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**THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 TOWARD PUBLIC RELATIONS
PRACTITIONER IN MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

In this globalization, all country in the world are facing the COVID-19 pandemic. It's getting harder when the government arrange the Movement Control Order (MCO) towards country. There were many who have lost their jobs and struggled to cope with the new normal during the COVID-19 pandemic. Public relations practitioner in government and private sector are among those who are having a difficult time which they have to contribute to the department and companies. The objective of this research is to ask about how public relations practitioner handles their work during pandemic COVID-19, to investigate the challenges that public relations practitioner face during the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify about public relations practitioner opinion on the roles of public relations during pandemic COVID-19. The researchers will research on the effects of COVID-19 toward public relations practitioner during the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of qualitative research, an interview will be conduct to gathers all information about the topic. The total of the companies that is a part of this research is Bank Rakyat, Jabatan Pertanian Pulau Pinang, Parliamentary Corporate, Afiq Rashid Public Relations and Media Prima which there is few from government sector and some from private sector. The findings of this research proves that public relations practitioners facing a hard times and crisis during this pandemic.

Keywords: Public Relations, Movement Control Order (MCO), COVID-19, virus outbreak, Effects on Public Relations practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the epidemic of unknown disease shaken Wuhan City of Hubei Province in China spread quickly across Asia and the world and was declared by the WHO as a public health emergency of international significance by the end of January 2020. After that, a big challenge to public health has arisen. A lethal infectious disease caused by extreme acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), dubbed coronavirus disease (COVID-19) 2019, is currently occurring in the country (WHO, 2020). In his opening statement at the media conference on COVID-19 on April 10, 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, confirmed that the epidemic of COVID-19 had impacted 213 nations, with 1,524,162 reported positive cases and 92,941 deaths. This disease is dangerous to all people because the virus that causes COVID-19 is primarily transmitted when an infected individual coughs, sneezes or exhales through droplets produced. These droplets are too large to stay in the air, falling on floors or surfaces easily then infecting the respiratory system.

Until today, 19 January 2021, there have been 161,740 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with new cases 3,306 and 605 deaths reported in Malaysia (WHO, 2021). As Malaysia was affected by Covid-19 and the Movement Control Order took effect on everyone and many sectors in the country were affected such as firms shut down, employers went bankrupt, there was a wide scale of retrenchment and a rise in the unemployment rate until the economy the country receives a very huge impact. Here, the Public Relations career becomes an important aspect in every company and every organization in maintaining the image and maintaining public relations with the organization they work for. Public relations are a service primarily concerned with the public interest and not with personal satisfaction. The department of public relations must establish relations with these approaches on the grounds of respect, ethics, fairness, confidence, professionalism, and craftsmanship (Kamil, 2020). To ensure two-way communication and full understanding, the public relations practitioner must use the scientific results of public opinion polls extensively. One of a public relations practitioner's duties is to clarify to the public the topics before they grow becoming a crisis. Good and constructive contact between senior management and public relations is seen as the proximity of the public relations apparatus to the decision-making department (Kamil, 2020).

Public relations begin with public opinion and ends with public opinion. The role of public relations in society is connected to the role and status of public opinion in society (Kamil, 2020). If society does not value public opinion, so most of strategic activities within the company cannot be accomplished through public relations. The increasing role of public opinion in society, the diffusion of

democracy, the sophistication of civil society, and the dissemination of communication and information technology are all factors that drive corporate development and the urgent need for public relations (Kamil, 2020). Attention to the public and public opinion is necessary, thus leading to the growth and development of public relations and their spread and the urgent need for them in various types of organizations.

In completing their daily tasks related to public relations careers in any sector or organization, it has become a habit for them but since the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have also been affected and experienced culture shock due to new norms introduced by the government to break this COVID-19 disease chain. This is because they have never experienced this lifestyle and some of them have difficulty and need time to adjust to the new situation in the world today. So, this research paper was made to know and understand the effects of COVID-19 toward public relations practitioners in more depth and try to understand their difficulties in performing their duties well (Ridzuan et al., 2017).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The first COVID-19 case in Malaysia has announced on January 25 involving three Chinese tourists undergoing quarantine in Johor Bahru as confirmed by Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad. (COVID-19 chronology in Malaysia, 2020) However, the case of COVID-19 in Malaysia quickly escalated with the emergence of new cases involving The Muslim gathering held at Masjid Jamek Sri Petaling, Kuala Lumpur. The incident has contributed to the drastic increase in COVID-19 cases resulting in death. (Reuters, 2020) The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and the Malaysian government has the initiative to implement The Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 until 31 March due to this pandemic. (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020) During the MCO period, restrictions on movement have been imposed, including national and international travel restrictions unless it is necessary for the purchase or requirement of essential goods and services such as food, everyday needs and health care. Moreover, educational institutions nationwide such as universities, schools and kindergartens including all government and private premises except the necessary services are required to be closed. (Vivien & Cheong, 2020)

