgit worth of luxury goods and foreign currency, before a series of corruption trials commenced. In July 2020, the first of these trials saw Najib declared guilty on seven charges of misappropriation of funds (Paddock, 2020). The nadir of Najib's political career was arguably reached in an interview with Mary Ann Jolley in Al Jazeera's "101 East" programme in October 2018 (Al Jazeera, 2018). Najib evaded questions, assumed ignorance of many graft and misappropriation claims before abruptly ending the interview in a fluster. He was subsequently accused of conducting himself poorly, lacking the calm and collected demeanor expected of someone who once held public office ("You are not being fair", 2018).

In the months that followed, Najib retreated from the public eye but focused most of his engagement efforts on social media, primarily Facebook. Through daily status updates, Najib (note that in Najib's case, his former effective control of the media and regulatory frameworks ended after the defeat of BN, leaving him in the margins) released long, eloquent criticisms of the new government, their handling of policies and rebuttals to claims of wrongdoing under his leadership. Slowly, Najib began building an online following as a credible member of the opposition, intelligently opposing government policies. This social media usage became more pronounced once his corruption trials started in November 2018, where daily posts were crafted to refute statements made in court (Mohamed, 2019). As far as the public was concerned, all available information about how Najib handled the 1MDB suggest that at worst he was corrupt and guilty as charged, or at best, he was an inept minister who knew nothing about corruption under his charge.

In January 2019, Najib unveiled his most interesting political move since leaving office at a meet-and-greet event. Donning a simple hoodie with jeans, he was depicted sitting on a motorcycle. Photographs circulated with a simple caption: "*Malu Apa, Bossku?*" (henceforth MAB, trans. "What is there to be ashamed about, my boss?") (Zurairi, 2019). This became the start of his MAB political campaign, which we infer was meant to reform his apparent failed political career through the careful and strategic use of shame — we suggest that its aim was to "misappropriate" his personal and professional shame, using it to subvert unfavorable political currents. This proved, as we argue, to be successful for Najib, and we shall elaborate more on his use of shame below.

Shame is associated with the acceptance of blame and subsequently, apologies signify the acceptance of blame for wrongdoing, as well as "provide something like evidence of moral transformation, offer redress, and fulfill a promise not to repeat the offense" (Smith, 2022). Here we argue that for politicians, while shame was once seen as an important commodity for their political survival following ruinous exposures — e.g., sexual deviances and misdeeds, abuses of power — success lies in how delicately politicians navigate incidents entailing shame to protect their public personas, rather than letting it

completely destroy their careers or taint their legacy. Thus, it was assumed that shame is an important component in ensuring that politicians maintained their best behavior to appear virtuous (despite public suspicion that they might be hypocrites). As public representatives, politicians must at least *appear* to stay true to their manifestos and keep their voters at heart. Anything done in contrast to their ideals invokes shame and reduces public faith and trust in said politicians. This was the common-sense understanding of shame in politics, at least until Donald Trump's electoral success (Stępień, 2019). We shall discuss this briefly below, bearing in mind significant differences between how shame and shamelessness are operationalized in political discourse.

This paper examines Najib's approach in subverting shame for his political return and contrasts it with other political narratives. Instead of weaponizing shame to motivate and spur on his supporters (as other right-wing leaders have been wont to do in recent years), we posit that Najib employed a humbler approach by "misappropriating" his shame, or so to speak, using it to resonate with his followers while avoiding the embarrassment and humiliation that such shame would normally have entailed. This gives us a glimpse into the varied ways by which shame is utilized in politics — in part catalyzed by social media, thus indicating new structures of political communication outside traditional media gatekeeping. Such renegotiations allow politicians to dictate their own narratives, which proved successful for Najib, albeit at the cost of misappropriating non-local cultures and class divisions, thus impacting the Malaysian society at large.

THE WEAPONISATION OF SHAMELESSNESS

"Trumpism"

In contrast to shame, we can briefly review how shamelessness has been weaponized. Little more needs to be said about Trump's rise to power through an ideology driven by his public personality, populism, xenophobia, and white identity politics (Saramo, 2017), a campaign that highlighted the importance of linking and exploiting the twin circuitry of shame and dignity (Schaefer, 2019). Despite his economic misfortunes and the allegations leveled against him, Trump remained a self-proclaimed winner, paradoxically turning his shame into dignity (Snyder, 2017). His target was the white working class (which he did not belong to) often left out by contemporary liberal politics. Their downward social mobility, the increase in economic competition due to globalization and the prevalence of affirmative action policies have fueled a sense of fragility, shame, and disenfranchisement among this group (Lamont et al., 2017). For instance, Watkins (2018) surmised that the white working class is often mistakenly accused of benefiting from privilege (this is not to generalize an "Eastern"/"Western" binary — Duterte's campaign is an answer in itself). By highlighting the shame felt by his supporters (specifically those often accused of being privileged or labeled as racist, backward, and conservative), Trump strategically tapped into their "white rage", using public humiliation to motivate them to take action (Monnat & Brown, 2017). The discourse, which revolves around the decentralization of white privilege and hegemonic masculinity, coupled with narratives of loss and decline, has become familiar and needs little further elaboration (Schaefer, 2019; Schrock et al., 2017). Commentators have drawn attention to the similarity of this xenophobic rhetoric to that which accompanied the Nazi ascendancy to power, which incited anti-immigrant sentiment and faulted the Jewish community for German unemployment (Cochrane & Nevitte, 2012).

Therefore, such a novel approach played on a very old idea: the dilution of class into race awareness. Right-wing media and politicians primed working-class whites to think along racial rather than class lines while ignoring commonalities between them and working-class people of color, thus suggesting a zero-sum game (Watkins, 2018). Considering the level of success that was reached in the United States with such a strategy, it seems that this would work well in the Malaysian context, particularly given the greater leeway afforded to bigotry and xenophobia, which was especially evinced during the COVID-19 pandemic. But rather than rely on ostentatious, crass, and more aggressive techniques, Najib's campaign adopted a humbler and subdued approach, omitting overtly masculine tones to appeal emotionally to the social imagination of his supporters. As the following sections will elucidate, the MAB campaign enthralled his audience "without having to use any structured or meaningful discourse" (Lemière, 2018, p. 42).

Social media and the authoritarian strongman

Social media has become a new battleground for narratives promoted by authoritarian strongmen. By providing a medium that bypasses structural gatekeeping by the media and regulatory frameworks, political figures are better able to engage and mobilize their supporters by espousing more conservative and less progressive values (see Chandra Muzaffar's *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-led Relationships within Malay Society*, originally published by Aliran). Many others have followed suit with this newly established playbook. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's campaign heavily engaged with his right-wing followers using social media, taking advantage of populist rhetoric by espousing more traditional values (Mitozo et al., 2020). The Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte not only used social media effectively to secure his presidency (on a notorious anti-drug platform condoning extrajudicial killings), but also encouraged his supporters to troll or cyberbully his online detractors (Sinpeng et al., 2020). These online tactics have become typical of contemporary autocrats.

Fuchs (2018) discussed Trump's various techniques and methods to build and nurture his fervent online base. His main pull factor was leveraging his celebrity status and callous demeanor. While extreme narcissism often alienates public figures from their audiences, this is not the case here; relevant tweets contained far more first-person singular nouns (e.g., "I", "me") compared to first-person plural nouns (e.g., "we", "us"). This narcissistic, self-aggrandizing behavior was emulated by Bolsonaro and Duterte, among others. But Najib's MAB campaign presents a different scenario. As a fallen strongman and not an outsider, he has taken the opposite approach, employing strong, empathic elements with an effusive humility meant to rehabilitate his brand.

As we shall see in Najib's case, a reinvention of his persona became key through the art of "impression management" as exercised through this social media campaign, a task we assume would have fallen to social media handlers who would have been tasked with crafting his new political narrative. The resulting rhetoric employed a strong pathos that ran contrary to the general hypermasculinity of Malaysian politics, one which displays little to no signs of the humility or restraint encouraged among the *rakyat* (incidentally, this is an avenue that sorely deserves further research). The MAB campaign appears to counter the now-typical weaponization of shame rather than galvanize a disenfranchised community; it is used as a shield for a seemingly peripheral political figure, thus transforming Najib as a downtrodden man of the people and ultimately serving as a near-impervious tool for him to criticize and attack others. This is the basis for our critical discourse analysis, which involves examining MAB's posts, conducting a close reading of its rhetoric, observing responses, and analyzing its overall effects on Malaysian politics.

CAMPAIGNING AFTER THE FALL

Critics of Najib Razak cite the 1MDB scandal as the beginning of his political collapse. After assuming premiership in 2009, Najib established the fund as part of Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme (“How 1MDB corruption scandal”, 2019) to manage and expand international investments in various local sectors (Case, 2017). As the chairman of the fund as well as the minister of finance, he was in complete control and could access billions of ringgit in public funds (Pakiam, 2019). The “disruptive context of 1MDB” derailed the “elite-level cohesion” within UMNO after “revelations of vast resources in Najib's accounts created such scandal that they viewed his leadership as vulnerable” and were “motivated to challenge his ascendancy” (Pakiam, 2019, pp. 639–640). Despite these controversies, Najib was still BN's leader, and his administration was widely believed to retain some degree of power after GE14 due to a recent favorable delineation exercise and a rumored informal agreement with the conservative Islamist party, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS).

Regardless, the PH coalition won a considerable number of seats even in supposed BN strongholds (Dettman & Weiss, 2018), and Najib was forced to concede defeat and relinquish his premiership. While many attributed PH's win to the enigmatic Mahathir Mohamad's return to politics, it was also widely believed that the rising cost of living and rumors of mismanaged national debt caused by the 1MDB scandal were key factors (“High cost of living”, 2018).



Figure 1. Najib Razak wearing a hoodie and sitting on a *kapcai* motorcycle.
(Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

After almost a year out of the public eye, in January 2019, Najib launched his MAB campaign, portraying a more relaxed demeanor at a meet-and-greet with motorcycle enthusiasts in Kuala Lumpur. Najib posed on a Honda Cub motorcycle, which became the symbolic image for the entire campaign. This motorcycle is particularly important in terms of associating him with the *Mat Rempit* community. In public discourse, this term can be considered derogatory, since it refers to urban Malay youths who roam the city on cheap modified motorcycles (colloquially called *kapcai*) in large groups, stereotyped as misguided delinquents who also engage in street racing, snatch thefts and other illicit activities. Malaysian road users consider *kapcai* riders as *Mat Rempits* who do not observe traffic laws, ride recklessly and engage in dangerous behavior (Wong, 2011). *Mat Rempits* are also believed to be dependent on their *kapcai* for their livelihoods and are thus regarded as only being able to hold positions as delivery or dispatch personnel, thus solidifying the illusion that they are lazy and unambitious.

Najib's use of this image highlights his attempt to create a more approachable and relatable version of himself to appeal to the oft-ignored working classes of Malaysia. While critics and the media accused MAB of being overly engineered, denying, and violating morality and good behavior (Tang, 2019; Lim, 2019; Tan, 2019), Najib was also able to garner massive support since his "new moniker has made him appear more accessible to more people, even non-voters" ("Najib: Bossku", 2019). So popular was the *Bossku* appeal that Najib made an appearance on behalf of BN and UMNO candidates in the Semenyih (2019) and Kimanis (2020) by-elections, both of which BN won.

METHODOLOGY

The main approach to analyze the MAB campaign is critical discourse analysis. This method assumes a multimodal approach to study the efficacy of media messaging and its greater impact or influence on society. Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2017) offered an approach to analyzing contemporary political campaigns conducted over new media, in particular how far-right politicians and supporters utilize Right-Wing Populism rhetoric to appeal to the wider electorate. By emphasizing the masculine traits and strengths of its candidates and to tie that to the popular sentiment of repairing a corrupt system, this resonated beyond their core base and allowed them to grow their list of supporters quickly. This was conducted by analyzing the content produced by far-right politicians and supporters and reading the responses and feedback from the public.

Our reading of the output from Najib Razak's social media pages makes use of MAB posts, starting from its inception in 2019. MAB was primarily referenced on Najib Razak's Facebook and Twitter social media accounts. Of these, Facebook seemed more popular, receiving positive responses and thousands of comments, views, and reactions. MAB's output on Twitter was significantly lower, and for each tweet, there was a higher presence of antagonistic responses versus overwhelming support. We searched for all instances of the term "*Malu Apa Bossku*" or the *#maluapabosku* hashtag, structuring search queries in this manner to ensure that such posts on the official Najib Razak accounts made deliberate and direct use of MAB. The Twitter account only returned seven tweets as opposed to at least 40 status updates on Facebook. Therefore, most of our critical discourse analysis focused on MAB's Facebook presence, including all photographs, videos, and shared content. We also examined the comments on each post to understand the sentiment of his supporters and gauge his support on Facebook. As such, posts featuring the hashtag make up a minority of the page's overall output.

FINDINGS

While the findings of our analysis draw some parallels with the weaponization of shame, there are some significant differences. Rather than use social media in a self-aggrandizing fashion (Fuchs, 2018), Najib used it as both a shield and weapon. The success of the MAB campaign can be attributed to Najib's adeptness at the linguistics of mass persuasion by ensuring that his posts seem authentic and resonate with the public, rather than authoritative and manipulative (Chi, 2016). The adoption of informal instead of formal language in his posts convinced his followers that there is an affinity in attitudes, beliefs, and ideas between them (Ricks, 2018). While evoking similar themes (e.g., drawing upon class/race shame to build empathy between himself and his followers), his self-representation adopts a highly apologetic and humble tone then uses this platform to direct attacks against his opponents and boost his public support (or at least the perception of public support).

Overall, Najib's Facebook output made use of a variety of status updates — videos of Najib in public, photos of Najib in various guises and livestreams of him at public events. In terms of engagement (i.e., commenting, sharing, and utilizing the “reactions” feature on Facebook), the highest engagement posts tend to be of a personal nature (four posts in total) or interactions with members of the public (12 posts in total). Political content, such as criticisms of the government and by-election-related posts, have the least engagement. Despite this imbalance, all MAB status updates managed to still attract a relatively high engagement, with the least popular still having at least 11,000 reactions alone. We suggest that one reason behind this imbalance is that his followers are less interested in politics but are more genuinely interested in Najib as a person; therefore, they are keen on following up with content that emphasizes his humanity. A more cynical answer is that MAB's goal is indeed to focus on Najib's humanity and establish that he is a “humble” human being, and therefore, he is more genuine and trustworthy. As a result, when Najib does make political posts, he can draw on a stable of followers who already have a strong affinity with him and are more likely to be persuaded by everything he says, regardless of their actual engagement with these posts.

The rebranding of Najib Razak

This analysis specifically examines Najib's posts to show how shame is presented and to gauge the tone of the rhetoric of his account's collective messaging. Therefore, MAB's overall campaign goal can be perceived as a means of rebranding Najib through three main approaches: (1) building affinities with the urban Malay working class by making Najib more relatable; followed by (2) taking ownership of non-specific shame and using it as a weapon to highlight the shame of his political foes; as well as (3) using shame sarcastically to defend his innocence.

Building affinities

Most of Najib's MAB posts centered around making him more relatable to his followers and building stronger grassroots support. Najib's awareness of the dynamics of his social relationship with his followers prompted him to deploy language as a political tool which has the power to shape social realities and the way people think (Rabiah, 2018). The strategic use of colloquial language by Najib evoked its affective properties, creating a façade that he is intrinsically similar to his audience (Ricks, 2018). With Najib battling on multiple fronts, the campaign panders to the “masses” with grievances against the current government, using his social media accounts strategically to muster support by addressing the issues and problems of his target audience, that is, the Malay urban working class. This

was done by highlighting that the PH government was uncaring and that he would have done a better job since he understood their struggles. The campaign attempted to achieve this goal by paying tribute to the working class while at the same time humanizing Najib, thus serving as a proxy to canvass public support online.

Tribute and support for the working class



Figure 2. A post celebrating the work ethic of Malays, countering the negative stereotype that Malay youths are considered lazy. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

In several of his posts, Najib countered the prevailing stereotypical narrative that the *Mat Rempit* are lazy and engage in criminal behavior. He lends credence to the idea that they are unfairly viewed and stereotyped, when they are in fact just as hardworking as everyone else, simultaneously drawing parallels between how both he and the urban working class are viewed and treated by society (and in Najib's case, the incumbent government). Through this narrative, Najib relies on "nativistic" and "personalistic" appeals that "flaunt the low" which is typical in populist discourse (Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016). The linguistic framing of the issue aims to heighten his likeability and popularity, as Najib is hyperaware that mobilizing support "has less to do with substance and more to do with style" (Ricks, 2018). This show of solidarity is seen as a reflection of how people can be accused of terrible behavior but are essentially good at heart. Najib claimed that he had been unfairly treated for losing GE14 and that he actually performed well whilst in office. While he takes responsibility for his party's loss, he still manages to find fault with those who attacked him for being corrupt, insisting that their accusations are trumped-up charges and slander. The argument being used is that his failings as prime minister cannot be equated with the corruption charges laid against him.

Humanising Najib

Najib's humble only persona carefully presents his views in a manner that is polite and seemingly coming from a position of weakness and lack of real power. While his supporters may believe that Najib has nothing to be ashamed of, this politicization of humility plays into the trope of his diffidence and innocence.

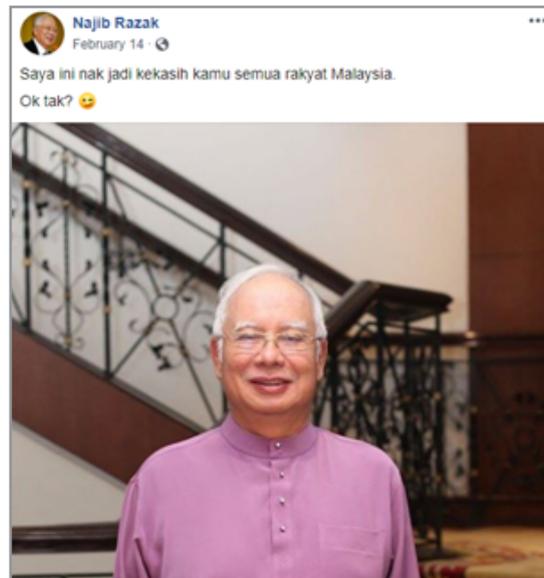


Figure 3. A Valentine's Day post beseeching Malaysians to accept Najib as their valentine. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

This carries on beyond politics: for instance, Najib posted a Valentine's Day message on his Facebook account, entreating the public to accept him as their valentine. Within the realm of Malaysian politics, where politicians often present themselves as entitled and lacking in humility, Najib shows remarkable restraint in reducing class differences in these posts.



Figure 4. A post featuring an image of Najib at his university graduation to refute the claim that he had a fake degree. In the post, he apologizes for his bad hair, citing that it was a trend back then. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

Another example can be seen when the account posted a picture of him during his graduation, in response to claims that he faked his degree, while also poking fun at how he looked then. While the number of these personal posts is relatively small, they have a significantly higher engagement than all other MAB posts, suggesting that they succeeded in softening his image.

A proxy for public support



Figure 5. Image of Najib hugging an Orang Asli voter during the Cameron Highlands by-election. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

MAB was also used to highlight public support for Najib. Choice photos and videos taken around the country were used strategically to show regular folk from various walks of life clamoring to meet and embrace him. Najib constantly parades in large crowds wherever he goes, drawing parallels with Anwar Ibrahim following his ousting in 1998. Live-streamed videos of his speeches during by-election campaigns were often accompanied by chants of “*Bossku*” by the crowd. Among the campaign’s media tie-ins and promotions was a song featuring the campaign’s tagline as its title, which featured a tacit endorsement by Najib in a teaser video, even if he did not actually appear in the song.

Overall, these posts create the impression that there is widespread support and adoration for Najib. The imagery of crowds flocking towards him demonstrates a strong grassroots appeal, while media tie-ins reflect the apparent growing popularity of the campaign. While social media posts are hardly reflective of reality, they are at least powerful enough to provide the perception that Najib has strong support from large portions of the Malaysian population. Therefore, we cannot automatically claim that Najib’s support is not rooted in reality.

Taking ownership of and ‘misappropriating’ shame

Contrary to common masculine and unapologetic conventions, the MAB campaign is a conduit for expressing shame over poor decisions in the past, where Najib apologizes for his mistakes and promises to do better. In this context, Najib’s apology is nothing more than a creative form of performance speech in his MAB discourse. He posits himself as sensitive and responsible by acknowledging his shortcomings. By highlighting shame, Najib seeks to minimize his responsibility over his misdeeds while simultaneously using it for the restoration of his political image and public trust (Kampf, 2013). Najib shares

this shame with his supporters, building up to the core idea that they had voted wrongly in GE14 and should therefore, recognise their mistake. By admitting this fault, Najib can be perceived as having forgiven them, assuring them that they are not to blame due to effective PH propaganda.

