



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, a pneumonia outbreak 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 Latiff 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 creates 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 platform. 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 where 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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