As a result of the implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO), Malaysians must live in a new norm where society has to face lifestyle changes that require them to always be at home and practice the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to prevent from getting the virus of COVID-19. Malaysian workers and business entrepreneurs are among those affected by this COVID-19 outbreak as they have to bear the risk of being laid off and may consider closing

their businesses. This problem undeniably impacts on their source of income includes job opportunities are also declining. Meanwhile, public relations practitioners were also facing the same issue in which they may struggle to cope with these new norms. Therefore, researchers have conducted a study on this issue to investigate how Public Relations practitioner survive in this field.

Furthermore, the researchers conduct a several interview sessions through an online platform which is Google Meet to investigate the topic “The Effects Of COVID-19 Toward Public Relations Practitioner in Malaysia”.

Research questions:

1. How Public Relations practitioner manage their works during this pandemic?
2. What are the challenges that Public Relations practitioner face during COVID-19?
3. What are the roles of Public Relations during COVID-19?

Research objectives:

1. To acknowledge how Public Relations practitioners manage their work during pandemic.
2. To investigate the challenges that Public Relations practitioners face during pandemic.
3. To identify Public Relations role during COVID-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How Public Relations Practitioner Manage Their Work

- **Ensure that information remains disseminated through social media.**

The Public Relations Department of the Ministry Health provides updates on news related to the corona crisis on the website of the Ministry to assist the concerned authorities in making the right decisions on the basis of accurate information. In addition, the department publishes all indicative and awareness data on social media and through the mainstream media in the country to deliver the right and accurate messages to the public (Kamil, 2020). The existence of covid-19 does not stop public relations from continuing to disseminate information. During lockdown, people are using social media platforms to obtain information, one of the alternatives ways for Public Relations to spreading an information in this pandemic are through the medium that the society usually use. Obviously, accuracy

is important to the eyes of publics. The importance of Public Relations in giving an accurate information is to maintain a positive image of their company. The reports must remain clear and truthful at any ways and all times. Other than that, the statements that address in the situation need to be the best, most elaborate way and not conceal or hiding anything because they supposed to be spoken the truth.

- **Must be prepared to talk to the news media.**

Public relations can play a critical role in preparing spokespersons for handling question from the news media. The media relations element of public relations is highly valued in crisis management. The public relations personnel can provide training and support because in most cases they are not the spokesperson during the crisis. Practitioner experience and academic research have combined to create a clear set of guidelines for how to respond once a crisis hit. The initial crisis response

guidelines focus on three points which is be quick, be accurate and be consistent. (Coombs, 2017). Topics which are current, feel new and “alive”. People likely hunt for latest updates, and it will look more sensational. As a Public Relations, they need to think fast in order to answer any questions given. People want accurate information about what happened and how that event might affect them. Because of the time pressure in a crisis, there is a risk of inaccurate information. If mistakes are made, the must be corrected. However, inaccuracies make an organization appear to be incompetent. The philosophy of speaking with one voice in a crisis is a way to maintain accuracy (Coombs, 2017).

The Challenges That Public Relations Practitioner Face

- **Fake news or False Information.**

In line with the development of information technology and internet facilities, information can be shared easily and quickly anytime but what worries everyone is the dissemination of fake news or false information that leads to misunderstandings. It includes the widespread of fake news or false information regarding COVID-19 disease which has caused public concern. When irresponsible people spread fake news or false facts about them, the issues of disseminating unverified and false information arise. This action will cause unsuspecting residents to be exposed to such fraudulent. Due to it the power to expose the unsuspecting population to be fooled that the data is real (Yusof, Muuti, Ariffin, & Tan, 2020). This is morally unethical, especially when it comes to intentionally spreading the distribution of such knowledge to mislead others because fake news aims to mislead and aim to influence which views (Kanekar & Thombre, 2019). On the other hand, false information consists of intentionally fabricated stories that are routinely generated to publicize certain agendas.