The MAB slogan itself is a means of expressing regret over falling for PH's supposed lies and slander, and it gained traction in light of PH's many unfulfilled election promises. It was also used to indicate that every other PH claim was probably false. Najib strongly implies that the PH propaganda machine is highly effective and unmatched in the degree to which it has manipulated the people, presenting himself as a humble victim of a highly organized smear campaign.



Figure 6. The account highlights the apparent shame of an apparent “independent” candidate standing in a by-election. The post is full of sarcastic remarks about how this is a tactical ploy by the PH government to win the election by splitting votes.
(Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

As Najib humbles and humanizes himself, he wears his shame like armor, thus allowing him to direct it against his opponents. When attacking the government, Najib makes use of shame throughout his rhetoric, attempting to pressure the authorities into admitting their faults. For example, when highlighting the fact that PH ministers were copying actions done during his tenure, he says: “*Sekarang sama-samalah kita tanya Menteri-menteri PH semua ini. Malu apa bossku?*” (Now let us ask the PH ministers about all this: what is there to be ashamed of, my boss?). Najib notes that PH engages in the same questionable behavior which they had been critical of in the previous government (other examples include avoiding questions posed by journalists).

By comparing his former government with the PH government, Najib highlighted how much better his administration was. However, Najib does not explicitly suggest that BN had ever actually engaged in such behavior, limiting his posts to pointing out how they had been “accused” of doing so.

Distractions from reality and non-apologies for non-specific shame

The MAB campaign served to distract Najib's followers from the reality of his failures and scandals, alluding instead to the PH government's illegitimacy and that ultimately, BN should be returned to power. Najib and BN are therefore not considered to be at fault, but are instead victims of PH's smear campaign. The subtext is that Najib did nothing wrong and his shame for losing is undeserved.

This humble disposition and apologetic tone appear both sardonic and sarcastic to the "masses". By creating affinity with his supporters, Najib's follies become their own and, played right, they might defend him regardless of the merits of any attacks. Najib has therefore created a support base like Trump's despite using a vastly different approach; where the latter leverages shame to create anger among his supporters, the former *embraces* shame to appear resonant and relatable to them.

There is another element to Najib's apology and concession of shame: his admittance of shame is clear, but the subject of his apology is always abstract. Despite calling on others to admit their failings, the MAB campaign never addresses the 1MDB scandal despite his Facebook account's regular postings about the case (often each time there is a court appearance). The account very clearly avoids using the MAB hashtag or slogans in these instances. For anyone following the MAB hashtag, their impression of Najib would be void of any indication of embroilment in any of his high-profile corruption cases. Kampf (2013) characterized this as blurring the nature of the offence, whereby the linguistic personification of the MAB campaign is implicitly designed to draw public attention away from his trials and towards his reformation as a regular, unjustly persecuted man instead. By emphasizing Najib's humanity, it focuses on building empathy and connections with the Malaysian public and not harping on the specificities of politics.

Rebranding through misappropriation

Baldacchino (2019) noted in his study that certain forms of honor were "antimodern and primitive". Yet perhaps a sense of honor is retained in Najib's assiduously crafted persona, coupled with shame and humility, which has allowed Najib to navigate a treacherous political scandal with some degree of success without having the need to express any guilt for any specific past action. Without the need for populist rage against the myriad issues facing Malaysian society, the MAB campaign has focused on honorable conduct in the sense that it steers away from the expected aggressiveness, cheap attacks, or incitements to violence.

However, it is important to also realize that this rebranding exercise can be considered a misappropriation of culture and class. The phrase "*Malu Apa, Bossku?*", which solidified a strong Peninsular support base, actually originates from Sabah, much to the chagrin of Sabahans. According to the anthropologist Trixie Tangit, the term "*Bos*" is commonly used by Sabahans as "a social currency to show friendliness, to seek help or favors", playfully used "amongst familiars" as an "art of ingratiating oneself" (Jacobs et al., 2019). "*Bosku*", however, originates from the Indonesian foreign labor communities in Sabah, used as an honorific for their local employers — "*Ku*" being short for "*aku*" ("I" or "my"). According to Tangit, the addition of the suffix intensifies the degree of one's relationship to their employer through some form of intimacy and affection to "soften any kind of ill-doing or ill-harm, or anything negative; it is always in jest or fun" (Jacobs et al., 2019). At the same time, to the average Sabahans, the expression is an oxymoron because the two elements have contradictory meanings. The phrase was popularized by a political campaign that ignored Sabahan cultural knowledge and can be considered a misappropriation of phrasing, with the possible intention of being antagonistic towards

the recipient in some contexts. Despite this supposed insult and slight, Najib's popularity in Sabah during the Kimanis by-election brought large numbers of local supporters who continued to use the "*bossku*" moniker.

Secondly, Najib's MAB campaign made waves, specifically amongst the Malay middle class, speaking directly to their grievances when it came to survival and political insecurities. An important point to consider is that there still exists poor class awareness in Malaysia, which is superseded by race awareness. This situation partly explains the MAB campaign's success in manipulating this lack of awareness for professional gain. Therefore, we criticize how it deliberately ignores Najib's actual class status as a political "blue blood", being the eldest son of Abdul Razak (the second prime minister) and the nephew of Hussein Onn (its third) ("Najib Razak", 2020), which would otherwise distance him from everyday Malaysians. The rebranding exercise reinvented Najib as a man of the people, often attempting to ignore the narrative of his privileged status. Again, what is remarkable is that there is no incitement to hatred or violence, the rhetoric that fueled other deeply contested issues (e.g., the anti-ICERD rally as well as mass anger directed at migrants and refugees) could easily have been tapped into and linked to the disenfranchisement of the "masses" as per the established Malaysian political playbook. Embracing shame in an honorable manner seems to be the dominant strategy here, and the traditional political discourses which his own party polished over decades of experience seem to have been abandoned. Most notably is the absence of the discourse of the "protector", looking out for the "protected" who are besieged by external threats, then again, this can hardly be a tenable narrative given that Najib was out of power and at the mercy of the judiciary at the time of campaigning.

Counter-narratives from opposition supporters remarking on the 1MDB scandal, his luxury goods, and the family's lavish lifestyle would usually be beaten down quickly by sycophants, and quickly followed up with newer posts focusing on his humbling experiences with supporters from the ground. The language used was also often colloquial and informal, a departure from his more commanding elocution while serving as prime minister. Some terms specifically seemed to be intergenerationally targeted, such as "*gais*" (guys), "old school", lowbrow humor, and sarcasm, with some commentators seeing it as somewhat unbelievable that "a political elite" would "have used such expressions", unless to "present himself as an ordinary man the people can get close to" (Anuar & Jalli, 2020, p. 24–25).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION — LEAVING NAJIB'S LEGACY OF SHAME

2020 brought drastic changes: as the COVID-19 pandemic began, Malaysia was undergoing a sudden, massive political shift after the PH government collapsed, and BN returned to the incumbent government coalition, albeit as a secondary force playing second fiddle to then Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Bersatu party, which continued to sideline Najib. Tensions grew due to Bersatu's poor handling of the pandemic, eventually forcing Muhyiddin's resignation. Despite this shift, Najib was still found guilty in his first corruption case, with a stay of execution. Najib remains a member of parliament until his appeal is completed.

The MAB campaign had already wound down by the end of 2019 after Najib's rehabilitation and rebranding exercise achieved its goal, although he continued posting very directed and poignant commentary via Facebook posts that resonated with many working-class Malaysians. In a previous study, Najib's MAB campaign was also seen as

attractive for utilizing humor “particularly among the younger generation” using “jokes, common speak, and trendy digital culture references”, creating a stronger bond with his targeted audience (Kasmani, 2022, p. 15).

While Najib appears to be living on borrowed time until his pending appeal is completed (as well as his other 1MDB-related charges), he has succeeded in reshaping his post-GE14 narrative. Judging by the photographs posted on his Facebook account, Najib appears popular. MAB's catchy slogan harkens back to other popular slogans, such as Mahathir's “*Wawasan 2020*” and Anwar's “*Reformasi*” (whether Prime Minister Ismail Sabri's “*Keluarga Malaysia*” slogan really catches on remains to be seen). These slogans perfectly encapsulate all their policies and intents, and supporters can draw different but favorable interpretations. This successful rehabilitation suggests the power of social media in reclaiming political narratives. It is arguable, however, that MAB may have been supported by the extensive use of cybertroopers, who operate pervasively in Malaysia, but the online support for Najib has arguably translated into on-the-ground support.

Within Malaysian politics, it is expected that a politician does not apologize for any wrongdoing, and thus Najib's approach of profusely apologizing and lowering his own station is a rarity. His opponents struggled to counter his attacks and were wary of angering his fervent supporters (who had grown tremendously during the pandemic). This inherent masculinity of Malaysian politics has been disrupted by MAB, and this is an avenue worth researching as successful Malaysian politicians are often defined by their abilities to exude masculine traits such as being vociferous, assertive, arrogant, and charismatic.

In the wake of his political fall, Najib was portrayed as emasculated and feminized, particularly through the turbulent relationship between him and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, with open jokes circulating on her aggressive and sometimes masculine demeanor, and rumors that most, if not all, professional decisions made by Najib were hers. Najib's MAB campaign has succeeded in relaunching his political career with no need to employ masculine traits, thus giving him significant clout in influencing the public sphere. The campaign is meant to portray Najib as a consistent, stable, and likeable everyday Malay man, only interested in the betterment of Malaysia.

In early 2022, as Malaysia braced for yet another state election (this time in the state of Johor), Bersatu and BN were once again at loggerheads over seat allocations. Amidst a heated tussle between Najib and Muhyiddin over the failure of the *Muafakat Nasional* partnership, Muhyiddin released an emphatic statement on this issue, where he directly addressed Najib's lack of shame:

In Islam, shame is part of faith. Unfortunately, in UMNO, a man convicted of a grave offence described as a 'national embarrassment' is instead placed on a pedestal as a boss and cheered on with the slogan, 'malu apa, bossku'. Where is your faith? Where is your pride? (Ong, 2022)

While this was not the first time a politician had highlighted the hypocrisy and shamelessness in Najib's candor through MAB, this was the first rebuke from a coalition partner that was said unapologetically and without reservations. MAB proved a useful vehicle to rally support against the then PH government and since has been useful to serve the political interests of Najib and UMNO by extension with no care for its allies. Muhyiddin's biting attack of MAB will unlikely break its hold on Najib's supporters but has brought into public discourse that even his allies can find the “*bossku*” moniker to be revolting and disingenuous.

It remains to be seen if this is the start of more humble and down-to-earth approaches becoming more common, but regardless, MAB has certainly changed the way in which shame serves as a political currency, allowing Najib to overcome so many setbacks yet retain a degree of honor. Even more remarkable is that as a member of the political elite, he has successfully rebranded himself as the proverbial salt of the earth, using shame as both shield and weapon. Perhaps politicians will be forced to employ more humble approaches in addressing the “masses”, and there could be a shift in the way people perceive their political leaders.

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The impact of social media advertising features on the purchase intention of the Malay millennial consumer

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ABSTRACT

Social media is frequently utilised as a platform for marketing and advertising. As such, businesses invest a lot of time, money, and resources in social media advertising. However, there is always a challenge in designing social media advertising that successfully attracts people and motivates them to purchase their brands. This study was undertaken with the objective of gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of social media advertising elements on the purchase intention of millennial Malay consumers. Focus group discussions were conducted with 36 informants from generations Y and Z who were chosen using purposive sampling. The findings indicate that interaction, informativeness, creativity, and attractiveness, as well as habitual behaviour, influence consumer purchase intent. Even if they have a different understanding of social media and the digital world, these two generations have essentially identical perspectives. Values, cultures, and customs do not play a significant influence in this study's conclusions, but they are deemed essential for the creation of advertising content that does not contradict with the informant's religion and values. This study is limited by a variety of factors that could be examined in future research as it does not investigate the influence of other demographic characteristics, such as gender, income level, and level of education. This study also investigates social media advertisements across many social media platforms without focusing on the influence of the platforms' characteristics. Thus, future research could investigate the influence of other platforms on this topic.

Keywords: *Social media advertising features, Malay millennial consumer, purchase intention*

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is of enormous significance in the modern day. It is the core of any brand or product. It can either propel a business to its zenith of prosperity or to its dwindling existence. Advertising is the best approach to attract a huge number of the target audience in one fell swoop when executed properly. Advertising strategies have changed drastically in the past decade due to technological advances. Further, advertisers are always looking for new and creative ways to compete with other brands for attention, target audiences, and consumer experience. As such, social media advertising is a major area of interest for modern advertisers because it connects brands with consumers and provides brand support through digital campaigns.

Globally, more than 4.26 billion people used social media in 2021, and by 2027, that number is projected to reach almost six billion (Dixon, 2022). Approximately 86% of Malaysians are active social media users as of January 2021 and this is a 24% increase from 2016, when social media users accounted for approximately 62% of Malaysia's total population (Müller, 2021). Malaysians frequently use the Internet to read news, watch videos, and connect with friends on social media platforms. According to a report by Digital Influence Lab (2021), the amount of social media content/posts shared increased from 27 million in 2011 to 3.2 billion in 2018, in Malaysia.

The rise in social media activity has encouraged advertisers to use Facebook, the most popular social media platform among Malaysians since 2004. Studies show that 90% of advertisers have a social media presence, and consumers use this platform to research brands. It is a good way to obtain new products (Schaffer, 2022).

Advertising has the potential to affect not only people's thoughts and actions, but also their long-term lifestyle decisions (Chukwu et al., 2019). Reaching consumers and having an impact on their awareness, attitude, and purchasing behavior should be the primary goal of any marketing to succeed in a consumer market where advertising predominates (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Advertisers all concur that social media is essential to the success of their business and brand. This optimism is reflected in their increased spending on this medium. In the United States alone, social media advertising spending exceeded 17 billion USD in 2019, an increase of nearly ten billion USD in 2014 (Statista, 2022). This demonstrates that in the age of digital commerce, social media is becoming increasingly important and is changing the way advertisers' market, advertise brands, and communicate with target consumers.

Existing research on social media and digital marketing are concentrated on how Malaysian millennial consumers get value from digital technology and how this affects their purchase decisions (Indahingwati et al., 2019), but do not specialize in Malay millennial consumers. Malay millennial consumers have enormous purchasing power in the market nowadays (Yong & Renganathan, 2019). Compared to other races, Malays account for 69.9% of Malaysia's population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Millennial consumers are the largest consumer population in Malaysia which consists of generation Y (26%) and generation Z (25%) (Worldometers, 2020). From the 89% Malaysians who use social media, 74% are millennials, making them the most influential users for sharing information as well promoting companies and services (Digital Business Lab, 2022). Millennials are the driving force behind online purchase activities, which make up 53.3% of all internet activities (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, 2020). Thus, Malaysian advertisers are highly aware of the value of advertising and how important it is to target this group of consumers.

The rise of social media has persuaded advertisers to target consumers through popular platforms; therefore, they must create effective ads. Given how much consumers and advertisers use social media, researchers must understand how emotions and perceptions of social media advertising features are affected. Few studies have examined how social media advertising affects Malay millennials' purchasing intentions, although most social media users in Malaysia are Malay. Religious principles and ideals influence their purchasing decisions as consumers. This affects how they interpret and accept the ad's message. According to Arora et al. (2020), social media advertising promotes and communicates business ideas to shape consumer purchase intentions and decisions, therefore this study aims to answer how social media advertising features impact Malay millennial consumers' purchase intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media advertising features

Social media advertising has the capacity to create a formidable brand and is an essential component of marketing activities, as seen by the fact that advertisers aggressively integrate social media into their advertising campaigns to increase digital engagement (Hilde A. M. et al., 2018). More than 90% of brands use more than one social media network for advertising, and companies are proactive in their use of social media strategies and tactics to increase brand usage. This situation casts questions on the efficacy of social media advertising initiatives from the perspective of the advertiser. Additionally, because social media advertising features and formats are constantly changing, advertisers are constantly challenged with how to plan and produce social media ads in a more effective and interesting way. Due to its interactive and technologically advanced nature, social media advertising is viewed as a more sophisticated advertiser-consumer communication than traditional mass media advertising or internet advertising. Advertisers can engage in two-way communication with their target audience (Arora et al., 2020). Therefore, social media ads can assist marketers in achieving their marketing objectives, such as raising consumer awareness, enhancing consumer knowledge, shaping consumer views, and encouraging consumers to make purchases (Alalwan et al., 2018).

Social media advertising is a type of online advertising, but because it is Web 2.0, it generates a unique impression and interaction experience for users. This is also due to the nature of social media advertising, which encourages user interaction through actions such as liking, re-sharing, commenting, and posting tailored advertisements (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Thus, social media platforms, by their very nature, have aided businesses in creating advertisements that can monitor consumer responses, host interactive sessions, and create personalized messages (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022).

Malaysian Malay consumers

Many brands face tough competition today. Globalization, new digital technologies, and the global financial crisis are contributing factors. Mulvey et al. (2020) stated that brands must identify and categorize their target markets to communicate effectively. In today's business environment, "one size fits all" may not work. Due to these difficulties, advertisers must be more cautious when allocating marketing and advertising budgets to target consumers (Sharipudin et al., 2020). In Malaysia, practically all advertisers focus on the Malay population, particularly the millennial age, as their prospective target demographic. This is because this group represents the greatest user base with a high discretionary income.

Malay is distinguished from the other two major ethnic groups in Malaysia by their intimate association with the faith of Islam and because Islam is such a significant part of Malay ethnic identity, its influence on the evolution of the Malay culture has been significant from the very beginning.

The definition of “Malay” is essentially cultural, i.e., someone who is Muslim, speaks Malay regularly, and adheres to Malay customs or *adat*. The term *adat* has a wide range of interpretations. It is often thought to include all aspects of Malay culture and social life, from clothing and housing to etiquette and social interaction, but it’s usually limited to birth, engagement, marriage, and death. Cultural values can profoundly affect a person’s personality and behavior. Despite empirical links between Malay cultural values and their psychological and behavioral aspects, studies on Malay consumer behavior are rare.

Malaysian millennial consumer

Marketers all over the world are obsessed with millennials, and Malaysia is no exception. Millennial is a term that represents the youth and is often associated with terms such as “tech-savvy”, “self-centered”, and “free-spirited”. This category of purchasers has a strong purchasing power in today’s consumer market, with annual sales exceeding \$170 billion (Woo, 2018). They are accustomed to rapidly evolving technologies in information communication, social media, and social networks, which affect how they shop (Mun & Renganathan, 2019). Millennials make up 74% of Malaysia’s 28.7 million Internet users, making them the largest social media influencers for brand promotion and information sharing. Millennials also make up 53% of all online purchases (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020). This generation shops more on mobile and online than previous generations.

Millennial consumer: The Gen Y and Gen Z

Generations Y and Z have been significantly impacted by the digital revolution. The rise of the Internet, smart devices, and social media introduced new perspectives on life, altered how people communicate with one another, and impacted the decisions they make in relation to their purchases (Thangavel et al., 2019). Gen Z exhibits different consumer values, preferences and ideas from those of earlier generations and has adopted different media consumption and shopping values compared to that of Gen Y. Social media has greater influence on Gen Z than it does on Gen Y, and according to a research done by Accenture (2017), the three factors on which Gen Z consumers generally make purchase decisions are lowest price/best deal, display of the merchandise and reviews of users. They were also observed to place more value on asking friends and family for recommendations before making purchases (Accenture, 2017). Research done by Ernst and Young (2015), as cited in Thangavel et al. (2019), on the other hand, demonstrated that Gen Z is less brand-loyal than Gen Y, whereas Gen Y cares more about prices than Gen Z does. These findings are slightly contradictory to the results of Accenture (2017). Generation Z is a distinct generational cohort with unique traits and characteristics. This generation will make up 40% of global consumers and 22% of the workforce, making them “the next big disrupter for apparel and retail” (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022). Digitalization and globalization of economies have also boosted their purchasing power.

Millennial purchase intention

Consumers today are meticulous. They compare costs, read customer and product reviews, and hunt for credible content from real people. In other words, consumer decision-

making, and purchase intention today is more complex and difficult than it was in the past (Lakshika & Ahzan, 2021). In fact, it has become much more vital than before. Thus, modern consumers are more informed and savvy thanks to advertising, social media, and digital word-of-mouth (Santiago & Pimenta, 2021).