- **Adaption**

Public relations practitioners are familiar and prefer to perform tasks such as meeting clients, colleagues, meetings, and others face to face because for them it is easy and fun. This is because they like to socialize and perform work in an open environment but now, they need to work from home. For many public relations practitioners, operating from home was the only alternative because it was considered dangerous to drive to our workplaces (O'Connor, 2020). Everything is changing where there are many changes in all aspects of social and economic life that were triggered by the pandemic. It has affected interactions, but also communication processes and strategies (Tworzydło, Gawroński, Szuba, & Bis, 2020). But some of them have difficulty in making this adaptation and they try to do their best. According to the (O'Connor, 2020), she states that “We're dealing and working in doubt right now. It's not easy, but this, too, is a chance to understand what we have taken for granted before, and to learn how to adjust to almost everything”. They also have worries in living their lives with the work from the home method because they are worried about the need to sustain the condition related to the transition in the style of work operating from home. They also fear a drastic decrease in jobs for public relations consultants (Tworzydło, Gawroński, Szuba, & Bis, 2020).

- **Reaching Out People**

Public relations practitioners and journalists, as we all know, need each other to accomplish their jobs. This is because public relations practitioners need journalists as a way of transmitting communications to diverse markets, and journalists need people in public relations as sources of story ideas, leads to reliable spokespersons, and precise story-making knowledge (Turney, 2002). Both public relations practitioners and journalists have had to adjust to this different daily life, and they need to be aware of the difficulties and sensitivities involved so it is not the time to pitch something self-promotional at these moments (O'Connor, 2020). Journalists are working almost all the time on COVID-19-related reports at the moment and pitching meaningless or self-serving reporting could backfire because our nation faces the possibility of spreading COVID-19 outbreak without us noticing it. Right now, millions of people work from home, which means that many office phones have been not in use. It is almost difficult to contact journalists by phone and their inboxes are filled with the COVID-19 linked reports already prominent in the news feed (Knowles, 2020).

Roles of Public Relations during COVID-19

- **Taking care of the contact**

In this pandemic COVID 19 situations maintain a good contact is the important

thing to do for public relations practitioner. The role of public relations in crisis management is not to understand only through the process of contact, which represents the basis of the work of public relations (Achammara, 2008). They have to take a good care with the contact in order to protect the company reputation especially when there is pandemic. The client of course wanted a good reputation from the company if they want to cooperate with them. What public relations practitioner can do to strengthen the relationship with the contact, they can always spare their time to solve client issues. By doing that client will feel more appreciated and happier with the company.

- **Effective Strategic Planning.**

Prior to a crisis, and certainly during the early stages of a crisis or disaster, organizational preparation and strategic planning can reduce or limit the impact of the crisis (Avery, 2016). The effective planning must be plan by the public relations practitioner in order for them to manage the company in the pandemic. They have to come out with the new strategic planning rather than sticks to the traditional system which is they have to conduct a meeting through online platform such as google meet, zoom and cisco Webex. Next, they also need to proclaimed the new guideline regarding to the standard operating procedure (SOP) especially in the workplace and make sure everyone is following the guideline for their own health.

- **The Change to Use Social Media.**

The uses of social media and website for public relations practitioner is important in the aspect presentation, performance of the company and communication. The need for social media and website is for them to showcase the activities, have the communication with the public and can directly get the feedback, and build up the reputation for the company itself. Many of them come up with that social media is the platform and carrier of public communication campaigns and strategic communication (Wang, 2015). Social media can help to give out large amount of information and improves the company participation to the public. The connectivity of social media enables people to build new relationships between people and organizations and help reconnect with other organizations, companies, and friends (Omar Shaikh, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **Research Design**

Research design is an investigation that does not require any numerical and representation, but rather textual form and narrative material that usually exists in a natural world, for example in the analysis of qualitative research people

experience, thoughts, opinion and emotion often take place. In this study, researchers used qualitative in-depth interview research. It will research effect on Public Relations practitioners that could target the individual due to the current pandemic situation or during the Movement Control Order (MCO). The informants can answer the question with their own words and openly share their opinion (Abdul Rauf Ridzuan, 2015). A small number of informants have involved in this type of research because it takes a lot of resources and time to carry out such research efforts.

Data Collection Strategy

The researchers conducted a semi-structured interview for this research, three main questions previously identified by the researcher to gather information; however, researchers are willing to take into account additional information provided by informants. (Adam, 2019). Public Relations practitioners will be setting up to an interview session with the researchers. There will be five informants that will be interview by the researcher to gain better information about the effect of COVID-19 on Public Relations practitioner's issue.