Today, millennials are one of the most prominent demographic and age cohorts targeted by advertisers. They make up the largest generation in all human history. There are around 1.8 billion millennials out of a total population of 7.4 billion people around the world, and it is expected that by 2025, millennials will make up three quarters of the workforce around the world (Catalyst, 2019). Millennials are more affluent and optimistic than other consumers. They could also influence other generations' purchases (Lakshika & Ahzan, 2021) and form their own buying patterns based on their attitudes and beliefs on appropriate behavior.

There has been much excitement about this prospective market, but there have also been a lot of challenges. Millennials have lived in both the pre-internet and post-internet eras and have adapted effectively to both (Newman et al., 2016). Millennials' buying environments are both digital and analogue. However, this generation prefers brick-and-mortar stores. They want to touch, smell, and pick up products they buy online. Millennials are price-sensitive and seek value beyond premium brands, according to Goldman Sachs (2022). Even millennials do not want to be passive consumers; they want to actively contribute, co-create, and be brand partners (Ozuem et al., 2021). Further, online and mobile channels are essential for millennials because they provide the knowledge and insights needed to locate the finest items and services.

As a result of the digital revolution and the ongoing political, cultural, and socio-economic shifts in the world, today's youths have very different buying behaviors than previous generations. Further, due to the ever-increasing use and interest in online shopping, there is a pressing need to understand the reasons behind this preference. For instance, Desai and Lele (2017) found that millennials have different consumer values, interests, and concepts.

Unified Theory of Acceptance and use of technology

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Theory of Reasoned Action, and Extended UTAUT2 (Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology) models have been employed in a few recent and small number of studies that investigate consumer purchase intention. These studies used a quantitative study design and a questionnaire approach. TAM is frequently employed to describe and comprehend consumers' behavioral intentions to use new technology. According to TAM, users who are less skilled in information systems are more impacted by perceived ease of use. The UTAUT model was created after TAM2 by adding new factors to the TAM, such as subjective norm, voluntariness, and image. In turn, the UTAUT2 model was created because the UTAUT model was not effective at explaining consumer expectations. The UTAUT2 comprises hedonic motivation, habit, price value, social influence, enabling conditions, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and price expectancy. Alalwan (2018) investigated how the UTAUT2 model affected the acceptability of social media advertising features and discovered that performance expectancy was selected to cover the role of extrinsic motivation while hedonic motivation was selected to cover the role of intrinsic motivation.

Another element from the UTAUT2 model included in the current study is habit, which influences how consumers develop routine behaviors toward social media activities. The current study, however, does not consider additional UTAUT elements, such as price value, enabling situations, and effort expectancy. The removal of facilitating conditions

and effort expectations may be attributed to the fact that users of social media sites have extensive experience utilizing them, which makes usage of these networks easy and requiring minimal effort on their part. Along with this, consumers' experience with new systems like social media may cause the effects of enabling conditions and effort expectancy to disappear. Additionally, using social media does not necessitate a high degree of assistance and facilities from the consumer, which could be necessary for other technologies like mobile and internet banking. Using social media is free, hence it has no financial value. The customer is not charged for viewing or reading social media advertisements and may not care about cost for social media advertising; hence price value is not considered in the current study model.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological approach in collecting and compiling the raw data required. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 36 Malaysian Malay millennial consumers who were divided into six groups and consisted of Generation Y (those born between 1980-1990) and Generation Z (those born between 1991-1996). This method is very compatible with the form of study done to obtain research data. Because each generation matures through comparable experiences and exposures, its members tend to develop similar belief systems, values, and personality traits. Therefore, despite being millennials, Generations Y and Z were divided further into three subgroups, respectively.

Purposive sampling was used to choose the participants for the focus groups on the basis of having social media accounts and having made online purchases. A total of six different sessions were conducted and each session involved six to seven participants. Each session lasted less than two hours and was moderated based on the interview protocol that had been designed. These sessions were recorded using the recording system in the Google Meet application for the purpose of transcription and coding while consent was obtained from all informants beforehand. The audio-visual recording was transcribed by the researchers and the coding process was done using the NVivo software.

Focus group discussion (FGD)

The researchers chose FGD as the data collection technique for several reasons. They noted that the study to “understand the impact of social media features on Malay millennial consumer's purchase intention” involves several aspects, namely i) the existence of a “power” difference that distinguishes the researchers' perception and that of the informant as the party that provides research feedback about social media advertising; ii) the existence of a gap that separates researchers who have extensive knowledge, academic background and skills in the field of advertising, with informants who are only in the position of audiences/consumers, iii) the need for the study to investigate an abstract concept, namely the phenomenon of “purchase intention” that involves a complex level of behavior and motivation to be explained, iv) to determine the amount of mutual agreement or disagreement, which can only be discerned through an informal dialogue, v) this study needs a sincere answer from the informant through a polite, transparent, and brainstorming process, and the moderator does not use any pressure or intimidation, and vii) the phenomenon engaged in this study is a “typical” issue to see the purchase intention of Malay millennial consumers who have been exposed to social media advertisements.

The participants or informants can express their views without fear or embarrassment because they feel safe among peers with similar physical characteristics, even if they do not know each other well. Interaction in the group stimulates discussion and produces diverse views, which produce rich data and new ideas. The group discussion of informants has many

advantages over in-depth interviews because it takes place in a more relaxed, unstructured environment, away from the moderator's control, and without feeling pressured or afraid. This allows active questioning and discussion that generates high-quality data.

FINDINGS

The focus group participants were Malay millennial consumers (Gen Y and Gen Z) aged 23–41 years. Each of them has a job and a source of income as illustrated in Table 1. All documents for recording the research data were considered and the statements were coded in accordance with the themes. These themes were determined from the literature. In doing so, researchers considered differences in the participants' opinions. A total of 12 themes were identified from the focus group discussions.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Total hours spent on social media (daily)	Preferred social media platform
P1	Female	41	Government officer	Master's degree	3–4 hrs	Instagram
P2	Male	40	Government officer	Bachelor's degree	3–4 hrs	Facebook
P3	Female	31	Government servant	Master's degree	2–3 hrs	Facebook
P4	Female	41	Teacher	Bachelor's degree	2–3 hrs	Instagram
P5	Female	41	Government officer	Bachelor's degree	1–2 hrs	Facebook
P6	Male	31	Production house	Bachelor's degree	2–3 hrs	Facebook
P7	Male	33	MNC	Bachelor's degree	3–4 hrs	Facebook
P8	Female	34	Unit trust consultant	Bachelor's degree	3–4 hrs	Instagram
P9	Male	36	Consumer data analyst	Bachelor's degree	< 1 hour	Facebook
P10	Male	33	Consumer data analyst	Master's degree	1–2 hrs	Facebook
P11	Female	33	Government servant	Other education	> 4 hrs	Instagram
P12	Female	34	Government servant	Diploma	3–4 hrs	Instagram
P13	Female	32	Government officer	Other education	3–4 hrs	YouTube
P14	Female	36	Government servant	Diploma	2–3 hrs	Facebook
P15	Male	31	Government servant	Other education	2–3 hrs	Facebook
P16	Male	28	Printing staff	Other education	< 1 hour	Facebook
P17	Female	27	Entrepreneur	Other education	> 4 hrs	Facebook
P18	Male	27	Self-employed	Other education	2–3 hrs	Facebook
P19	Male	29	Farmer	Diploma	1–2 hrs	Facebook
P20	Male	24	Government servant	Diploma	> 4 hrs	Facebook
P21	Female	23	Private sector worker	Bachelor's degree	> 4 hrs	TikTok
P22	Female	24	English teacher	Bachelor's degree	1–2 hrs	Instagram
P23	Male	24	App, web and game developer	Bachelor's degree	> 4 hrs	YouTube
P24	Female	23	Private sector worker	Bachelor's degree	3–4 hrs	Instagram
P25	Female	24	App, web and game developer	Bachelor's degree	> 4 hrs	YouTube

Table 1. (con't)

	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Total hours spent on social media (daily)	Preferred social media platform
P26	Male	29	Entrepreneur	Bachelor's degree	1–2 hrs	Instagram
P27	Female	25	Postgraduate	Master's degree	> 4 hrs	Twitter
P28	Male	25	Entrepreneur	Bachelor's degree	> 4 hrs	Twitter
P29	Male	23	Self-employed	Bachelor's degree	1–2 hrs	Instagram
P30	Female	23	Self-employed	Bachelor's degree	> 4 hrs	Instagram
P31	Female	26	Marketing executive	Bachelor's degree	3–4 hrs	Instagram
P32	Female	26	Part time lecturer and PhD student	Master's degree	< 1 hour	Instagram
P33	Male	27	PhD student	Master's degree	3–4 hrs	Twitter

The statements were categorised into the following: performance of the social media platform (performance expectancy), creativity and attractiveness of the social media content (hedonic motivation, effort expectancy), habitual behaviour, interactivity, and informativeness (privacy concern, perceived trust). Table 2 shows the categories and themes obtained from the collected data.

Table 2. Categories and themes derived from focus group discussions

Item	Category	Themes Derived
(i)	Performance of the social media platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create more engagement • Useful and valuable ads influence consumer's like and share intention
(ii)	Creativity and attractiveness of the social media content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hedonistic motivation • Interactive features increase consumers' control, participation, and interaction • Preference towards content of advertisements that do not contradict with norms, values, and culture
(iii)	Habitual behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conciously process more info
(iv)	Interactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily interaction with social media platforms enriches the level of consumers' skills and knowledge • Shape online buying behaviour
(v)	Informativeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive reaction towards social media ads • Privacy concerns • Create more intentions to buy products advertised and loyalty • Credibility
TOTAL		12

Theme 1: Performance of the social media platform

Not all users are comfortable with, or have the skills or ability to master certain systems and features that are offered by social media platforms. These differences can be attributed to each social media platform utilizing a unique operating system and having features in accordance with the function and implementation objective of the platform. The performance of a social media platform, according to the participants, influences their purchase intention.

a. Create more engagement

Consumers are more likely to adopt new systems if they perceive them to be more productive, advantageous, and capable of saving them time and effort.

“I am comfortable with social media that is useful and user friendly. I don’t want to waste time learning system that is obviously not easy to use.”

(Informant 6, Group 3)

They are more likely to become attached to social media ads if they view them as valuable, worthwhile, and effortful. Consumers’ perceptions and intentions to buy from online malls can be predicted in great part by website advertising.

“I don’t usually pay attention to sponsored or ads in social media unless it is worth my time. I mean if the ad is about something that is beneficial to me.”

(Informant 2, Group 6)

Due to the proliferation of new platforms, users have more options than ever to choose the social media platform that best meets their needs. This decision depends on the platform system, which should be straightforward and user-friendly. This is especially important for members of Gen Y, who are less tech-savvy than Gen Z. Compatibility influences social media users’ purchase intentions for items or services offered on social media.

b. Useful and valuable ads influence consumer’s like and share intention

The promoted product influences a consumer’s desire to like or share an advertisement. This is because a product that does not benefit the consumer or is seen to be of low quality will not find a home in the consumer’s heart, even if the advertisement is aimed specifically at the consumer. More importantly, badly created advertisements will not inspire consumers to enjoy or share, let alone buy the offered product.

“I don’t share unless I know it is good.” (Informant 1, Group 1)

Theme 2: Creativity and attractiveness of the social media content

a. Hedonistic motivation

Creative and appealing social media advertising can persuade the target audience to like the advertised brand. This is known as hedonistic motivation. Hedonistic motivation in consumer behavior is the desire to buy products or services to satisfy psychological needs such as emotion, fulfilment, prestige, and other subjective feelings. According to Widagdo and Roz (2021), it is triggered by an individual’s emotional reaction, sensory pleasures, and dreams.

b. Interactive features increase consumers’ control, participation, and interaction

Social networking services have been regarded as a new way to have fun and be amused. Consumers are drawn to social media ads owing to their uniqueness and appeal. Further, the high level of involvement afforded by such platforms increases consumer control, participation, and human contact. As a result, consumers enjoy higher hedonic advantages. This gives incontrovertible proof that intrinsic motivation, in the form of entertainment (original and beautiful content), affects the value of social media advertising and consumer attitudes.

c. Preference towards content of advertisement that do not contradict with norms, values, and culture

The content of the advertisement published on social media also affects the consumer's intent to purchase. According to the participants, advertising that is insensitive to the values, beliefs, and culture that they hold as Malays and Muslims would not even attract their attention, let alone influence their purchase intent. Even though they are more sensitive to adopting cultures from other nations, due to widespread exposure to information on social media, they nevertheless cling to their religious and cultural beliefs, even if some of them lack strong convictions regarding religion and culture.

Theme 3: Habitual behaviour

a. Consciously process more info

Habit refers to automatic behaviors acquired as a result of early and long-term learning. People are more prone to establish habits concerning social media platforms since they use them often and most marketing activities are posted on them. This increases consumers' general abilities and knowledge about these activities. Consumers tend to be more involved with new systems and apps if they use them often, and consumers who are exposed to social media marketing daily are easily affected by them and respond positively to them.

“I am most comfortable using Facebook, maybe because I'm used to it. Been using it for more than 8 years. I know how it works but of course, when they update new features, I will find it annoying, but I think it is just a normal reaction when we experience new things.” (Informant 4, Group 5)

Theme 4: Interactivity

a. Daily interaction with social media platforms enriches the level of consumers' skills and knowledge

The ability to interact with other users is one of the most important and fundamental features offered by social media platforms and the online space in general. Effective features of such technological elements will broaden the scope of human perception and, consequently, their capacity to consciously process more data. The nature of the communication process and the way information could be transmitted between all parties in the online space is significantly altered by the introduction of interactivity.

Interactivity is a form of connection and communication between people and technology. Interactivity also refers to a user's ability to manipulate a media platform's context and content. The FGD discussions demonstrated the role of interaction in consumer purchasing. The perceived interactivity of social media advertising increases consumers' intent to explore and revisit those platforms. In other words, online interactivity indirectly affects social media user engagement.

b. Shape online buying behaviour

Interactivity affects online shoppers' buying patterns. Interactivity is the media platform's ability to respond quickly, and some define it as a two-way exchange of information in real time. This could increase the perceived value of the media platform. Interactive elements will have a significant impact on how consumers perceive the utility and benefits of digital and social media items. The findings reveal that interactivity shapes consumers' perceptions and actions in online shopping. As a Web 2.0 system, social media is highly interactive, and as a result, users would have greater room to interact and make their own

contributions. This, in turn, can increase the degree of intrinsic as well as psychological benefits associated with using and following social media advertising (such as hedonic motivation, enjoyment, and fun).

Theme 5: Informativeness

a. Positive reaction towards social media ads

Advertisers are considered informative when they can provide their consumers sufficient information to assist them make better judgments on their purchases. It is more of a perceptual construct in which this concept is associated with the sender's capacity to logically attract consumer response, thus affording the consumer the ability to cognitively evaluate the adoption of the information and messages that are provided to them. The beneficial impact of informativeness on consumers' reactions to social media advertising is their intent to purchase the advertised products.

b. Privacy concerns

The participants also discussed that content or ads produced for social media platforms should not breach users' right to privacy by selling user data and information to third parties. Thus, individual's attitude toward social media advertising was found to be negatively predicted by privacy concerns. Most consumers are unaware that their online behavior is being tracked and that they have no control over the acquisition and use of such personal information.

"...you know that when I see an ad on social media, I sometimes want to buy but most of the time, I hesitate to share my information like my address, account number, I mean, anything can happen right?" (Informant 4, Group 1)

c. Create more intentions to buy products advertised and loyalty

The degree of information that is provided in advertisements on social media platforms has the potential to educate consumers and provide them the necessary tools to improve their purchasing habits, hence increasing their desire to make a purchase. Advertisers have access to more procedures and resources on social media platforms, which enables for better customization of information and ads. In turn, this makes the consumer's experience with social media advertisements more valuable and beneficial.

Informativeness is one of the most essential features of effective advertising, influencing consumers' opinions of social media ads. As more recent and detailed information becomes accessible, consumers may regard social media ads as more useful. Informativeness is most significant in shaping customers' opinions of ads' value. From the consumers' perspective, social media advertising with enough information may be more beneficial and effective. Thus, social media platforms allow advertisers a greater ability to personalize and customize messages and content based on consumer preferences. When customers feel personalized, they become more satisfied and loyal. In turn, consumers are more interested in ads they believe are relevant to their tastes and preferences and will be more likely to rely on social media ads if they believe they are relevant to their goals and interests.

d. Credibility

An advertisement's credibility refers to how much consumers believe its claims. The transmission medium determines the credibility of information, while the advertiser and ad determine its credibility. Consumers will accept more trustworthy information.

“...if the company who advertised the product has a bad reputation, I will think twice before taking any action...hmm... or maybe I won't continue watching the ad. Why should I?”
(Informant 3, Group 6)

The transcript-based themes represent the factors that affect purchase intention related to the existing models such as UTAUT and UTAUT2 and how social media advertising features impact the Malay millennial consumer's purchase intention.

DISCUSSION

Advertisers all over the world invest a significant amount of time and resources into advertising their products or service through various types of social media and there is always concern over the viability of such initiatives and whether these efforts could attract a greater number of consumers. According to Abubakar et al. (2017), advertising on social media needs to be planned and created in a way that reflects all the primary concerns that are intended to treat consumers.

Generations Y and Z were divided into separate groups during the FGD sessions because each generation matures through many similar experiences and exposures, leading to the development of belief systems, sets of values, and personality traits that are similar to one another but distinct from those of the generation that came before them and the one that will follow them. Although Malays are perceived to be steadfast and influenced by their beliefs, culture, and religion in their lives, including their buying intention, the results of this study indicate that these characteristics do not contribute to the data findings. A small number of value, cultural, and religious aspects are addressed, but only in the framework of the advertising content, which do not go against their values and beliefs. Additionally, the beliefs, culture, and upbringing they receive have a big impact on how conscious they are of privacy issues. The ideas and suggestions made by the two sets of participants, namely generations Y and Z, do not differ greatly from one another. Generation Y is not a true digital native, in contrast to Generation Z, who might be regarded as the first true digital natives in history. There is not much evidence to support this, however it may be true that these two generations share the same values and habits as Malays.

It is revealed that interactivity plays a substantial part in the process of contributing to hedonic motivation. This suggests that if a consumer perceives an existing level of interactivity in relation to social media advertising, they will generally find such advertising to be more useful and entertaining to follow, and as a result, they will be motivated to purchase the products or services that are presented in the advertisement. Customers are therefore primarily focused on a two-way conversation rather than just sending texts (Ali Shah et al., 2019). Additionally, interactivity affords consumers a greater voice by allowing them to provide comments and discuss their perceptions and experiences of the targeted advertisements.

Informativeness also influences the purchasing intent of Malay millennial consumers. They are more inclined to purchase when they view social media advertising as a reliable source of information. They believe social media to be a crucial source of relevant information about products and services. Social media advertising has an adequate amount of consumer-generated and business-generated content because of social media's high level of engagement, and this makes social media advertisements a more reliable source of information than any type of conventional media.

High interactivity and informativeness in social media ads also improve their effectiveness. Studies on perceived relevance indicate that consumers see social media

ads as relevant to their needs and preferences. This improves how consumers view social media ads. As online advertising grows and consumers are inundated with ads, ad veracity becomes even more crucial. Deceptive advertising reduces its value and irritates consumers, thus advertisers must always ensure the credibility of their social media advertising.

The advent of the Internet has greatly benefited civilization, for example, easy access to information (Waheed, 2019). Information sharing affects security and privacy (Hajli & Lin, 2016). The phrase “privacy concerns” in reference to social media sites refers to the users’ desires to maintain control over how their information is used. Personal data is collected not only when making purchases but also when using the Internet and publishing preferences on user accounts. Therefore, it’s difficult for advertisers to design relevant ads, resulting in privacy concerns. When a marketer collects consumer data to design ads, they should respect their consumers’ privacy. Social media platforms use user-generated content (UGC) and browsing history to create customized ads. In this respect, privacy issues become a key component of tailored advertising. One of the main reasons people use social media is for reliability, timeliness, and complete information. Information readily available aids consumers in selecting better products and avoiding risks when making purchases.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study focused on Malay millennial consumers in Malaysia, which is the largest consumer segment, and data was collected using focus group discussions. This study was primarily conducted among this consumer segment and thus, cannot represent other group of consumers in Malaysia. Thus, future research can look at how social media advertising features impact the purchase intention of other groups of consumers. This study also did not consider the impact of other factors such as gender, income and educational level and thus, is worthwhile to investigate these in future studies. This study also examined social media advertisements over several social media platforms without focusing on the nature of each platform. In this regard, future research could fruitfully explore the impact of different social media platforms.

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Perceptions and engagement of Klang Valley urbanites on COVID-19 PSAs during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, rampant misinformation about the virus has created large-scale panic and uneasiness among the Malaysian public. In response to this threat, the Malaysian government launched public service announcements (PSAs) on COVID-19 in various media to increase public awareness and knowledge, specifically on recommended solutions. The messages in the PSAs were tailored to underscore the various phases of the pandemic to persuade public belief as well as nurture positive attitude and behavioural changes. The objectives of this study are: (1) to investigate the public's information-seeking behaviours, (2) to investigate user perceptions and indicators of PSAs, and (3) to determine the effectiveness of PSAs as a communication platform to convey important information about the pandemic throughout the different Movement Control Order (MCO) phases. Through focus group discussions with eight urban Klang Valley informants, findings highlight the crucial elements in identifying motivation and factors of media preferences which affect how various media platforms benefit the Malaysian public. The findings also illustrate the need for the government to ensure that the content and context of the PSAs meet the audiences' demographics in ensuring effective dissemination of information and awareness during a pandemic.

Keywords: *PSAs, health communication, media usage, information, digital storytelling*

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown origin was first reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China (Ciotti et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) reported that since its discovery, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has spread all over the world, infecting 4,806,299 people, and causing 318,599 deaths, as of May 20, 2020. This alarming situation prompted WHO to declare COVID-19 as a worldwide health crisis or pandemic due to the number of infected cases showing an upward trend at an unprecedented rate (Velavan & Meyer, 2020).

When the deadly pandemic hit Malaysia, the government mobilised its agencies and worked very closely with the private sector to ferociously protect public interests. These efforts included creating awareness and educating the public on the virus before enforcing relevant laws and measures to curb the spread of this highly contagious virus. In disseminating information to create a ripple effect so the general public can receive information in a fast and effective manner, public service announcements (PSAs) were aired and deployed on various media.

With the imposition of the first and second phases of Movement Control Order (MCO), members of the public were confined to their homes or within a certain radius. This made it physically impossible to disseminate COVID-19-related information via certain media formats such as billboards, posters, brochures, and fliers. In hindsight, the MCO resulted in increased usage of the Internet, television, and radio where PSAs were strategically employed.

A study by Krishna and Anuragh (2017) highlighted the importance of PSAs where they serve as the most influential component in creating awareness and informing the public on safety, health, social, environmental, and people behaviour. Indeed, PSAs' role is significantly recognised in society as it continues to support and carry vital messages and life values. PSAs transcend beyond conventional advertising in which the latter focuses on selling specific products or services while PSAs aim to make the public aware of an important issue and encourage them to take specific measures or action (Sulatra & Pratiwi, 2020).

The significance of PSAs can be evinced from the public perception and acceptance of COVID-19 PSAs at ground level; this could also shed important indicators for the government in strategizing the dissemination of health-related information. Thus, this qualitative study aims to explore the Klang Valley urbanites' information-seeking behaviours during the pandemic and their relationship with behavioural change. More specifically, there are three study objectives. First, to investigate the public's information-seeking behaviours. Second, to investigate user perceptions and indicators of PSAs and, third to determine the effectiveness of PSAs as a communication platform in conveying important information about the pandemic throughout the different Movement Control Order (MCO) phases.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PSAs in the time of the pandemic

PSA is an integral part of the community where communicatory elements are essential for government campaigns that focus on the society at large. The focus of PSAs mainly revolves around public issues to help increase public knowledge and awareness which are also necessary for possible solutions. This includes the ability of the PSAs to influence public beliefs, attitudes, and its capability to stimulate behavioural changes.

Notably, in the time of pandemic where the government was battling COVID-19 and misinformation, the role of PSAs has become even more important than ever before. This includes at the global level where governments strategically ally with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) in dealing with these multiple threats that jeopardise peoples' lives and livelihoods (Jerome et al., 2021).

A study by Azlan et al. (2020) on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of the Malaysian public on COVID-19 found that Malaysians acquired an acceptable level of knowledge on the virus which contributed to their positive perception of overcoming the pandemic. This was enforced by the continuous PSAs done by the government during the pandemic which further increased the public's understanding of COVID-19. To that effect, the deployment of PSAs by the Malaysian government agencies was dedicated towards increasing public awareness and knowledge as well as recommending solutions. The narratives and messages for each phase of the pandemic were specifically tailored to shift public beliefs, and attitudes, which in turn stimulates positive behavioural changes. This rightly shows that to manage a pandemic, public trust is key.

Past studies on the effectiveness of media health campaigns by governments illustrate that health-related messages have the ability to influence individuals' health behaviour (McWhirter & Hoffman-Goetz, 2016; Yoo et al., 2018). Most health campaigns use public service messages and manifest cognitive and emotional cues to obtain the desired results (Yoo et al., 2018). This strategy of message framing has been widely used in health communication to induce motivational protective behaviours (Jin et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, the Malaysian government undertook numerous measures to alleviate mass panic and protect the health of its citizens (Shah et al., 2020). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the use of PSAs to disseminate information has risen rapidly. Employing effective storytelling of concepts with the aim of changing public behaviour, PSAs are indelibly an important tool in equipping and keeping a society vigilant of the pandemic. However, it should be noted that to effectively influence the audience, the PSAs must also employ social pressures which could be more effective than just expressing individual values.

Aligning PSAs with public information-seeking behaviour

PSAs play an important role in impacting public behaviour, especially when behavior modification as a result of knowledge gained on COVID-19 enables them to effectively distinguish reliable and trusted information received via various media. Additionally, the main method for government agencies and NGOs to deliver messages to the public is through PSAs, which are typically broadcasted through television and radio, outdoor formats such as billboards as well as in print (newspaper and magazine) advertisements. PSAs aim to increase awareness, reinforce positive beliefs, intensify personal concerns and move people to take action (Abd Latif et al., 2013).

When discussing information-seeking behaviour, it is important to postulate the origin of the content especially when it involves health-related information. In any PSA, source credibility is significant as it determines the message effectiveness of the communicator which in turn, largely depends on their expertise and trustworthiness to influence the public (Kareklas et al., 2015). Source credibility has been found to be effective in changing health behaviours, including HIV/AIDS prevention (Major & Coleman, 2013), smoking cessation (Byrne et al., 2012; Phua, 2013), health information-seeking (Hu & Sundar, 2010), and social support (Wright & Rains, 2014).

Media consumption patterns among Malaysians seemed to have changed, particularly during the MCO. The information-seeking behaviour observed suggests that

the electronic media and the Internet have been very useful for those who stay in urban areas. In relation to this, social media preferences as a source of information among the public is undeniable despite the authenticity issue. For instance, Phua and Tinkham (2016) found that social networking sites, such as YouTube, represent a viable medium for the dissemination of health messages. As such, the effectiveness of health messages to be propagated through social networking services (SNSs) and other Internet platforms allows health organisations to plan and execute more time- and cost-effective media campaigns.

PSAs on preventive measures such as frequent handwashing, social distancing and regular sanitisation were the main focus during the pandemic in Malaysia. Aside from that, various NGOs also utilised PSAs to spread messages on mental health issues caused by the pandemic. Just like any other form of advertising, the message disseminated must consistently tally with the information-seeking behaviour sought from the public to ensure relevancy. The aim to educate the public can only be considered successful if the public is able to connect with the PSA messages. At the core of most campaigns are PSAs, which tend to be short (less than 1 minute), target a broad audience, and are informative, succinct, and attract attention (Ftanou, et. al., 2017). This correlates with the study by Witteman and Zikmund-Fisher (2012) on the characteristics of Web 2.0 where social media and its popularity is hugely influential in changing people's perceptions, due to its role as a health information resource.

In relation to that, media effects and its relationships to information-seeking behaviour is undeniably significant. In this perspective, the uses and gratification theory (UGT) posits that the cognitive behaviours of people construct the decision-making process which they intentionally choose. Activities in which gratification is sought, correlate with the information obtained and include individuals' interaction with the media they come into contact with. To this effect, Whiting and Williams (2013) recommended three functions of UGT for social media (and the Internet), namely information seeking, communicatory utility, and convenience utility.

The Internet has undoubtedly played an important role in serving the public with health-related information (Murero & Rice, 2013) and this is critical in ensuring the formation of opinion on any issues related to health and medicine. Studies also indicate that a significant number of populations of the world prefer to use the Internet when searching for information related to health, although the motivation behind such selection could vary (Gutierrez et al., 2014; Chaudhuri et al., 2013). In addition, UGT postulates that the individual's motive in choosing the media to watch PSAs acts as the driver to obtain gratification. It further denotes that media consumption positively contributes to convenience in seeking the right COVID-19-related information.

With regard to information-seeking behaviour among urbanites, PSAs is among the most effective tools to disseminate COVID-19-related information. The messages embedded in the narrative deliberately create an influential communication utility for the public to use as part of conversation with others. This will then create an effective chain of information disseminated widely. In fact, past studies succinctly demonstrate a plethora of evidence where public education campaigns have the potency to change attitudes and behaviours involving public health (Ajzen, 2012; Jordan et al., 2012; Wakefield et al., 2011; Wakefield et al., 2010).

METHODOLOGY

To explore the patterns of information-seeking behaviour involving COVID-19 PSAs, this study employed a qualitative research methodology. Through this methodology, the

perspectives of PSA recipients were explored through a focus group discussion (FGD). This necessitates an in-depth understanding of the social context and relationships affecting the successful implementation of the PSA content during COVID-19. Additionally, this method was approved by the expert panels at the Malaysia Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) who granted the research grant. Qualitative studies typically use small sample sizes because of the intensive nature of such studies (Creswell, 2014). Thus, the FGD was conducted with eight informants selected using a non-probability sampling technique.

Using snowball sampling, the study selectively determined the informants based on the prescribed criteria, namely: 1) lives in Klang Valley, 2) aged between 18 – 40, 3) exposed to government-produced COVID-19 PSAs, and 4) actively used television and Internet to search for information. FGD is conducted as a provision to ascertain and pave the way to possible interactive discussions facilitated by researchers in a venue while Nyumba et al. (2018) also added it is not a common and classical type of focus group discussion. Nevertheless, as the study criteria included a focus on Klang Valley with a saturated urban population at designated areas, this resulted in only one FGD. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the informants involved in the FGD.

Table 1. Demographics of the informants

Informant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Location
Informant 1	Male	38	Academician	Seri Kembangan
Informant 2	Male	42	Academician	Bangi
Informant 3	Female	42	Academician	Damansara
Informant 4	Female	47	Entrepreneur	Kajang
Informant 5	Female	51	Senior manager	Kajang
Informant 6	Male	44	Senior government officer	Cheras
Informant 7	Female	44	Senior government officer	Bangi
Informant 8	Female	47	Senior manager	Shah Alam

Data was collected from the FGD session held for approximately 60 – 120 minutes, which was recorded and transcribed. The FGD session was conducted virtually using the Google Meeting platform to limit the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The FGD session was specifically designed to assist in the manifest and latent analysis which encompasses the opinions, thoughts, perceptions, and sentiments of the urbanites on PSAs and their exposure. The instrument of the study was primarily based on UGT's six category systems, namely cognition, diversion, social utility, entertainment, withdrawal, and expression. Aside from that, media preferences were also added to understand the informants' motivation for the selected media and channels.

The instrument served as a guide and the study employed a semi-structured interview style in a semi-formal setting to allow the informants to feel more comfortable and at ease when giving feedback. Creswell (2014) highlighted that this technique promotes interaction between researchers and informants, thus allowing the researchers to explore informal thinking and request further information spontaneously.

The transcribing process was done manually, and two tiers of checking were done by two other researchers to ensure accuracy. The data was later analysed using the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CASDAQ) NVivo 12 software programme. The first layer of coding was done by one of the researchers which was later verified by

another researcher as co-coders for authentication and verification purposes. The study used a predetermined theme to guide the thematic analysis. According to Schreier (2012), predetermined themes are known as main categories of coding, and they are derived from the study objectives and research questions.

FINDINGS

From the analysis, 173 quotations from eight informants were recorded for abstraction purposes pertaining to the perceptions and indicators of PSAs. In line with the research objectives, it led to the formation of the predetermined theme (information-seeking behaviour), and the subsequent three sub-themes (cognition, Internet usage, social utility).

For sub-theme one (cognition), the analysis generated two codes (beware and instrumental surveillance) with 11 and seven quotations, respectively. For sub-theme two (Internet usage), three codes were manifested: duration (36 quotations), platform preferences (59 quotations), and radio (19 quotations). Finally, for sub-theme three, social utility yielded three codes: conversational currency (16 quotations), parasocial relationships (12 quotations) and animation (13 quotations).

The abstraction process for the pre-determined themes was conducted to explore the urbanites' information-seeking behaviour focusing on cognition and the Internet as the main platforms. In addition, motivation was also considered important to inculcate holistic views on learning curves via PSAs and the subtle interventions it creates in fostering behavioural change for COVID-19. Table 2 presents data on co-occurrences between the frequency of quotations and thematic analysis of the FGD.

Table 2. Co-occurrences for public information-seeking behaviour

Theme: Public information-seeking behaviour	Frequency	Total
Sub-Theme: Cognition		
<i>Codes</i>		
Beware surveillance	11	
Instrumental surveillance	7	
Sub-Theme: Internet Usage		
<i>Codes</i>		
Duration	36	
Platform preferences	59	
Radio	19	
Sub-Theme: Social Utility		
<i>Codes</i>		
Conversational currency	16	
Parasocial relationships	12	
Animation	13	
		173

Cognition

When discussing information-seeking behaviour, multiple media from conventional print and electronic to the more sophisticated ones such as social media, have proven to be very useful for the government and its agencies. These media formats were chosen to disseminate the PSAs to create awareness and educate the public on any COVID-19-

related information. The findings reveal that the Internet and social media were perceived as pioneers which paved the way for the selection of various other media when searching for information. This finding concurs with Savolainen (2011) who contended that with the proliferation of various social media platforms and their applications, the creation and dissemination of information has gained much attention amongst the public who seek information, due to their ease of use. A study by Zulkarnain et al. (2022) on social media literacy skills in combating fake news during COVID-19 revealed that social media is very efficient in searching for information as people's information-seeking behaviour shift from mainstream media to social media. This trend also helped governments to accelerate the dissemination of COVID-19 updates using various social media platforms.

“I think you can relate more when it's from members of the community, it doesn't matter if they came from Sarawak or you know. People from KL... But you know I think I've seen a few. Especially on RTM actually. RTM TV2. they would do random... random... like you know... people on the streets.”

(Informant 2: Reference 16 – 0.36% Coverage)

From the 18 quotations extracted for the sub-theme, cognition, the findings reveal that the cognitive element is indeed significant for urbanites when searching for information. The codes derived from cognition were instrumental surveillance (everyday information that helps people carry on with their daily activities) and beware surveillance (information that serves as a warning to people of any impending danger). These surveillances helped the informants filter and weigh on the type of knowledge acquired upon being exposed to COVID-19 information.

Further to this, the findings indicate that all informants viewed the information found within the spectrum of Internet usage as part of the social utility which assisted them. In this respect, Mustaffa et al. (2012) argued that the search for information (online and offline) is motivated by the need to necessitate the application of the information, and this involves individual perceptions of their lack of knowledge towards certain issues; in other words, the process of information-seeking and the use of the acquired knowledge in everyday life.

“The social media platforms, both inst... Facebook, Twitter. So, when the first pandemic happens, we use most of these key opinion leaders to get people to be cautious about the dos and don'ts... SOP... so at the early stage, it was something that is found to be very helpful, and very accommodating in terms of giving people perception and the right perception and all that.”

(Informant 4: Reference 13 - 0.52% Coverage)

It should also be noted that the cognition aspect, with 19 co-occurrences, serves as an important indicator for the government to wholly understand that the motivation behind the selection of the media, is either for daily use or for obtaining updates on COVID-19 that affect one's family, society, and surroundings. With regard to this, Medlock et al. (2015), in their study, found that the Internet (social media) was the most preferred source for those searching for health-related information.

“The ones especially on aa... Encik Ayub, Mak cik Kiah and all that. It's quite interesting because... the animation. Because it's attractive... I know, I know it's repetitive, but I think most of us will like, say, “what is this... I know what

to do with the SOPs and all” am I right? But surprisingly, some people still don’t know.” (Informant 7: Reference 6 - 0.39% Coverage)

The beware surveillance code under cognition signifies the role that the media plays as a conduit to warn the public of any impending danger. In the current context, PSAs contributed towards creating the much-needed awareness among the informants. This was supported throughout the discussions with all the informants. Similarly, Udeze and Chukwuma (2016) noted that the media functions as a form of surveillance which then assists the public in obtaining much-needed information on any impending danger. It should be noted that the messaging covered under beware surveillance carries a serious tone to ensure that it will be taken seriously by recipients due to its potential harmful consequences for the public. This also means that the exposure from PSAs and the subsequent gratifying effect of cognitive development (instrumental and beware surveillance) in particular, works as a functional approach to the public.

“Haa, the content itself... It comes from the ministry itself. That is the way... well, at that time... when the issues spark. So, when the issues spark, we initially didn’t know what COVID is. The increase in the statistics serve as precautions or for our information to get a hold of the current situation at that time.” (Informant 8: 246: Reference 3 – 0.28% Coverage)

“Mostly, the total number of the cases, and... right after the cumulative infection cases were revealed, there will be a PSA about SOPs, what is COVID, yeah... in a way, it creates awareness for us. So, yes.” (Informant 5: 767: Reference 2 – 0.19% Coverage)

“Normally when it comes to the (use or preference) medium... platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp are very present. It is used. The most important (social media platform) is Facebook. In our communication, we use Facebook 100% to obtain important information, aaa... to know the cumulative cases, what is... what happens... er... because we are living in fear, so we need to know (about other) villages... the ones that are under lockdown and all... we need to know.” (Informant 6: 451: Reference 2 – 0.99% Coverage)

As for instrumental surveillance, the informants opined that media selection provides gratification in terms of learning general knowledge. Although the messaging may appear simple, it is highly crucial when considering the experiences that they endured during MCO. The PSAs and its continued messaging ensure that the public is kept abreast of current events. Instrumental surveillance also proved to be valuable as it served as a social intervention mechanism to repel misinformation. To this, Assemblo (2017) stated that repetitive messaging (content in the media) would inculcate familiarity for the public. This is crucial in ensuring strict adherence to instructions or standard operating procedures (SOPs) by the Ministry of Health, as reflected in the PSAs.

“This is so because if I am searching for information, I will not look at it on Facebook, I’ll go to YouTube. So, for me to search for certain information, say, for example, a personal one, such as I want to purchase a handbag, for example... I need to know the model... then I’ll go to YouTube to search. So, I’ll look for the review.” (Informant 7: 197: Reference 1 – 0.96% Coverage)

“As for me... for example news about the latest development in the country and all that, I’ll go to Facebook, for this one like... what do you call it... hmm, how do I say it... that is because sometimes, I also watch for like crypto news, investment and NFT, so I watch and read about it on TikTok and Twitter, so basically these 3... this one la.. I use this one normally.”

(Informant 1: 526: Reference 2 – 0.32% Coverage)

Internet usage

The Internet and by extension, social media platforms were identified as the preferred media for urbanites who search for information. Despite credibility issues, the informants acknowledged the significant role that the Internet played during the pandemic when the government imposed MCO in stages, restricting people from social gatherings and quarantining at home. As a result of the social distancing restrictions, many ended up congregating online and this directly contributed to a spike in Internet usage for information-seeking as well as for socialisation purposes. Taking cognisance of the exponential rise in Internet usage, effective measures to ascertain information credibility, trustworthiness, and quality were called for (Hou & Shim, 2010). This means that media preferences can help to determine the most effective platforms for PSAs to be deployed. Urbanites’ experiences interacting with the Internet and social media can provide interesting perspectives and insights for government agencies in selecting the most appropriate media for PSAs to achieve the desired results and maximum dissemination.

From the FGD, it was found that the Internet and social media preferences contributed significantly to the increased usage of various PSAs on COVID-19 by various relevant agencies. A study by Xiang and Song (2020) on adoption attention of users’ knowledge payment surmised UGT in terms of media functions and the users’ needs wherein the preferences and behaviours of individuals are based on motivation originating from psychological needs. In the case of social media where PSAs could be abundantly found, this solidifies the fact that governments must understand public media choice when choosing the right platform to post the PSAs.