The interviews are conducted for approximately 30 minutes for this study. The questions asked are based on their expertise, knowledge, point of view, experience and perspective.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this research is grouping because the focus of the researchers is mainly on Public Relations practitioners interviewed on Google Meet platform due to pandemic. An analysis unit is an entity that is being analyzed in the context of scientific research.

Sampling

A sample is a group of people involved in the research. Sampling is a method of selecting population participants. It is very important to select some suitable respondents to get reliable results. Therefore, sample size is very important in selecting the most relevant informant for the analysis of this qualitative investigation. The *non-probability purposive sampling* is used for this research. The samples are obtained in a method that does not provide equal chances of being chosen for all individuals in the population. Researchers chose Public Relations practitioners because it aims to gather their personal experience of the preferences between working in this pandemic situations or their previous daily work routines. They are the people that most affected during the MCO, and they can provide such relevant information because of what they have encountered. In this research, sampling continues until the information achieves saturation point (Marshall,

1996).

Stated below is the list of s interviewed by the researchers: -

- i. Mrs. Zakiah Hashim – Chief Corporate Communications Unit at Jabatan Pertanian Pulau Pinang
- ii. Mrs. Nadiya Haneem Zaminudin – Parliamentary Corporate Communications Public Relations Officer
- iii. Mr. Afiq Rashid – Public Relations Company Owner
- iv. Mr. Hakim Zaharuddin – Public Relations Executive at Media Prima Berhad
- v. Mr. Nizam Sani – Chief Marketing and Communications Officer at Bank Rakyat

- **Data Analysis**

For this research, researchers have interviewed all five Public Relations practitioners to get information. Thus, researchers used Narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a kind of theoretical process whereby researchers interpret stories that are told or shared in daily life in the context of research. In a workplace or in an abnormal situation such as a natural disaster, it values the real and the abstract, lived experience. The researcher analyzes, organized either chronologically or as critical events, the form, content and contexts within which the story unfolds. (Gelston)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: How Public Relations practitioner manage their works during this pandemic?

1. Work from home

Based on Mrs. Zakiah, Mr. Afiq and Mr. Hakim they need to change their work style instead of work at office with other co workers they have to work from home. Due to Movement Control Order (MCO) they must follow the government directive to reduce the infection during this pandemic. So, as Public Relations practitioners they must to stay alert and keep up-to-date to any news even though they work from home because it might cause problems if they do not know about current issues in our country and their sector.

According to Mr. Hakim and Mr. Afiq they need to came out with fresh ideas, methods and concept to adapt by this situation in order to keep their work ongoing.

2. Work as usual

Based on Mrs. Nadiya and Mr. Nizam they have to work as usually in the office because they need to work in team to come up with any press as soon as they face

crisis. Since, Mrs. Nadiya work with government she cannot work from home because everyday will have press release regarding updates on COVID-19 cases so she needs to standby for 24hours with the team.

According to Mr. Nizam, he also to need to standby for any changes make by government to release statement from bank side such as initiative to help public financial problem cause a lot of them lost job during pandemic. So, he needs to stay alert as a leader to get the information and spread it to other branchers. *“I work from home just for one day since this pandemic because I need to work team to collect and release information faster”* he said.

3. Work Digitally

Based on all interviewee they need to change everything regarding their work from manually to digitally during this pandemic. For example, they need to do virtual meeting if it involves more than six people because everyone must follow Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) by government and avoid face-to-face interaction. Next, they also need to keep up-to-date through their media social platform to give information to public and use it as a medium to stay connected with their client for maintaining good relationship between them. Moreover, press release also should be done virtually such as live or recording due to the limitation of media that can come during the press. As for media kit they change it from manually bag that include everything to digitally by sharing the link that contain press related material and send the product through delivery service.

“I need learn how to use some application for meeting such as Google Meet and need to be technology literate since everything became digitally nowadays” said Mrs. Zakiah.

Conclusion Remarks

In conclusion, Public Relations practitioners face a few changes in managing their work during pandemic which is working from home and work digitally. Therefore, some of them feel there is no change in managing their work before and during pandemic. However, all of them must stay alert and keep up-to-date to ensure the information they release remains disseminated through social media to avoid crisis. Next, they must be prepared to answer with rationally and use appropriate words to any crisis that happened during this pandemic cause everyone is sensitive and panic.

RQ2: What are the challenges that Public Relations practitioner face during pandemic COVID-19?