“Instagram is number 1. Why is that so? Even though I love to watch TikTok, in TikTok there are just too many people sharing TikTok reels on Instagram. Because the functions are very much similar. That is why I didn’t use TikTok despite having an account. Aaa... if it’s me... aaa... ok. Instagram (is my preference) because I want to see what my friends are up to... and I too am very active in updating my Instagram account, like many of you here right... all of you follow me on Instagram right? (Feel like) an influencer. And it allows people to express... My day-to-day activities... I love updating stories.”

(Informant 2: Reference 21 - 0.65% Coverage)

The assortment of new media technologies available to users around the world at one’s convenience has allowed user-generated content, and co-creator producers, which has increased further the complexity of the communication ecosystem. Thus, the reach factor (in this case, the PSAs) and its duration are crucial to ensure that the messages are disseminated effectively across various media. This was an important factor agreed upon by the informants as this factor was the second most highlighted factor discussed positively. The informants also mentioned that the duration they spent online can become a good indicator for the government agencies to determine the most appropriate media for the PSAs.

“Okay as for me, umm... most likely, heavy usage. No matter day or night, WhatsApp will be the most used or prioritised. This is so because, mostly all work-related, and then MS messengers and all that. Because I was looking after the global market. So, there are times when I have a meeting with the US at 11 at night, with the UK sometimes at 10 pm... so, that’s why it’s a bit around the clock (in terms of usage and frequency of internet). So, a lot of it on WhatsApp, with current work... so when anything couldn’t be sent through normal channels on my laptop like file attachment and all, they will normally paste to WhatsApp.” (Informant 8: Reference 24 - 0.71% Coverage)

“As much I hate to admit it, well, I am a heavy user... maybe... I think in 7, 8 hours (per day) because when I search for information, I will not go to Facebook, I prefer YouTube.” (Informant 3: 197: Reference 8 – 0.20% Coverage)

“For me... because my phone tracks my usage of the internet and social media, my daily average is 9 hours, 56 minutes.” (Informant 8: 44: Reference 1 – 0.14% Coverage)

Social utility

With regard to perceptions among urbanites in Klang Valley, the informants benefitted from the increased awareness from PSAs as the messages helped them understand the pandemic better. To elaborate, the availability of the right information allowed them to be flexible in sharing opinions whilst leveraging on social utility to be better equipped to endure the pandemic. Avram et al. (2020) highlighted that people seek social media to fulfil their needs for socialisation (social factors) as social media equips users with immediate social information that is crucial to social cues.

In fact, social utility acts as a proponent of information-seeking behaviour and the findings show that PSAs meet the public’s affective needs. More specifically, the content of the PSAs serves as an engagement tool and offers conversational catalysts for urbanites about COVID-19 issues. In other words, the knowledge gained from the PSAs provide insights that act as a conversational currency for the public. It then transcends the normative consensus that allows the public to engage in communal experiences:

“The social media platforms, both Inst... Facebook, Twitter. So, when the first pandemic happens, we use most of these key opinion leaders to get people to be cautious about the dos and don’ts. SOP... so at the early stage, it was something that is found to be very helpful, and very accommodating in terms of giving people perception and the right perception and all that.” (Informant 4: Reference 13 - 0.52% Coverage)

The social utility concept also postulates that PSAs become part of the conversational currency where they mirror the context of the society in which they are disseminated. Evidently, the content and context of the PSAs reinforce the message carried, which assists in relationship building and creating solidarity among people due to their own COVID-19 experiences. The informants also mentioned that the incorporation of local contexts in the PSA storyline, for example the local Sarawakian content in a PSA which was highlighted, increased their relatability, thus aiding in the recall session. Therefore, the message design

and the selection of appropriate content must fit within the context of the audiences that the PSAs intend to influence.

“I think the native in Sarawak if I’m not mistaken. The PSAs used the excerpts from some interviews but then, this PSA is rarely shown... it will normally air early in the morning like 4 am, 5 am, or late at night 11 pm. But for me... I liked it because the PSA was short... it has captions, and then, in the end, the PSA was made into a kind of collage presentation. The thing is... I have not seen the PSA anymore and do not know who made it. But I like the content there because they use native Sarawakian... use the local slang... and the PSA was not too long.”
(Informant 4: Reference 12 - 0.61% Coverage)

“...maybe in the future... you... I mean, MCMC or MOH could feature... aaa... COVID survivor, the family that lost the loved one from COVID in the PSA... It will then resonate with the people emotionally... oh, this will be more effective, because it touches on the core of a human’s feelings. At least, it makes people remember better... even the anti-vax too can be influenced.”
(Informant 1: Reference 11 - 0.42% Coverage)

PSAs with animated features were mentioned as some of most effective contents that the informants were able to utilise as part of their social utility. The informants admitted that they remembered characters featured in these PSAs which further reinforced the messages they conveyed. With the strategic use of animation, for example, the informants found these PSAs to be very favourable and reacted positively to them. This suggests acceptance of such formats across demographic groups, notwithstanding children alone. Furthermore, the message must contain a creative and interesting narrative to ensure the longevity and retention of the COVID-19 information communicated in the PSAs. Interestingly, the combination of education and entertainment in the storytelling creates an ingenious narrative that reinforces COVID-19-related information to the public, and aids in their understanding of the issue better.

“The use of the video graphic, the motion graphic like PowToon and all that... animated PSA I think, despite it being repetitive and also, the content is simple and straightforward. It’s very catchy, and easy to understand, so. I’ve actually highlighted this to the MOH team too.”
(Informant 4: 1165: Reference 2 – 0.37% Coverage)

“But if we look at the ones shown on TV or social media, I prefer the animation... whereby animation has simplified the message. To me, I like to watch it... like how we get the virus... so it tells me what I should do... and when I know, it helps me to be better prepared... albeit it’s at the early stage... the information is useful as we advance to more complex information.”
(Informant 5: 824: Reference 2 – 0.57% Coverage)

“Well, I don’t know... sometimes it can be very useful like the use of cartoons and animation... in terms of content we can see... well, how do I say it... the way it is presented is interesting... like how to wash our hand ... wear mask... using animation (to teach).”
(Informant 7: 1073: Reference 2 – 0.91% Coverage)

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the need for the Malaysian government to ensure the content and context of their PSAs meet the audiences' demographics. This is important to ensure that the PSAs are effective in delivering their intended objectives. This study also reveals the ripple effect resulting from the deployment of the PSAs in various media. PSAs serve as a social utility to enhance public understanding and impact those not exposed to these PSAs in the form of conversational currency and viral messages. Ling et al. (2021) added that the omnipresence of social media in today's society and the vital role it played in disseminating information during the pandemic further allows the public to acquire knowledge as well as help the government affect public attitude and perception.

The relevance of the fundamental elements of motivation and factors underlying media preferences among urbanites in Klang Valley as well as the intended outcome have been proven. Through latent and manifest analyses, the findings of the study illustrate the need for the relevant agencies to ensure the content and context of their PSAs meet the audiences' demographics. Apart from information dissemination, the PSAs were also intended as public education concerning COVID-19. The study has established the need for the government to increase surveillance using PSAs which serves as an incremental social intervention. In its entirety, the conversations that took place amongst the informants of diverse backgrounds and identities reveal interesting insights of media consumption patterns. Thus, highlighting the importance of understanding the reasons that underpin the Klang Valley urbanites' media selection and consumption. In particular, the dissemination of information through the deployment of PSAs by various government bodies.

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The effect of personal locus in media literacy on youth's interpretation of violent media messages

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ABSTRACT

Media literacy is an important factor in determining how an individual internalises media messages which in turn, affect how they view the world. This paper expounds on how personal locus, an element of media literacy, affects the cognitive process of constructing and interpreting violent media messages. The focus of this study is youths between 15 and 19 years old as this age group is deemed the most susceptible to the effect of violent media messages. A total of 21 respondents were selected and sorted into four different groups based on their media literacy level. The findings reveal that youths with a higher media literacy score have a clearer aim in their consumption. They are also more curious about media education and the effects of media. Youths with high media literacy are able to utilize different media literacy skills, resulting in a more varied interpretation and analysis of violent media messages. Their perception of violence is more abstract and contextualized. Youths with low media literacy, on the other hand, have a limited and more superficial interpretation of violent media messages. It can be concluded that youths with low media literacy are more susceptible to negative effects of violent media messages. This research is useful for the government to design better media literacy policies, especially with the rise of violent media messages on social media.

Keywords: **Media literacy, media violence, personal locus, cognitive approach, youth**

INTRODUCTION

Media literacy is generally understood as the ability to critically and responsibly access, analyze, evaluate, and create mediated communication (Mohd Salleh et al., 2019). Potter (2019) synthesized that there are seven cognitive skills required in media literacy, namely the ability to analyse, evaluate, categorize, induce, deduce, synthesise, and abstract media messages. Australia, Canada, England, South Africa, Scandinavia, Russia as well as countries in Europe, South America and Asia are among the first countries that implemented media literacy within their school curriculum. Most of these curricula focus on educating society, especially children and teenagers to critically scrutinize and evaluate media messages (Fedorov et al., 2022). Australia, for example, provides media education from pre-school to grade 12. The syllabus emphasizes aesthetic and semiotic values, using a humanistic and liberal approach to popular art. In Russia, its media literacy movement focuses on media education practices in the digital environment (Kaminskaya & Erokhina, 2022).

When COVID-19 hit, the usage of media worldwide increased tremendously. In tandem, media literacy proponents accelerated their research on media literacy at institutional levels such as schools, colleges, and community hubs (Potter, 2019; Khan et al., 2021, Schmitt et al., 2018). These studies are important as the world is increasingly mediatized at a rapid pace. However, the focus on institutional levels have hampered and slowed down media literacy studies at the individual level. Potter's (2019) cognitive approach in the media literacy theory emphasizes how an individual's cognitive understanding of media messages is the core of the institutional movement of media literacy. Therefore, this research seeks to address this gap to understand how media literacy affects individuals and not institutions. More specifically, this study captures the thought process of youths in interpreting media messages and how they present the interpretation within discussions with others.

In Malaysia, media literacy is an important area that had been touched on by media scholars. For example, the study of Hassim et al. (2021) aimed to understand how media literacy intervenes with childhood obesity. Md Ghani et al. (2022), on the other hand, studied how media literacy influences parents' vaccination knowledge. Pandian et al.'s (2020) research revealed that secondary school students are self-assured of their own digital media literacy capability. The studies of media literacy in Malaysia have largely revolved around understanding how media literacy affects family institutions and general media literacy skills. However, very few studies have looked at how media literacy in Malaysia assists individuals in navigating and understanding violent media messages.

One of the most emphasized aspects in the study of media literacy is how it can become an intervening tool to deal with elements of violence in the media. Moorhouse and Brooke (2020) expounded on how critical media literacy is in preventing primary violence from happening. They opined that while much has been said on media violence and media literacy, there are not many studies that deal with the construction of violent messages by individuals at the cognitive level. The construction of the idea and meaning of violence by individuals are key to creating effective intervention to violent actions.

In Malaysia, the government's approach is mainly to censor media messages (especially films) that are deemed harmful or violent. Sim (2021) pronounced that censorship of films in Malaysia is effective in intervening with violent behaviours among young people, but this approach is often criticized by filmmakers. She also emphasized that there should be more qualitative research to understand viewers' perception of violent media messages in Malaysia's context. This understanding has become more crucial as more and more digital tools are available to bypass censorship.

It is against the background of the gaps within media literacy and media violence studies in Malaysia, that this research is formulated. The main aim of this research is to capture the thought process of youths in a group setting as they reflect upon violent media messages and to understand how youths' media literacy levels affect their interpretation of media violence. This research is important for policymakers to build effective policies that can equip Malaysian youths to decipher media messages and intervene in the effect of violent media messages on the community. On a theoretical level, this research adds value to the media literacy knowledge by focusing more on individuals rather than institutional change (Potter, 2019).

In summary, the questions raised to answer the research problem are as follows:

- a) How do individuals construct the meaning of elements of violence seen on media, especially within a group setting?
- b) What are the similarities and differences in the meaning construction of media violent messages between those with high and low media literacy?
- c) To what extent does the strength of personal locus play an important role in the meaning construction process of media violent messages?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The media literacy theory using a cognitive approach was founded by James Potter, a leading figure in the field of media literacy (Potter, 2019). He theorized that individuals are overloaded with information from the media and are unable to process all the information. Therefore, individuals would resort to automatic filtering of the messages within the mind to evaluate the importance of information presented to them until something catches their interest. However, automatic processing of information affects the subconscious mind and individuals may unconsciously shape their perception of the world through media messages given to them. At the same time, the automatic processing of information causes us to ignore important and quality messages in the process, which can lead to an incorrect perception of the world (Potter, 2019).

The main premise of the cognitive approach to media literacy is that when an individual receives information from the media, the individual will use his or her existing knowledge structure within their personal locus to make decisions, with skills and abilities. The person's knowledge structure is derived from five structures which are media effects, media content, the media industry, the real world, and oneself. This knowledge structure is the basis of awareness used in understanding media messages (Nguyen, 2021).

Personal locus refers to the consciousness that controls the information processing activities in a person's mind (Potter, 2019). Personal locus is the most important construct to determine the level of media literacy of an individual. Personal locus has two important dimensions, namely control and awareness. Control in this context is control over media messages while awareness refers to a person's level of awareness when exposed to media messages. Control of media messages is controlled by two parties, the media, and the individual. Usually, control is shared between the media and the individual. The higher the ability of individuals to control media messages received, the higher their level of literacy.

At the same time, a person's level of awareness has two states — automatic or conscious (mindful). Automatic processing refers to the state when an individual performs automatic processing without much thinking. As a person moves from automatic processing to the conscious, they increase their awareness of the media used, the specific purpose of exposure and the choices available in information processing.

Potter (2004) combined the two dimensions of control and awareness and created four neighbourhoods or categories that symbolize four different levels of literacy, namely the automatic-manipulated neighbourhood, the automatic-habitual neighbourhood, the conscious-manipulation neighbourhood (mindful-manipulated) and high level of literacy (high degree of media literacy). The link between control and awareness and the level of media literacy can be seen in Figure 1.

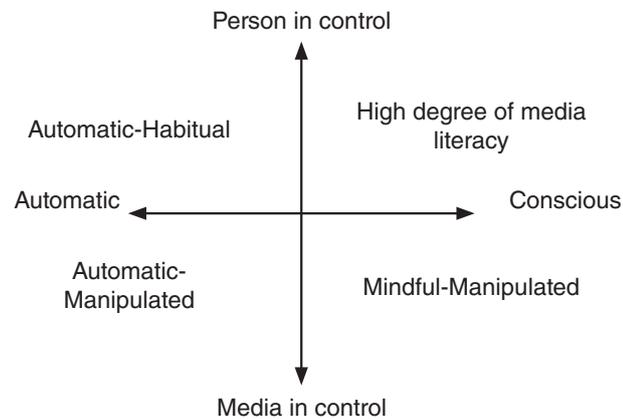


Figure 1. Neighbourhoods in personal locus by Potter (2004)

At the basic level, all individuals are at the automatic-manipulated neighbourhood by choosing to ignore the media's effect on them. They expose themselves to various media messages until something grabs their attention and lets the media have control over their attention. This is the lowest level of personal locus strength. Individuals within the habitual-automatic neighbourhood have a higher desire to control their exposure and their construction of meaning, but still use automatic processing. They are unaware of their ability to control the media content exposure. Those in the mindful-manipulated group control their exposure to media messages and criticize the media messages they watch. However, they are unable to empower themselves to know what to do. The fourth group with high media literacy has good control over the media and at the same time, has a high level of awareness. They are able to answer important questions such as how much they should reveal themselves, what media messages to avoid, and what media messages to seek out (Potter, 2019).

This research utilized the media literacy theory's cognitive approach to understand how the strength of personal locus affects youths' interpretation of violent media messages that they come across daily. It aims to contribute to the theory by understanding how youths specifically construct the violent media messages and how elements of media literacy, especially personal locus, are applied within the meaning construction.

Studies on personal locus or individual control over one's selections as well as the media that ultimately shape their reality are not novel. Cho et al. (2022), for example, built a conceptual framework for social media literacy where their framework focused on social media users' self and their dynamic choices of messages and networks. Cho et al. (2022) argued that literacy of any kind, especially media literacy, should start at the individual level of construct. They also emphasized the importance of personal locus. However, this research focuses more on the meaning of the construction of media messages instead of choices of networks or focusing on social media per se.

Recent literature for media literacy and the strength of personal locus are mostly focused on the competencies and abilities of young generation to utilize digital tools for learning purposes. For example, Galih et al. (2019) explored the level of personal locus of both students

and lecturers in state universities using Moodle e-learning systems. Their research found that most university students in Indonesia's state universities have good personal locus in terms of using systems. Asady and Mirbakhsh (2019) studied news media literacy among 466 high school students in Tehran based on the cognitive approach in the media literacy theory. The results show intrinsic motivation to be the highest predictor of news media literacy.

In Malaysia, most media literacy research focused on health-related issues such as parents' media literacy effect on vaccination knowledge (Md Ghani et al., 2022) or parents' media literacy effect on child's obesity (Hassim et al., 2021). Many of the local research focused on digital or media competences. For example, Ker et al. (2020) reviewed the Malaysian Generation Z's digital competencies such as competence of access, analysis, evaluation, creation, reflection, and action in their use of media. However, there is a lack of research that evaluates the personal locus of youths in their interpretation of media messages, much less violent media messages.

Muhammad (2019) expounded on media violence content and its impact on audiences. He reviewed violent content from films, video games and computer games as well as the effect of exposure on real-life violence. Ismail et al. (2022), on the other hand, attempted to understand how Malaysian youths' social media practices can shape their attitude towards violent extremism. These studies set the foundation where the researchers added to the literature of media violence in Malaysia by understanding how personal locus, an element of media literacy, affects violent media message interpretation.

It can be surmised from past research that there is a need to investigate individuals' personal locus strength and not just mere technical competencies when it comes to media literacy. At the same time, there is a gap in media violence studies in Malaysia to see how individual personal locus can affect the interpretation of violent media messages. Hence, this study specifically looks into these gaps and seeks to address the thought process of violent media message interpretation and meaning construction among youths in Malaysia.

METHODS

To capture the thought process of youths as they reflect upon violent media messages and to understand how the youths' media literacy levels affect their interpretation of media violence, this research utilized focus group discussion as the methodology. Focus groups allow for richer discussions and probing (Ochieng et al., 2018), making it the most appropriate for this study. For the instrumentation of the questions, the researcher adapted and extended the theme from Xufang (2022). The theme was subjected to a thorough expert validation to ensure that the questions were valid.

The questions were:

1. How do you view violence in general?
2. How do you view violence in movies?
3. How close do you think violence that you watch on mass media in general are reflective of the real world?
4. Do you think violent media content affect how you feel?
5. What do you think of the effect of violent media content on you or people in general?

Participants were selected from the age range of 15–19 years. According to Guo (2022), youths in this age range are youths who have higher reasoning abilities than children. They can distinguish between what is seen as true and what is not true. They have the ability to question the validity of things that happen. They also have the cognitive

ability to think and plan a real act of violence and improvise the act based on violent acts that they watched. Apart from that, youths who can identify themselves with violent heroes in the media are the ones who will become violent, especially if they continue to think about themes of violence. The nature of youths who like to rebel and fight against authority causes this group to be the only group that will respect criminals and perpetrators of violence. Ochieng et al. (2018) also stated that the selection of respondents should be those who understand the topic being discussed. Youths are the group who have time to watch the media and can express their opinions on what they watch. In summary, youths are a group that is no stranger to the media and elements of violence in the media.

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. This study selected respondents from four major schools in Kajang, a small town in Selangor, Malaysia. The reason for the selection of this town is because this town is a mix of urban and rural areas. At the same time, the youths are the largest population in this town. To randomly select respondents for the focus group discussions, the researchers first conducted a survey based on Arshad et al.'s (2022) measurement of media literacy to gauge the youths' media literacy level. From the survey conducted, the respondents who scored above three were categorized as high media literacy (HML group) while those who scored less than three were categorized as low media literacy (LML group). Overall, Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of HML and LML groups. The percentage of HML is 80.4% (N= 78) while 19.6% (N = 19) are LML.

Table 1. Frequency and percentages of groups

Group	Frequency (N)	Percentages (%)
High literacy	78	80.4
Low literacy	19	19.6
Total	97	100

The highest mean score of the survey was 3.91 while the lowest mean score of was 2.38. The overall average score was 3.28. The media literacy level of youths on average exceeds the determination point 3, meaning that their literacy level tends to be high. However, it should be noted that the mean difference is only 0.28, indicating that there is room for improvement. Based on the survey results, the researchers can conclude that the media literacy level of youths aged 15–19 years is high. These youths are aware of the impact of the media and the message that media is trying to convey to them.

From the survey, the researchers then randomly selected 11 respondents from the HML group, and 10 respondents from the LML group. Each HML and LML group were then divided into two focus groups. In total, there were four focus groups. See Figure 2.

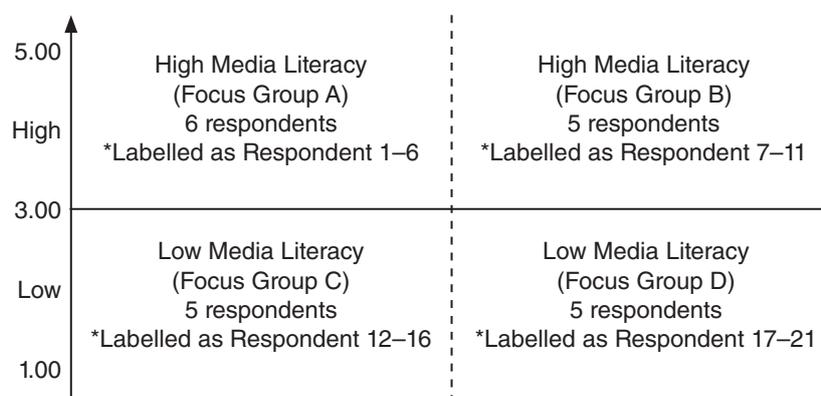


Figure 2. Distribution of focus group respondents

Comparisons were made between a) the two groups with high media literacy levels, b) the two groups with low media literacy levels, and c) the four groups with different levels of media literacy. To ensure the clarity of the presentation of the research results, a combination of Group A and B would be referred as HML (High Media Literacy) groups, while a combination of Group C and D would be referred as LML (Low Media Literacy) groups. Thematic analysis was conducted to find recurring themes on the construction of media violent messages.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In answering the first research question on how individuals construct the meaning of elements of violence seen in media, the study found that youths aged 15–19 construct the meaning of violence from media differently depending on their level of media literacy. Using a cognitive approach, Potter (2004) stated that everyone has an existing knowledge structure which is the result of reality construction based on the process of socialization with society. This study found that media is one of the important agents of socialization in the construction process of a person's reality. In the social construction of reality, an individual not only accepts the subjective reality given by society, but that reality is negotiated in the individual's mind using the existing skills within them (Kendrick & Fullerton, 2019). This skill exists with the frequency of cognitive use of the individual's mind in giving meaning to what often happens around him/her. Skills, in the context of this study, refers to a person's media literacy used to negotiate the reality of violence received from media socialization agents. The HML groups were found to have a different perception of violence compared to the LML groups. The respondents were labelled using numbers as shown in Figure 2.

In general, HML youths see violence with a broader perspective and make room for different interpretations and factors before summarizing their view on the reality of violence. HML youths see violence as something that is not necessarily physical but can also be emotional and verbal. For example, when asked to define violence, Respondent 2 questioned back:

“First of all, the violence we are talking about, are they doing it for fun? Or are they forced to do so? If you do it with friends, it's always just fun, and you don't intend to hurt them”. (Respondent 2, FG A)

The other respondents in the HML group concurred with the statement and added on:

“There is emotional violence. You keep scolding or bullying a person with words, it hurts. That is violence even if friends”. (Respondent 5, FG A)

The HML group argued that when it comes to violence, violent actions should not be condoned regardless of circumstances. One of the HML respondents opined:

“If a good character does violence to an evil character, then the good character will become an evil person. Not good. Because people will be affected. If you want revenge, do it the right way...Sue him”. (Respondent 9, FG B)

The LML groups, on the other hand, confined their definition of violence to physical violence alone. The LML group insisted that there needs to be a significant amount of violence to be classified as violent. Among their responses:

“I mean...if I just scold you, you cannot say that is violent. Our parent also will scold us.” (Respondent 15, FG C)

“I think if like a girl beat the guy, then the guy don't feel anything. It is not very violent. No injury also...” (Respondent 17, FG D)

To answer the research question on the similarities and differences of the LML and HML groups, as well as how personal locus comes into place, the researchers analysed their views on media violent messages as well as the skills that were utilized during the discussions. An important difference that emerged is that youths with high media literacy could negotiate the reality given by socialization agents (media) to match their experience and their own societal values. Respondents from HML groups provided these statements:

“Ok... When you watch the action and the challenge, it's very fake, so you watch it just to watch. Sometimes, some plans, they have value in life and others. You take that value, and you apply it in your life.” (Respondent 6, FG B)

“Like I saw a certain film...in that film, there is a moral value, as he stated, or some words or sayings or an action in the film, you know... Scenes that can inspire me to keep going. So, the impact is very clear”. (Respondent 1, FG A)

This shows that those with high analytical skills will have a perspective on reality that is consistent with their experience and based on their societal values. They are also more likely to doubt the truth of messages received from socializing agents. This is consistent with the statement by Kendrick and Fullerton (2019) that media messages are often adjusted to personal life experiences only by those who are highly media literate.

For those with low media literacy, it is easier for them to believe the reality displayed by the media even if it is not experienced in their daily lives. For example, they are more likely to accept the reality that there are many bad people in this world, especially men. For example, Respondent 10 from the LML group stated:

“I feel like I am more careful when I am around men, because you won't know when they become violent. I feel that because when you watch movies, it's always the guy that is very violent.”

This study found that awareness of media literacy in Malaysia is generally still low, especially among youths. This matter should be taken seriously because it affects youths with low-level media literacy more than those with high-level media literacy. Those with high levels of media literacy practice self-censorship. This was evident in HML groups when asked if they would allow children to watch violent cartoons.

“No... Because they can't think anymore ma... there must be an adult to watch.” (Respondent 3)

“They still don't know... What is right and what is wrong.” (Respondent 1)

Those with low-level media literacy from groups C and D showed a significant difference of perception. For them, censorship and age categories in movies are unnecessary and troublesome.

“No... You see...Like Thor and Thunder... we can't watch... But I looked, sneaked in, there was nothing [violent or bad]. I don't see why [we can't watch]”. (Respondent 14)

“I think it's good that we can get it from the Internet because I can see ma...” (Respondent 16)

When asked about the viewing of violent cartoons by children, Respondent 17 stated that she would allow her younger brother to watch violent cartoons *“because we grew up like that ma... I think it's ok for him to watch.”*

So far, the Malaysian government's approach has been to block and filter. But with the advancements of technology, this approach needs to be reviewed. Youths nowadays have the technical knowledge of technology and finding access to filtered information has become easy for them (Nurzihan et al., 2021). Stringent censorship can also backfire and lead to negative consequences. Based on the current situation and the voices of youths, they need media literacy skills. They need to understand why censorship is necessary, how not to expose themselves to negative information that will give an incorrect picture of their reality and be given the skills to filter, analyze and draw conclusions for themselves about media content.

The findings of the study prove that the HML groups use media literacy skills more actively compared to the LML groups. Table 2 are exhibits of transcripts from Groups A and B that reflect their media literacy skills during the discussions.

Table 2. Statements exhibiting media literacy skills by the HML groups

Skills	Group A	Group B
Analyzing	<i>Yes, there is a time... we watch... we think... real life is the same... so there is an influence.</i>	<i>Ok, so when you watch a movie that has action and adventure, it's a lie, so you watch it to like it. There are movies, they have life values and things like that. You take that value and apply.</i>
Evaluating	<i>Still can't... because we believe there is heaven and hell... There is no punishment... there must be... otherwise, everyone can kill... so there is no one in the country anymore... because there is no law... there must be law.</i>	<i>Gandhi once said, an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind... So, revenge is not a good thing. After all, who are we to judge what will happen... I mean... In my way... I mean, as a Christian, God is the real Judge. He will know who is guilty.</i>
Categorizing	<i>In TV, blood is not right. In life, it's true, it's more painful than what we see.</i>	<i>Because when I watch violent movies, when one person kills another, I don't laugh. The funny thing is the way they kill is not that bad.</i>
Induction	<i>Because TV follows real life... So, what happens on TV, happens in real life.</i>	<i>Men are stronger... So, when a woman hits a man, her impact is less than when a man hits a woman.</i>
Deduction	<i>If that's true... so now there are no more bad men lor... If all the bad people have to be killed, then there are no more bad people..</i>	<i>So, like I watch this movie, there is a moral value, like he said, or a saying or a movie action, understand no... There was a scene that inspired me to keep going.</i>

Table 2. (con't)

Skills	Group A	Group B
Synthesis	<i>In Brilliant Mind... Like them all... fighting for money. So, you have to answer the questions, look at the plate, remember the things on the plate.</i>	<i>Rambo rips the bad guy's throat out with his hands</i>
Abstracting	<i>I think their EQ is very low... Because when the EQ is low, it's easy to be influenced by what's near the TV.</i>	<i>But I don't think it's a bad thing. I know it probably won't happen in real life, but all this opens possibilities... It helps me to understand what to look out for... when I'm on the street.</i>

The HML groups evidently applied their real-life experiences and were able to relate it to the media content. This finding concurs with Nguyen (2021) that the ability to contextualise media violent content based on shared experiences reflects respondents' personal locus strength. Table 3 shows statements from groups C and D where their media literacy abilities were manifested, although not as active as groups A and B.

Table 3. Statements exhibiting media literacy skills by the LML groups

Skills	Group C	Group D
Analyzing	<i>Men are stronger ma... Women are weaker... Women beat men for nothing. But a man hits a woman... it must hurt.</i>	
Evaluating	<i>Assessing the reason, we have the law... Having to use that method for the law of that person.</i>	
Categorizing	<i>TV is a lie; real life is real. So, when we see that thing in real life... We try to run away from that place. Because we know that one is for fun but the other one might happen in real life.</i>	<i>So, you know where to laugh, where not to laugh.</i>
Induction		<i>I think... all Korean girls wear very beautiful.</i>
Deduction		<i>It's like if people can't control themselves...it's very dangerous. So, we have to be careful with the people around us.</i>
Synthesis	<i>The ghost is looking for a girl... then guna knife and stab it many times... then just throw it in the trash</i>	<i>Don't know what happened, the eye came out, then the friend remembered that the eye was a lemon. Because the friend is blind. So, he used those eyes, made lemonade. So, he cut the eye. Blood came out, very scared.</i>
Abstracting	<i>No men will not use violence.</i>	<i>Usually, women beat men for security reasons.</i>

As can be seen from Table 3, not all media literacy skills were manifested by the LML groups. Throughout the focus group discussions, the LML groups showed a lack of abstraction skills compared to the HML groups. For example, when asked whether children should watch violent films, one of the responses was:

Violence is bad especially for children. It teaches kids wrong things. Like when you teach a boy to do something bad. That's violence. (Respondent 5, FG A)

Respondent 5 reasoned why violence against children is not good because it brings bad consequences. But Respondent 13 from the LML group countered that children should be exposed to violence based on a rationalization,

“If you don't let him see it, he will want to see it”. (Respondent 13, FG C)

The LML groups had problems expressing their feelings, tended to agree with media messages, rarely gave implicit meaning and rarely analyzed media messages. Reflecting on Potter (2004, 2019) and Nguyen (2021), this research demonstrates that a weaker personal locus means lesser frequent usage of cognitive skills during construction of messages. The LML groups admitted that they believe in what is presented in the media and they look up to influencers. In group D, they admitted that they believe in the media and what is presented to them.

An overview of the process of meaning construction that takes place in the minds of youths are reflected within the findings of this study. With these findings, this study hopes to advance media literacy, particularly the understanding of media violence among youths. The consistency of the present findings with that of Potter (2019) and Guo (2022) concludes that the strength of personal locus is pivotal to ensure that individuals are better equipped to interpret media messages correctly with varied assumptions to reflect a broader worldview.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to understand how youths construct the meaning of violence, especially based on what they have consumed through media and how their personal locus (component of media literacy) affects the interpretation of violent media messages. The findings clearly indicate that youths with a stronger personal locus, hence higher media literacy, can decipher violent media messages in a more systematic, organized, and diverse way. Further, the study establishes the importance of strengthening the personal locus of youths to better equip them to handle the influx of violent media messages.

This study has also given a glimpse at the level of media literacy of the Malaysian youth. This is important as youths are exposed to media content daily, are the most active users of media and the most vulnerable group to be influenced. This study can be used as a reference point to build an effective curriculum and policy for media literacy and education among youth. Media content creators, be it filmmakers, social media influencers or media organisations should take this into account to responsibly create content that would affect youths in a positive manner. Additionally, the government, media players and educators should work together to strengthen the community's personal locus through campaigns, more targeted media education and quality contents.

This study's limitation is that it only involved focus group discussions among 21 youths aged between 15 and 19 years old. Nevertheless, the researchers hope that the insights gained can be a stepping stone for future research in understanding how individuals interpret media messages and how media literacy is utilized within the interpretation. Future research may expand this to different age groups such as children aged 7–14, or university students aged 20–25 years old.

Further, this study classified respondents according to their level of media literacy (or strength of personal locus). However, future studies could fruitfully investigate how personal locus is formed by looking at the knowledge structure and agents such as personality, environment, media, and social institutions. The researchers believe that further understanding of this matter will provide a clearer picture of the cognitive process that takes place.

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Challenges of Malaysian journalists in reporting and misinformation on COVID-19 (2021 – 2022)

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists took on the challenging task of gathering and distributing accurate information. Journalists exist as part of an ecology in which their work influences and is influenced by the environment. Using the framework of disaster communication ecology, this study explores the challenges of Malaysian journalists in news reporting and misinformation on the pandemic from 2021–2022. To this end, six journalists from different media organizations and news desks were interviewed to get their perspectives regarding their challenges in news reporting and misinformation during the pandemic. Five themes — struggles in gathering news on COVID-19, Work from Home and follow-ups, database of sources, downsizing of media outlets and creativity of journalists — emerged from the interviews and are discussed in this paper. The study also looks at how journalists think of misinformation and how the public should be more active in their fact-checking. At the time of the study, the six journalists interviewed also talked about the reopening of the news media organizations and their practices in 2022. In conclusion, it is important to note that journalists are important in mediating the information on COVID-19 to the public so that the latter will be better informed and better equipped for the new normal, during and post pandemic.

Keywords: *Malaysian journalists, news reporting, journalism, challenges, COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic started in early 2020 where it hit every corner of the world. In the initial stage, when not much was known of the virus, no one could predict the severity of the pandemic and how much it would affect our lives. However, through continuous new findings and updates reported on COVID-19, people became more informed and empowered to take precautions to protect themselves and their loved ones from the highly contagious virus.

As COVID-19 continued to devastate the world with the rise in the number of deaths and infections, news reporting too has had to adapt itself to the new norm of being credible in disseminating information as the public sought diligently trustworthy news and reliable information (Pavlik, 2021). Filling in the vacuum of credible and verified information as well as disseminating it to help the public understand the pandemic better remains the sole responsibility of journalists around the world.

In conversing about COVID-19, the public often thinks that the health worker was the frontliner in dealing with COVID-19. Little do we realize, journalists around the world have risked their lives, safety, their loved ones by going out to source for information on COVID-19. In upholding the general motto of journalism, that the public should know “the truth and nothing but the truth”, journalists have been covering COVID-19 news stories despite restrictions of movement enforced throughout the world.

Be it through television or online news portals, the dissemination of information on COVID-19 was crucial so that the public could understand how life-threatening the virus was. Communities rely on information from the media without many realizing it, as the media has become part and parcel of our lives. In Malaysia, journalists were and continue to be the mediators and key persons in delivering information on COVID-19 between the Health Ministry and the Malaysian public.

In a research commentary released in the early stages of the pandemic, Lewis (2020) argued that COVID-19 did not add new issues for journalists to work through but compounded existing issues and highlighted “the blind spots in our work”. He explained (p. 685), “Journalism research tends to underplay some aspects of their lived experiences. Consider the complexity of covering crisis and trauma while also experiencing the same yourself.” This applies to local journalists who are residents and stakeholders in the communities in which they work (Perreault, 2020). As Katz (1989) puts it, news work resembles the work of science. Journalists shoulder the responsibility as fact-checkers and information transmitters to the public. Additionally, journalists use formal, professional, informal, and personal means to contribute to the COVID-19 communication ecology. In disaster and crisis communication, journalism serves as a conduit for communications from public officials and experts to the broader public, which is known as the facilitative role of journalism (Christians et al., 2010).

Journalists conceive of and operate their role based on their perception of their audiences’ needs. For example, research has shown that journalists operate in a storyteller role when mitigating coverage of dangerous actors (Perreault, Johnson et al., 2020), an enrichment role when trying to comprehensively serve a particular community (Perreault & Bell, 2022), and a disseminator role when attempting to maintain objectivity in a volatile cultural space (Perreault, Stanfield et al., 2020). In the facilitative role, the journalist’s purpose is to monitor, or observe, the environment for “relevant information about events, conditions, trends, and threats” (Christians et al., 2010, p. 139) and operate in response to a perceived need for collaboration. The facilitative role draws on an understanding that the journalist is responsible to the society and perhaps contributes to the public’s decision making in a crisis.

This study has two objectives: a) exploring the Malaysian journalists’ challenges during the pandemic, and b) examining how they dealt with misinformation on COVID-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalism, digitalisation and COVID-19

The effectiveness of media in providing information, educating people, and conducting social control of change processes is influenced by various factors including external ones. For instance, the new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the work patterns of journalists. Technological advances have also paved the way for everyone and anyone who is willing to engage actively in the production and distribution of news, a role conventionally restricted to reporters and media houses, thereby democratizing journalistic procedures (Joseph, 2016). As for the journalism profession, the Internet, for example, has enabled any individual who owns a smartphone, computer, or a tablet to not only write stories but also to produce the stories via an online or social media platform. As such, this has become a contentious issue, as anyone with little or no journalistic training, and without being attached to any news agency, can now engage in news reporting (Hadland, 2015; Waisbord, 2019). In addition, there is now an international news agency offering a service called *GuardianWitness*, that provides a platform for its audiences to publish their own eye-witness-related audio-visual materials (Višňovský & Radošinská, 2018). Thus, with user-generated videos and other audio-visual materials, users are longer viewed as normal recipients, and instead many have become journalists or photographers (Višňovský & Radošinská, 2018). Practically anyone with Internet access can now participate in digital journalism. Thus, media outlets and newsrooms are no longer the only providers of news, data, and comment, as a wide range of actors are contributing huge quantities of news content as well (Waisbord, 2019).

Journalism reporting on disaster

There is a paucity of literature on the methods and challenges of journalists in reporting during disasters. Past studies have mainly focused on how to deal with crisis in social media, responding to the media during crisis, and how people consume crisis news reporting through journalism (Kormelink & Gunneiwick, 2022; Mannell & Mese, 2022).

It is believed that there are only approximately 10 studies found in relation to the challenges of news reporting among journalists during COVID-19 in various contexts. Amongst them, the work of Adam and Akote (2022) who investigated issues such as health, security, mobility, and pay cut. Another study by Perreault and Perreault (2021) revealed that journalists risked their lives while covering assignments during the pandemic, had to think outside the box in gathering news stories and remain vigilant to changes at all times. Another study focusing on Bulgaria's COVID-19 community communication ecology (Price & Antonova, 2022) highlighted the problems the Bulgarian media and journalists faced which are similar to others across the world. Other studies in relation to the topic are Ndlovu & Sibanda (2022) and Sujoko (2022).

This study is hoped to contribute to journalism literature, specifically on the challenges of journalists in news reporting during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the Malaysian context.

Disaster communication ecology

Disaster communication ecology (Spialek et al., 2016) refers to the resources and information individuals use before, during, and after a disaster. While journalists, like any individuals, must adapt to crises and disasters, the COVID-19 communication ecology provides an environment where new norms and practices can be established and tested, and perhaps innovated. This approach of trial and error as well as innovating is not new or confined to

pandemics, but rather arises from journalists seeking to establish practices focused on four key principles — research, a commitment to freedom of speech, a dedication to the pursuit of truth and accuracy in reporting, and ethics (Pavlik, 2013). From this lens, journalism situates itself in an environment that involves not only of solid foundations but also newfound fluctuations. Journalism exists as a microenvironment within the COVID-19 communication ecology. The dissemination of information by journalists relies on the capacity of journalists and the overall composition of the media environment. Therefore, the function of news in crisis and disaster communication reflects the overlapping roles of citizens, organizations, and journalists through social media (Houston et al., 2015). News organizations might engage the public online more often during a crisis or disaster, and therefore the social media's structure creates a much more complex ecosystem for information stakeholders (Paulussen & Harder, 2014; Weaver & Willnat, 2016). Hence, journalism serves as a conduit by which the public may not only learn but also document and share information about a crisis. While journalists, like any individuals, must adapt to crises and disasters, the COVID-19 communication ecology provides an environment where new norms and practices can undergo testing and innovations.