1. Adaption to New Norm

All the respondent agree that the main challenging situation is to adapt with new norm where they need to follow SOP and MCO by government. According to Mrs. Zakiah she needs to adapt with new environment. “I need to work and take care of the family in the same time, so I need to reschedule my working hours” she said.

Based on Mr. Hakim “ I feel unhappy to adapt with this new norm because I need to attract with people and get fresh air to develop new idea but because of MCO I am stuck at home”

2. Had to Overwork

According to all interviewee, they need to work over-time during pandemic because there is many fake news spread among netizen. So, this will occur a huge crisis to company management and might scratch company reputation. Due to it, Public Relations practitioner need to work more in ensuring the information before spread it to public.

Based on Mr. Nizam, “I have to work over-time in collecting and ensuring all the information before spread it to other branches in order to avoid misunderstanding when public read the press about it”

3. Dealing with Client

All the respondent agree that they had a difficult time when dealing with client because of pandemic. They said meeting must be made virtually and some of the client are not technology literate and they have to wait a long time when held a meeting.

Based on Mr. Afiq, “I find it hard to deal with client when my team want to consult about our work because we can meet face-to-face and client might have low connection when do virtual meeting. So, there might have some misunderstand on what exactly client want”

Conclusion Remarks

In conclusion, Public Relations practitioner need to adjust their work style and strengthen their connection with media agency to make their work easier in getting news and publish their press. As we know, Public Relations and media need each other to survive in this field. This is because Public Relations practitioner need journalists to transmitting communications to diverse markets meanwhile journalists need people in Public Relations as sources of story ideas, leads to reliable spokesperson and precise story-making knowledge.

RQ3: What are the roles of Public Relations during COVID-19?

1. Maintaining good relationship and bring a good image

According to all interviewee, their priority role is to keep a good relationship between company and its client. They have to take care the relationship and follow client needs to obtain their trust and maintaining the connection. Next, they have to bring a good image for company by portray the professionalism while working.

Based on Mr. Hakim, during a live event he apply the professionalism ethic by following the SOP and be firm if any of workers or media agency didn't follow it. This action will bring a good image to the company and gain client trust.

2. Strategy on Getting Free Publication

Based on all respondent, as a Public Relations practitioner everyone needs to have a good connection with media agency to get free publishing and publish their brand all over the country or even international. Next, give media kit to media agency can attract and make it easier for them in release about your company or product.

Based on Mr. Afiq *"To get huge coverage and free publishing you need to use bombastic words in your press writing to tackle editor in media agency for publishing your brand or story. Next, you have to improve your media kit by using a nice packaging to attract writing to release about your product first compared to other company that send a traditional media kit"*.

Based on Mrs. Zakiah and Mr. Nizam they use social media as a strategy to publish information about their company to public and show what they do to help people. This will attract media to cover about them especially when people who have power such as prime minister involve in that activity.

3. Managing the Crisis

Based on all interviewee new role and skill they need to develop during this pandemic is quick action in solving crisis. The way they manage it show how much they worth in Public Relations sector because it might break your company if take the wrong step. So, as a good Public Relations practitioner you need predict what will happened if you do that and this. Then, take an action as soon as possible to avoid the crisis getting worse.

According to Mrs. Nadiya and Mr. Hakim, there are a few steps in handling crisis. *"Firstly, you need to identify and address the effect on what you will do. Secondly, monitor the situation and lastly, review then learn from the situation."*

Based on Mr. Hakim *"Thanks to this pandemic I can feel how to managing a big crisis and develop my solving skills because before this as a Public Relations practitioner I never experience something like this"*.

Conclusion Remarks

In conclusion, Public Relations is not an easy work because they play a big role in company. Based on literature review, Public Relations practitioner must make up with new strategic to face this pandemic and this statement supported by interviewees to maintain their performance in this sector.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this research, public relations practitioners are actually also affected by this pandemic COVID-19 especially in terms of the problems to perform their usual tasks, the challenges that they face to overcome new norms and to maintain the roles as professional public relations practitioners. The implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) cause a public relations practitioner to adapt with the new work environment regardless of government or private sector. Nevertheless, business company have facing the most challenging crisis during the pandemic. In the Movement Control Order (MCO), it is not easy for public relations practitioners to do their job and maintain the sales for the company. It makes everyone thinks out of the box and start being creative more than what people expect. It makes the public relations practitioner to be prepared for the outcomes and crisis that they have to face. In that case, public relations practitioners should always be physically and mentally prepared to face any situation that may occur during this pandemic. In short, developing existing technology helps to increase public relations practitioner efficiency for the future.

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