Further, due to the rapid spread of misinformation on COVID-19, journalists have to doubly work hard to establish practices grounded on the aforementioned key principles.

METHODOLOGY

The research design employed a qualitative method with in-depth interviews conducted in July – August 2021 and September 2022. This timeframe was selected to examine the nature of news reporting of Malaysian journalists during the pandemic, as well as after restrictions were loosened and when the economy had fully opened in 2022. A total of six interviews were conducted in 2021 through various platforms, to accommodate accordingly the availability and convenience of the selected journalists. Interviews for Journalists 1, 2, 5 and 6 were conducted through Facebook messenger while Journalist 3's interview was conducted through Zoom. Journalist 4's interview was conducted through Instagram chat as the journalist was much comfortable doing the interview in the said platform.

In July 2022, the same journalists were gathered once again to share their viewpoints on what the journalism industry is like after the re-opening of the economic sectors in Malaysia. Analysis of the discourse involved reading the transcripts for discursive themes, with awareness emphasised on the temporal context and how journalists identified their challenges in news reporting during the pandemic. The researcher analysed the entirety of the sample answers with the research questions in mind and then compared the themes to address the questions.

Six journalists were interviewed regarding their challenges at their respective desks in various news organizations:

- Journalist 1: Courts Desk, *News Straits Times* (8 years' experience)
- Journalist 2: Current News Affairs, *Berita Harian* (8 years' experience)
- Journalist 3: Head of Digital News Department, *Bernamea Agency* (8 years' experience)
- Journalist 4: Producer of AWANI TV News Programme, *Astro Awani* (9 years' experience)
- Journalist 5: Broadcast journalist, *Astro Awani* (7 years' experience)
- Journalist 6: Former journalist at *Kosmo*, stringer at *Utusan Malaysia* (15 years' experience)

Initially, the researcher aimed to conduct in-depth interviews with 10 journalists, however, in the end, only six journalists were available to share their thoughts on the different challenges of news reporting in their respective desks. Hence, while this study does not represent the full spectrum of challenges faced by Malaysian journalists in news reporting during COVID-19, it does provide a glimpse into the topic.

In-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews were conducted based on the following questions:

- a. Can you describe in brief your day-to-day routine in news reporting?
- b. What were the challenges that you faced in terms of news reporting skills during the start of the pandemic?
- c. How are you adapting now in your day-to-day routine a year after the pandemic? Have your news reporting skills changed?
- d. How has COVID-19 affected the journalism industry? In a good or bad way?
- e. What do you think about the misinformation that the public has on the COVID-19 vaccine?
- f. How can we combat viral forwarded messages distributed through social media platforms, for instance (WhatsApp), that create an inaccurate perception of the COVID-19 vaccine amongst the public?

The next section discusses the findings of the in-depth interviews. Each discussion point starts with a quotation from the journalists followed by an elaboration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In conversation with six journalists from various news desks and media organizations, five themes emerged in relation to the challenges faced by Malaysian journalists in news reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021. The themes are: struggles in gathering news on COVID-19, Work from Home and follow-ups, database of sources, downsizing of media outlets and creativity of journalists during the pandemic.

1st theme – Struggles in gathering news on COVID-19

“Many people didn’t know what COVID-19 was, so did us. We have to dig as much information in the beginning of 2020 to make the public understand how deadly the virus is. It was not easy to find information in the beginning of the pandemic. People were scared. We try to make the public understand by coming out with visuals and figures on how to stay safe from COVID 19.”

(Journalist 1)

“It was hard to get information on COVID 19. As everything was new and unknown to us”

(Journalist 2)

“We came to understand what COVID 19 is through the news events as well. Through that we did visuals to explain to the public how to combat the deadly virus”

(Journalist 3)

In discussing this theme, the journalists were of the opinion that the Malaysian public thought that COVID-19 was a normal disease, like the flu, which infected some locals after their trip from China. No one knew what COVID-19 was. When more people got infected in 2020, people started to panic and started to look for answers and solutions. Even journalists had very little information to go on at the beginning of the outbreak in Wuhan, China. However, over the next few months, as they came to understand how serious the outbreak was, journalists in their respective media organizations, started to ‘dig’ more and explain through visuals and figures in layman’s terms what COVID-19 was and how it could infect people. Journalists also faced the difficult task of explaining to the public that it was not safe to even meet family members at that point of time as well as other social distancing measures. Reporting included animations to emphasize to the public that it was safer to stay at home. Various standard operating procedures (SOPs) were given by the Ministry of Health (MoH), and journalists were responsible for disseminating them and reminding the public that the new normal must be applied in their daily lives starting from March 2020.

2nd theme – Work from Home and follow-ups

“The news reporting scenario after the pandemic is divided into two if you are based in Berita Harian (BH). One, where journalist are being assigned to do a follow up and the second one would be where a journalist is assigned to attend a physical event, a proceeding or any breaking through events though the policy during the pandemic is for employees to work from home in the beginning of the Movement Restriction Order. If a journalist is being assigned to do follow ups, they have to contact any news sources from home, and in addition to that, they have to think outside the box, if any news source failed to be contacted, they have to come up with plan A, plan B, etc. Journalists also would be on standby to cover a physical event if there is a need to. There will be some leniency if the event was held through online platforms via Zoom, they could monitor and cover the event online or look for news stories through credible social media platforms of various sources. Usually, journalist have to verify with other colleagues to follow up with questions to the ‘source of the news story’ in the assignment that they covered. Situations are quite different in regards to the Health Ministry Press Conference whereby there will be one journalist to monitor social media platforms for responses, observations and questions from the public and another or two journalists to attend the press conferences physically. Selected journalists will attend these assignments.”

(Journalist 2)

Journalist 2 was more active in handling news on COVID-19 as he was from the Current News Affairs Desk. He was responsible for attending the daily Health Ministry Press Conference to report on the cases during the beginning of the pandemic in Malaysia in April 2020. After the first restricted movement control order (MCO) was enforced by the government at the beginning of the pandemic, it was difficult for journalists to operate as usual. Reporters from various organizations and different news desks resorted to building a solid base of network sources and interviewees as they were expected to write up stories from within the four walls of their homes.

For journalists from the Current News Affairs Desk, only two from each media outlet were allowed to cover COVID-19 issues “on-site”. MOH used WhatsApp and Zoom to communicate and disseminate information and updates with reporters, and later on, used

the same platforms to conduct press conferences remotely, so that reporters could stay safe and not risk any COVID-19 infection. Remote press conferences were especially timely and necessary, as journalists found it hard to maintain social distancing amongst other fellow journalists in a closed, crowded space where interviews or press conferences were held.

“Maintaining social distance is hard between other journalists, as we are always crammed with each other to get news sources on record” (Journalist 4)

“We risk our lives every day during the pandemic and at that point of time, there were no vaccines available.” (Journalist 5)

“The public always forgot that we too are the frontliners during the pandemic.” (Journalist 6)

“We too didn’t see our families for such a long time, just like doctors, to keep our family safe from the deadly virus.” (Journalist 2)

The interviewees stressed that the public forgot that journalists were also frontliners, just like doctors, in getting the latest updates and transmitting them to the public in a fast and accurate manner. They also agreed that Internet connectivity at home was crucial. At times when there were disruptions of connections, journalists could not send the news on time to editors, and news reporting was delayed.

3rd theme — Huge database of sources

“We have to have our own sources. A huge resource helps. This is where the contacts you gathered throughout your career as a journalist plays an important role in verifying the news angle that is assigned on a day-to-day basis. At times, news sources wouldn’t even pick up your calls. It was very hard and challenging times for us not to be on the field in reporting news.” (Journalist 1)

“It is helpful if you had a huge rapport with news sources before the pandemic, as it helped a lot during the pandemic as no one was out and everyone was at home.” (Journalist 2)

“If you were timid before the pandemic and only rely on your other journalist colleagues for sources, you are going to have a hard time in getting sources as you have to do it own your own during the pandemic.” (Journalist 3)

Journalist 1 mentioned that they were expected to rely on their own database of sources for verifying news angles: *“This was required by our media organizations on a day-to-day basis”*. This statement was agreed by Journalists 2 and 3. Journalist 3 added: *“to be bold is a quality that every journalist should possess as if you do not have that quality and only rely on other colleagues, you will have a hard time in getting news sources. During the pandemic, a journalist stands alone in doing a news story.”* In short, all the journalists agreed that, *“you are a one man show during the pandemic in getting and writing a news story.”*

Journalists had to strategize in terms of which source, purpose as well as news angles to help them write their news reports in a systematic order. They could no longer rely on just a clutter of their existing contacts. A system had to be applied to speed up

the writing process. Challenges were aplenty when sources were not able to or not willing to cooperate; some would not even pick up phone calls to verify information. In other situations, sources did not give any added value to their news story whereby their feedback or responses were not substantial enough to support credible news reports.

4th theme – Downsizing of media outlets

“I myself, a long-time news editor had to leave my media organization due to the pandemic, where it could not sustain a great number of journalists. For those who are still around, they have to cover a big number of assignments on a daily basis to accommodate the amount of news story to be published in our news portal”
(Journalist 6)

“Many of our friends have left the newsroom willingly and unwillingly due to the COVID-19 pandemic”
(Journalist 1)

“It was sad to see our colleagues who left the organization to do other alternative methods to find money for their family than pursuing their passion in journalism, due to the pandemic.”
(Journalist 2)

“We have to cover a great deal of assignments to accommodate the downsizing of our media outlets, sometimes we do struggle a lot with meeting timely deadlines.”
(Journalist 4)

Due to the pandemic, various media organizations had to make the difficult decision of letting go journalists and downsizing their operations. As a result, the remaining journalists became overloaded with daily assignments covering the pandemic and endemic.

5th theme – Creativity of COVID-19 journalists

“Equip yourself with the most skills as it’s not enough to only know how to write. Editing, knowing how to navigate through various social media platforms are important as we have to keep up with the changes in technology in news reporting.”
(Journalist 3)

“Be creative and think outside the box”
(Journalist 2)

“Be bold and learn other new skills other than writing, like editing videos.”
(Journalist 4)

Advice from the majority of the interviewed journalists to aspiring journalists is to equip oneself with various skills in news reporting. In today’s fast-paced digital world, it is not enough to know how to write news in an inverted news pyramid style or a feature, but other skills such as video editing and social media platforms, have also become crucial. During the pandemic, journalists were expected to be a one-man-show with no assistance from colleagues, hence the main quality expected of a journalist today is to be an all-rounder. Nevertheless, senior journalists expressed their fear that if an undergraduate were to join the news industry during the pandemic, the essence of real journalism, which is to go out for assignments and interview people, will be missed out.

Misinformation on COVID-19

“Netizens out there should check various viewpoints and news stories and try to rely on credible news portals in reading information on COVID-19. Netizens should be more critical on news information before they share information within their close community.” (Journalist 5)

“Don’t spread news that you are unsure of, it’s dangerous.” (Journalist 4)

“Read as many news stories from credible websites, than come to your own point of view after that.” (Journalist 2)

Regarding misinformation on COVID-19, most journalists felt that Malaysian citizens should fact-check and rely only on credible news portals for information on COVID-19. Citizens should be more media literate and not complacent in accepting any information they come across. Firstly, citizens should be more critical in accepting information; if the information is true, only then is sharing permitted. Secondly, the government plays an important role in reminding and reprimanding netizens to always fact-check before sharing any information in their circle or community. Public service announcements to discourage sharing of misinformation is not enough; there should be awareness and media literacy campaigns to educate citizens on a consistent and widespread basis.

According to Mahamad et al. (2021), many social media users, regardless of gender, share fake news on their social media platforms without verifying its legitimacy and its impact on others. In contrast to Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) who found that those who normally share fake news are males, the study by Mahamad et al. (2021) found that both males and females share fake news. Typically, social media users are not aware that a piece of news is fake until someone points it out. The findings of this study agree with the statistics highlighted earlier, whereby 63% of Malaysians are unable to distinguish between true and fake news (Zin, 2018). Journalists in this study also agreed that netizens should be critical and fact-check when coming across any dubious information or news updates before disseminating it to their circles or close communities.

Opening of economic sectors in 2022

Moving forward to 2022, the same six journalists concluded that the reopening of all economic sectors in Malaysia has enabled news reporting to return to its normal practices. While several media organizations have already scrapped hybrid working arrangement, all COVID-19 SOPs are still being adhered to, so that risk of COVID-19 spread is minimal. Press conferences are back to normal, done physically, but some government ministries or agencies still conduct via Zoom according to the needs of the news event. For current events which are not news breaking, news releases are distributed through WhatsApp groups to make way for other major news events. In relation to court proceedings, some judges prefer online communication, hence emails and Zoom links are distributed to court desk journalists, accordingly for news stories.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has been a critical turning point for journalists in innovating their profession and work practices. Based on the theory of Disaster Communication Ecology, journalists in this study have maintained the four key principles of which are research, a commitment

to freedom of speech, a dedication to the pursuit of truth and accuracy in reporting and maintaining journalism ethics throughout their news reporting. The findings also demonstrate that journalists must maintain and adapt to any ongoing “disaster or crisis” that they find themselves in, and despite all odds, deliver credible news stories to the public.

They must develop a system in their daily routine to adapt and rely on digitalization and applications that are available on the Internet to conduct and find new sources to organize and publish credible news stories. With lesser journalists in the field, one has to conduct and accommodate as many news stories as possible so that the public can become informed citizens during crises such as the recent pandemic. Together with the public, journalists also find news stories through the Internet and specifically through various social media platforms as there are no news sources “on-site” at times. The creativity of a journalist to source for news and gather information becomes more crucial than ever to ensure that the public can still rely on credible news portals for information regarding COVID-19.

In conclusion, news reporting during the pandemic has been a challenging phase for Malaysian journalists. Yet, like any other profession powering through the pandemic, it is important to create a sense of normalcy so that Malaysian citizens continue to be informed from time to time on the current issues happening around them. Due credit and acknowledgement should be given to journalists as the “forgotten frontliners” during the pandemic. Without journalists, it would not have been possible to keep the Malaysian community informed and updated on COVID-19, and many Malaysians would have been “left behind” during the pandemic. To be informed as a citizen is crucial so each individual can decide and act upon a course of action according to the information received. Apart from that, during and after the pandemic, netizens should be critical in fact-checking news stories as misinformation is prevalent and unavoidable in this global age. For future research directions, the study strongly urges other researchers in the field of journalism to focus on journalism issues outside of the COVID-19 context, as we have moved passed the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, future studies could look at the current challenges of journalists in various news desks, so that practitioners and stakeholders can keep abreast with the changes taking place in the news industry.

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Facebook vs. Twitter: Social media platform selection for news consumption among undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are used by various age groups. Each social media platform has its own targeted age group, as the user's preference for interface, content and visual varies. Therefore, it is important to identify the preference of age group. Metadiscourse is a term for words that are used in a sentence indicate the direction and purpose of a text. Each social media platform has different types of metadiscourse, depending on the audience. Hence, the objective of this study is to analyse and identify the social media platforms that students prefer to obtain news and what influences their decision in choosing these platforms. Social media platforms in this study are viewed from the perspective of the media ecology theory by McLuhan (1964). The social media platform chosen by students is mainly influenced by the ecosystem of the media itself. The quantitative part of the study administered a questionnaire to 110 students from the Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (IUKL) to identify and analyse the type of social media platforms that they prefer and interviews were then conducted to support the quantitative findings on what influenced their choice of social media platforms. The findings show that Twitter is the preferred social media platform. Various factors influence the students' choice, which are (a) personal bias, (b) less political influence, (c) trustable source, (d) family/relatives not using the same social media platform, (e) ease of identifying fake news and (f) friends' recommendation. It is hoped that future research can further explore the effectiveness of having different types of social media platforms for friends and family and the benefits for the user.

Keywords: *Social media, Facebook, Twitter, news, students, metadiscourse, media ecology*

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media has evolved through recent years. The rise of mobile phone contributed to the explosion of social media as an inextricable part of daily life. Today, the number of users on social media has increased exponentially. Statista (2021) reported that in October 2021, the number of Facebook users was 2,895 million as compared to Twitter which had 436 million users. Since then, Facebook has maintained its number 1 rank as the social media platform with the highest number of users. This has largely influenced people to shift to obtaining news from digital platforms rather than traditional printed newspapers. Further, Gulzar et al. (2021) highlighted that students rely on social media as it increases their level of creativity in creating content for the platform. With more and more students depending on social media for their daily interactions, it is also natural for them to use social media to obtain news updates as well. However, the platform students prefer as a source of news remains debatable, as the choice of social media platforms may be influenced by many factors.

Sun et al. (2021) mentioned as the popularity of social media rose, it has enabled the dissemination of news through platforms that has large numbers of users. This is because more people feel that social media platforms deliver news faster compared to mass media (Ahmadi et al., 2021). They further added that the younger generation's news consumption has increased over the years through social media as they feel the news is more authentic and in real-time. Essentially, students relying on social media for news consumption hinges heavily on their dependency and loyalty for social media platforms.

Therefore, the present research aims to analyse and identify which social media platforms students prefer to obtain news and what influences their selection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital era has taken over the world, with most industries needing them to survive and to remain competitive. People everywhere use mobile phones mainly to communicate with each other and it has become an essential platform, especially for students, in completing their assignments and non-assignment related tasks. Apart from laptops or mobile phones to complete their assignments, students also require good and fast Internet connectivity. In addition, students also surf social media in between their breaks and share their daily activities with other netizens. According to Meşe and Aydin (2019), the ever-evolving technologies continue to affect various industries, especially the education industry. Additionally, they elaborated that with the emergence of Web 2.0, students use social media to interact with each other and share fun, interesting and knowledge content with their friends and followers. Their work demonstrated that the main purpose students use social media is to share information with WhatsApp and Instagram being their most preferred social media platforms. Similarly, Anser et al.'s work (2020) found that social media is an integral component of any organisation and an essential part of life, including for students. This shows that social media plays a big role in influencing students as they read and share information online. It is also important to understand and identify which platforms students prefer as their news source, as this will help brands, companies, and organisations to disseminate their messages.

Sousa and Bates (2021) stated that most students use social media for learning purposes. Zamri et al. (2018) agree with Sousa and Bates (2021) by highlighting that the use of social media amongst student has increased drastically over the years, with 95% of students having access to mobile phones. Further, mobile phones as well as Internet connection have become

cheaper and more affordable for most families. Moreover, the trend of using social media to stay in touch with family and friends is on the rise. In addition, Anasri and Khan (2020) elaborated that social media plays a big role in 21st century learning as social media is often used as a collaborative learning method to increase the interactivity of students, lecturers, teachers in sharing ideas and knowledge online. They added further that the increase of student engagement in class online or offline, as a result of the students' interest in using social media as a part of their class activity, helps them enjoy their class and allows them to show their creativity through social media collaborative learning.

On the other hand, Kolhar et al. (2021) disagree as their study showed that students prefer to use social media during their leisure time searching or scrolling for less-stressful content as compared to using social media for academic purposes. The team reported that the habitual behaviours of students using social media for entertainment purposes affect their academic performance drastically as they become more sleep deprived due to surfing social media late into the night and as they become more focused on their social life instead of their studies. Their work demonstrated the negative impact social media has on students due to the effortless flexibility social media affords, as it is just a swipe or click away to switch from academic content to entertainment content, which is more enjoyable for the students. Hence the tendency for students to use social media for entertainment purposes are higher compared to academic purposes. However, language change happens among social media users, as they try to fit within the audience's primary language used (Natsir et al., 2020). In the context of language, Natsir et al. (2020) mentioned that it varies by sentence structure, word choice and slang as each social media platform has different preferences and target audiences. For example, middle-aged to older users prefer Facebook, those in the early twenties and teens prefer Instagram, while video platform users prefer TikTok as the algorithm is different. This study hopes to demonstrate that most students depend on social media to acquire news depending on various aspects, which can be identified through their social interactions and usage frequency of their preferred social media platform.

It should be noted that each social media platform has its own metadiscourse as its audience varies. Instagram and Twitter users generally come from the younger generations of 15 to 30 years old, while older generations, 30 years old and above prefer Facebook. As the audience varies depending on the social media platform, the metadiscourse in these social media platforms also vary. According to Biri (2021), the type of social media platform and its interface and structure are the primary determinants of the metadiscourse from the perspective of users. Similarly, Al-Subhi (2022) elaborated that the use of engagement marks in the context of the chosen social media platform presents the most effective metadiscourse techniques in influencing users. Other than that, the role of metadiscourse on social media is impacted by both visual and language use, which structure the social media's discourse as engaging for the audience. This shows that the type of metadiscourse used on social media influences users in their selection of the platform. It also influences users in selecting certain social media platforms as the source of news.

Ngai and Singh (2020) mentioned in their study that metadiscourse is often used to assert a position on an issue and to build more in-depth gravity towards an argument. In addition, metadiscourse is also used to increase the readability of a text to suit the audience. Additionally, metadiscourse is also used to prevent any objection to the writer's interpretation of the content, that leads a more credible text, as once the users know and understand the metadiscourse used on the social media platform, it will lead them to believe in what they read. In other words, as Ngai and Singh (2020) concluded, metadiscourse renders content on social media platforms to be more "worthy of attention".

Roslan et al. (2021) analysed the metadiscourse chosen for the Aidilfitri television advertisements of specific brands by examining the language and word choices used in these ads. Their findings reveal that each brand displays a different style of metadiscourse which is further influenced by the objective of the advertisement itself. The team further explained that since it was an Aidilfitri television advertisement, most of the contents and word choices was skewed towards the festive celebration. The aforementioned studies show that metadiscourse focuses on the content and in-depth context of the meaning of words used and how other factors such as social media interface play a role in influencing the usage of a social media platform. However, research has yet to be conducted on metadiscourse as a possible contributing factor or influence towards users choosing a specific social media platform as their main medium of news consumption. To this end, the present study analyses the influence of metadiscourse on users and how they can further understand the use of metadiscourse when choosing a social media platform to obtain news.

Al-Rahmi et al. (2020) highlighted that media itself is a language in its own right as it has its own structure and system similar to grammar and the type of structure depends on the social media platform and the users of the platform. Tiani et al. (2021) stated that media ecology is a platform that produces an influence on its environment. In the context of social media, a media ecology is observed when social media platforms influence the behaviour of users, as different types of social media platform have different users with different characteristics. The theoretical concept of media ecology was first proposed by McLuhan in 1964. However, the term “media ecology” was formally introduced by Postman in 1968 (Media Ecology Association, n.d.). In his work on media being the main communication platform that influences human behaviour, Postman mentioned the term media ecology (Media Ecology Association, n.d.). The type of environment created by the media is what enhances and influences human behaviour. He expanded the concept by stating how the environment or platform is used to deliver a message is a complex system which has a significant impact on the way a person would react, think and feel (2013). However, media ecology is also affected by the use of media and the communication technology’s effects are further discussed as the primary cause of social change amongst social media users (Tiani, 2021).

A study by Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) revealed the inter-relation between media ecology and the future ecosystemic society. They further detailed the social consequences that media has towards the media ecology tradition which explains how media accounts influence a user’s way of thinking. They also argued that the Internet is the main medium that shapes the current society, making the Internet the ecosystem used by the present society. The society’s dependency on social media also shows how the ecosystem transforms together with their consistent use of social media. This demonstrates the phenomena where social media has created its own ecosystem, and created an ideal image based on how their respective users act, which further confirms how each user’s characteristics further influence the platform they use. This explains why audiences on different social media platform vary as the narrative of media ecology for different platforms also varies.

Zhao et al.’s (2016) study demonstrated that social media users opt to use multiple platforms as a communication medium to communicate with various people they want to influence. Their findings show that users intentionally chose the type of content and audience depending on the social media platform they use, and they become competitive in creating content that suits the platform, thus creating the ecosystem. The respondents in Zhao et al.’s study (2016) mentioned that they desire to maintain different boundaries between the different social media platforms that they use, to maintain relevancy with the audiences on the platform and stabilize their own ecosystem for communication.

In a different study, Yeh and Li (2022) looked at the rapid growth of the technology era and how it affected students' awareness towards the communication environment. The study found that the education level of university students influences their awareness of the communication environment on social media. The studies on media ecology and social media by Tiani (2021) and Al-Rahmi (2020) also focused on how a user behaves towards a certain social media platform. In the context of this study, various factors are believed to contribute to how a user chooses a social media platform for news consumption, such as the influence of friends and family using the same social media platform that creates an ecosystem.

METHODS

This mixed methods study analysed and identified the social media platform(s) that students use to obtain news and what influenced their choice. The collected data were analysed using the metadiscourse approach from Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis. According to Fairclough (1995), metadiscourse is the way a text is created by the writer using a chosen language for the reader of the text. The way each social media platform uses its language varies according to its target age group. Therefore, it is important to identify which social media platform students prefer for their news source and the reason(s) for choosing that particular platform. Facebook and Twitter were the two social media platforms selected for this study, as both platforms have different user demographics.

The study was grounded on the media ecology theory. As mentioned by Gamel et al. (2021), social media platforms rely on digital technologies and computer-mediated communication to get information. The media ecology theory proposed by McLuhan is still relevant as the theory highlights the relationship between subjectivity and social media as the social patterns and interaction formed are linked to the digital culture. This shows how the interface between media, technology and communication influence the human environment. This study analyses the influence of the social media platforms used and its social standing amongst students. The theoretical concept is shown in Figure 1.

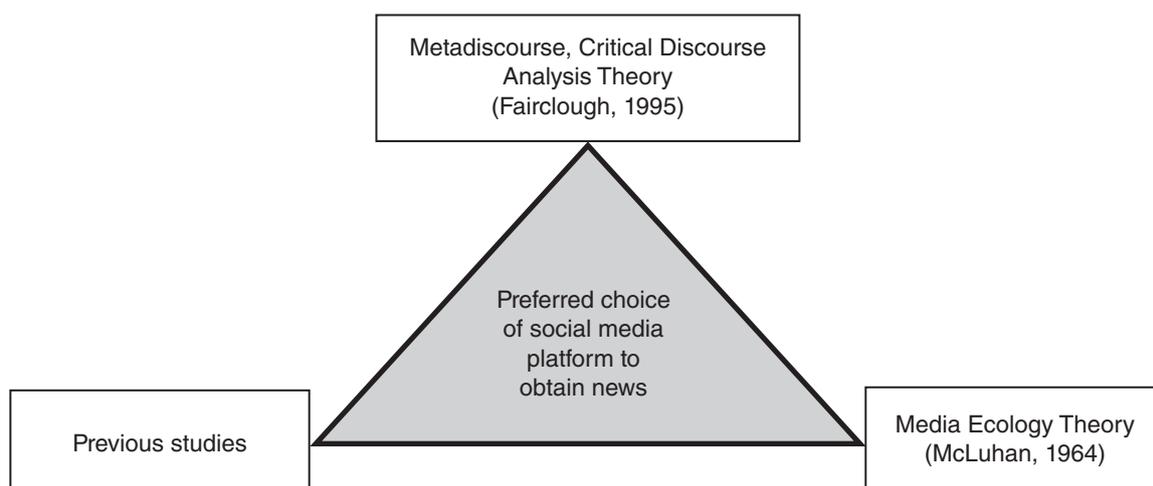


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

The study was conducted in October 2021 – January 2022 during an active long semester at Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (IUKL), Malaysia. A questionnaire was distributed to a total of 110 IUKL students. The questionnaire comprised of demographic questions and statements regarding the personal preference of social media platforms

to obtain news. About 20 out of 110 students were then called for an online interview to further probe into their decision making in the selection of social media platforms. The interviewees were chosen using purposive sampling as it is a small-scale study in relation to the phenomenon which fits the criteria of social media users who use a platform based on their own choice. According to Campbell et al. (2020), purposive sampling is used to match the aims and objectives of research which could increase the accuracy of the data collected and its results. The interviews allowed a more in-depth understanding of the subject as well as better clarification of the respondents' views on the metadiscourse used for each social media platform and how the media ecology theory influenced their decision-making. This research mainly focuses on quantitative findings which were then further supported by qualitative data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that 94.5% of the respondents have either Facebook or Twitter accounts, and 81.1% relied on social media to obtain news. Of these, 56.4% followed a news channel so that news updates will appear on their timeline, as opposed to 43.6% who preferred to search for a specific news on their chosen social media channel. Of the total 110 respondents, 55.6% preferred to use Twitter instead of Facebook, since 70.9% of the respondents were aged 21–24, which is the average age of Twitter users. These results demonstrate that the age of the users using social media influences the type of platform they choose to obtain news.

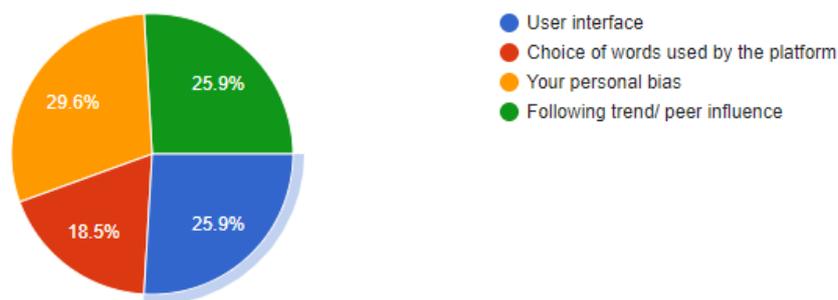


Figure 2. Respondents' reasons for choosing a specific social media platforms as their news source

Based on Figure 2, personal bias at 29.6% is the main reason that respondents chose a specific social media platform to obtain news, followed by user interface and trend/peer influence (each at 25.9%) as the second reason. Apart from this, 18.5% strongly agreed that the language used on the platform was simpler to understand. Regarding personal bias, 38.3% held a neutral opinion regarding their chosen platform having lesser biased political opinions; however, 29.1% agreed and 23.6% strongly agreed that their preferred social media platform has lesser biased opinions.

Additionally, a majority of the respondents (32.7%) held a neutral opinion that the social media platform they used was a trustable source while 27.3% agreed and 29.1% strongly agreed. Malik et al. (2019) mentioned that Twitter helps students improve their learning styles through various ways. One way is by improving their vocabulary skills including through reading of news. News on Twitter is more compact with a character limit for each tweet. Therefore, word choices are very critical in Twitter. In supporting Malik et al. (2019), Sudiran (2020) elaborated that Twitter helps in improving one's English competence, where the media plays a big role in providing news in English. This suggests that the language

used on a particular social media platform leads students to believe that the platform is a reliable source and does not have too much political influence. This also contributes to students choosing Twitter over Facebook as their preferred social media platform.

Further, Sudiran's (2020) study showed that the character limit on Twitter forces students to think critically of their choice of words for their postings. This trend could be influenced by students who are not keen to read the whole news article from news media site. They would rather read important points which are delivered through the news site's Twitter account, which simplifies the news due to character limit. Hence, this demonstrates that the metadiscourse used on Twitter is directed to its own users who prefer simpler and less wordy discourses to obtain news updates. Respondents 1, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 18 and 20 also agreed that the reason they chose Twitter was because its metadiscourse was more suitable for their age group, as the younger generations prefer lesser words and succinct texts, which Twitter provides, compared to Facebook posts which are lengthier and contain a lot of advertising pop-ups. This finding concurs with Sudiran (2020) and Malik et al. (2019) who found that Twitter was used by many educational experts to increase engagement for their online classes as their students prefer to use Twitter, which offers a metadiscourse that meets the students' preference.

This finding is also in line with the media ecology theory, where Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) mentioned that when an ecosystem in an environment modifies its users' thoughts, behavior and decision making, the ecosystem imposes a big influence on the environment. In the context of this study, the ecosystem refers to friends/peers who influence users in selecting certain social media platforms to obtain news. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2016) in corroborating with Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015), added that the ecosystem significantly influences users, especially under media ecology, as users want to have a sense of belonging in a social media platform, and hence they are greatly influenced when more friends/peers use it.

The platform I use is not used by my relatives

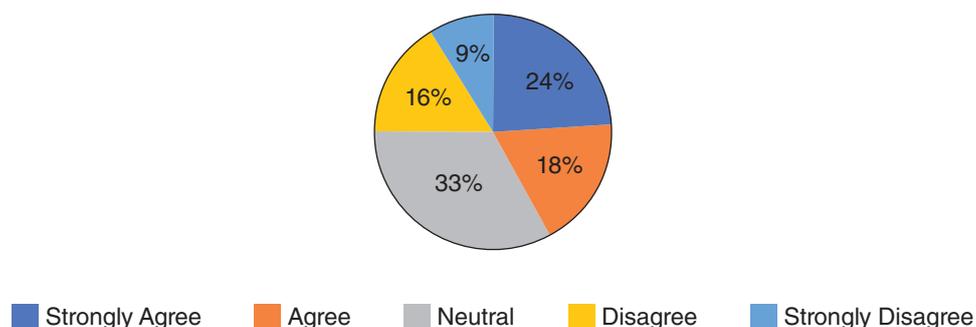


Figure 3. Responses regarding choosing a social media platform not used by relatives

Another factor that contributed to students using a particular social media platform as a news source was their relatives not using the same platform. From the total responses, 23.6% strongly agreed and 18.2% agreed that when their relatives use a specific social media platform, they tend to choose another platform, so that they are not exposed to the same content, as each social media has its own metadiscourse.

Wok et al. (2016) mentioned that social media helps build a family's bond by helping family members to stay connected through social media. However, not everyone wants to connect with their family members on social media, which is reflected by the high number of

responses for selecting a social media platform that is not the same as their family members'. This proves that the respondents do not use social media to communicate with family members, which could be attributed to the former having had negative experiences in using the same social media platform as their family members or relatives. This study is parallel to the study by Procentese et al. (2019) who studied the impact a family has towards open communication through social media including parent's perception.

Procentese et al. (2019) found that communicating through social media platforms can enhance a family's relationship in a modernised lifestyle setting. However, the study also discovered that the perception that parents have of their child using social media can also negatively impact the child's attitude. Therefore, Procentese et al. (2019) suggested that parents should take a positive approach in embracing their child's use of social media by looking at the advantages. With the positive perception parents have towards their child using social media, the child will also be more comfortable in using the platform to communicate with their family members, thus avoiding the situation where a child decides not to use the same social media platform just to avoid their family members.

The work of both Wok et al. (2016) and Procentese et al. (2019) present examples of positive experiences of using social media to communicate with family members. Therefore, students can be more open to using the same social media platform to connect and communicate with their family to enhance the bond between them.

However, Hussain et al. (2020) disagree as their study showed that people opt to use social media to escape from family problems, and the best way to do so is by using a different social media platform than the one used by the family. The authors (2020) also suggested that users turn to social media as an escape platform to release their stress and bad feelings that they have towards their family, but not to the extent that they would be replaced by social media altogether. The authors explained that social media platforms are mostly used as an avenue by users to vent their feelings without hurting the feelings of their family members as they still appreciate and want to maintain their relationship with their family members and relatives. This shows that social media has both cons and pros which leads one to select a specific platform over another for obtaining news or to communicate with others.

Additionally, based on the interviews held, Respondents 2, 3, 7, 8, 14, 16 and 19 mentioned that their relatives used Facebook as it is more suitable for their older age, and that its metadiscourse was much longer and more convenient to navigate as they do not need to open an additional page to read news in comparison to traditional news media. This proves again that the metadiscourse of a social media platform influences the user's decision to select a particular platform. Similarly, the media ecology presented on a social media platform further influences the decision of a user to choose that specific platform.

Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) stressed that being a part of an ecosystem is one of the most important parts of communicating through a social media platform. Therefore, when a user is aware of a relative on a particular social media platform, it limits their freedom of speech or expression as compared to speaking with a friend. Hence, the findings illustrate that media ecology presence plays a strong role in influencing students in selecting platforms to obtain news, and not to communicate. This may be due to the fact that students can freely share with each other news that they have read and can continue to discuss the news on the social media platform without the need to worry about their family members' or relatives' possible negative reactions and perceptions towards them.

Yeh and Li's (2022) work showed the effects of media ecology and how it can significantly influence a user in the selection of social media platform(s) to communicate with others. Hence in this context of this study, students chose a social media platform that their relatives are not using as their news source.

The platform that I use makes it easy to identify fake news

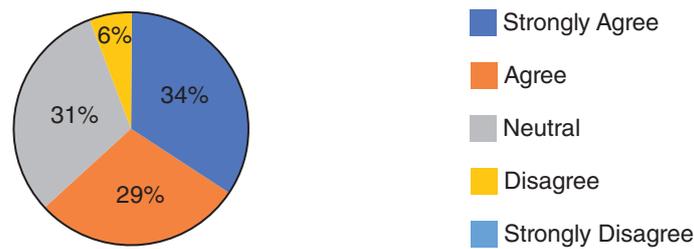


Figure 4. Responses for choosing a social media platform based on its ease of identifying fake news

The results show that 34.5% of respondents strongly agreed that the social media platform they chose to obtain news was the easiest to identify fake news. This is probably a strong factor which encouraged them to continue sourcing news from the chosen social media and recommend their friends to do the same. The latter is proven, as 30.9% of respondents agreed that they were using a particular social media platform to obtain news, based on their friends' recommendations. Friends/Peers have a bigger influence in recommendation when it comes to students. The responses also reflect a neutral agreement for social media platform recommendations by family (33.3%) and lecturer/higher education institute (25.9%). This clearly implies that friends have a stronger influence in recommending social media platforms as a news source to students.

A study by Décieux et al. (2019) highlighted that the use of social media among friends was a necessary tool in building the relationship between them as it enables complimentary interactions apart from the normal offline face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, the study further demonstrated that people prefer to use social media as it is more time-effective and efficient when communicating with their friends. This shows that a friend's opinion plays a big role in the selection of one's social media platform as the person would want to be in the same circle as their friends in order to communicate better with each other.

Décieux et al.'s (2019) study also found that social media helps to increase friendship-driven interactions between a person and his/her friends, and to do so, he/she must use the same social media platform that would allow them to communicate with each other, so that they are exposed to the same metadiscourse from the same social media platform. Hence it will influence both parties in a similar way, as opposed to if they were to use different social media platforms with different metadiscourses. Therefore, it is important for the younger generation to use the same social media platform for better communication. This results in peers/friends using the same social media, and being exposed to the same content and metadiscourse.

Another factor that influences media ecology as mentioned by Yeh and Li (2022) is the presentation of content on the platform. The findings reveal that the chosen social media platform by university students was due to its built-in feature in identifying fake news and its indication of fake news in the postings. This refers to how the ecosystem of a platform feeds news to users and how users are cognisant enough to research further or check with their friends who use the same social media platform if the news is true or fake. Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) agree with Hakanen (2009) and further elaborated the importance of understanding the difference in ecosystems of various social media platforms. Thus, the present findings indicate that students in this study are aware and are able to identify which social media platforms can help detect fake news better.

This is further supported by Mohamad Yusuf et al. (2022) who highlighted the effects of fake news on social media and how it significantly affects news credibility from the perspective of users. The study showed that the main factors that contribute to the credibility of news on Facebook are technology acceptance, quality of news source and interactive media. Hence, the present findings are in line with the findings of Mohamad Yusuf et al. (2022) that students are aware of which social media platform can detect fake news better compared to others, which in turn influences the student's dependency on social media to obtain news.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study demonstrates that university students from IUKL prefer using Twitter as their main social media platform as the majority of Twitter users range from 20 – 24 years old. There are several reasons why students prefer to use Twitter as their main social media platform to obtain news: their own personal bias, simpler interface, easier to understand content, lesser political influence, and ease of identifying fake news as opposed to other social media platforms. The last factor is important as there is a prevalence of fake news circulating in the Internet as anyone can publish content and make it viral. Another factor that influences students in selecting a particular social media platform is their family/relatives not using the same platform. They consider social media as their own personal space that they can freely use in the absence of their family. Finally, peer influence in using the same social media platform so that they are exposed to the same content.

This study provides a glimpse into understanding the metadiscourse present in the social media platforms selected by students as their news source. Social media platforms are most beneficial when a person can use it for both academic and non-academic purposes. It can also help a person to communicate with both family and friends without having to have a separate social media platform for specific social circles. Additionally, this study reviewed metadiscourse under the critical discourse analysis theory and media ecology theory as both theories have a big influence on each other, where it is essential to understand and analyse language, communication and type of platform concurrently.

As this research was only limited to IUKL students, future research can be expanded on a wider scale to include more undergraduate universities around Malaysia to examine the effectiveness of having separate social media platforms from friends and peers and the impact it has on an individual, to measure if having separate social media platforms for friends and family can help enhance the relationship between the person and friend/family and to better understand how media ecology can further influence a user in choosing social media platforms as their main medium of communication.

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