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Public service announcements during COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia: Analysis of themes

Nalini Arumugam¹, Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi², Alice Shanthi³, Puwarno⁴ and
Kaarthyainy Supramaniam^{5*}

¹*Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology, and Music, Segi University, Jalan Teknologi, Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.*

²*Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, Terengganu, Malaysia.*

^{3,5}*Department of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam Campus, Selangor, Malaysia.*

⁴*Faculty of Literature, Islamic University of North Sumatera, Medan, Indonesia.*

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ABSTRACT

Public Service Announcements (PSA) is an important source of information for the public especially during a crisis such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Governments utilise PSA to implement strategies that could reach the masses in the quickest and most efficient means. During the global crisis, the Malaysian government faced an unprecedented need to reach the populace with its contingency plans. In retrospect, it is important to study the PSA made during the health crisis and to identify the official sources through which health information was conveyed to the public. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted whereby COVID-19 related PSA published between 1-31 March 2022 were generated from three online Malaysian newspapers: Malay Mail, The Star, and New Straits Times. Keywords “COVID-19” and “Public Service Announcement” were used to mine the digital news portal archives. Analysis of categories that emerged were: “endemic phase”, “recovery”, and “international” which made up dominant themes. Also, the Health Minister made the highest number of COVID-19 PSA whereas press conferences was the most common platform for dissemination of government PSA. However, the issue of border reopening was conveyed via social media. It is important to understand the trends of PSA and sources in order to compete with the proliferation of information on social media. An efficient PSA could be a powerful source that satiate public hunger for information during a crisis.

^{5*} Corresponding author. E-mail address: kaarthyainy@uitm.edu.my

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Governments inform, educate, and change public behaviors through official sources (Marbun et al., 2021) like Public Service Announcements (PSA) as seen during the recent outbreak of COVID-19. The outbreak caused an unprecedented public health crisis in recent times, which inadvertently caused uncertainties (Jerome et al., 2021; Liew et al., 2020; Rus, 2022). There was a need to quench uncertainties fast among the public to maintain peace and order. In short, effective PSA was needed to reach the masses. Generally, PSA is the “general-interest messages or non-commercial advertisements, which are primarily designed to inform and educate the general public about a particular topic or issue” (Jerome et al., 2021, p. 256). More importantly, PSA is considered an important medium for crisis communication between the government and the masses (Zhao, 2021; Pratiwi & Hidayat, 2020) especially during a crisis like the outbreak of COVID-19. PSA indeed contains crucial information that the Government disseminates via multiple media, e.g., television, radio, newspapers, and online platforms. Moreover, government PSAs can be made in various styles and forms, including verbal, textual, and visual content with the main purpose of improving public knowledge, attitudes, and practices on critical issues (Azlan et al., 2020). In essence, the quality of the message conveyed is seen as the most important feature of any PSA, and their success depends on the audience’s comprehension of the message (Hashim & Salleh, 2021). For instance, the PSAs delivered during the COVID-19 should have contained relevant information needed to influence public attitude towards reduction of adversity (Azlan et al., 2020; Hashim & Salleh, 2021; Mohamad et al., 2020). Investigating the PSA trends and content in retrospect is necessary to understand the public discourse made under duress. Findings could inform public administrators and other stakeholders for more efficient plans.

Considering the importance of PSA in the face of adversity, it is surprising that few studies have investigated it in the Malaysian context (Mohamad et al., 2020). The very few identified have focused on aspects of information-seeking behaviors and practices (Mohamad et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2020; Azlan et al., 2020) during COVID-19. Despite the significance of newspapers in providing valuable information on the various aspects of COVID-19, there is limited empirical research on newspaper reports and commentaries made during the PSA campaigns (Jerome et al., 2021). Therefore, content analysis was carried out in the current study to categorise the information in the local government’s PSAs during the pandemic. The researchers identified the official sources through which information was disseminated. A theoretical lens of Persuasion Theory (Bator & Cialdini, 2000) allowed the researchers to examine data with the underpinnings that information should be intended to capture people’s attention and influence attitudes (Hovland et al., 1953). This is explained in detail in the subsequent sections.

1.1 Public Service Announcements during an Emergency

As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of PSA is to influence public behaviour by revealing certain forms of information (Zhao, 2021; Pratiwi & Hidayat, 2020). Not surprisingly, past studies have focused on the content and efficacy of PSAs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Belobrovkina & Rodgers, 2021; Greene et al., 2022; Zhao, 2021; Jerome et al., 2021; Marbun et al., 2021). For instance, Zhao (2021) conducted a social semiotic analysis of the emotions expressed in twenty-one (n=21) COVID-19 PSAs in China. The analysis showed that they contained both written and visual imageries “to represent judgment for educating people to observe the social sanctions and esteems” (p. 256) using various communicative strategies.

More recently, Greene et al. (2022) examined the efficacy of PSAs in encouraging the use of face masks during the virus outbreak in the United States. According to the study, exposure to PSAs increased greater demand for face masks and created greater compliance with public health advice. Similarly, Belobrovkina and Rodgers (2021) attest that PSAs represented one of the effective means of curtailing the spread of the virus especially in the absence of treatment, vaccine, or inadequate facilities. Additionally, Greene et al. (2022) indicated that PSAs were effective in delivering related information to people with

both high and low concerns about the pandemic, which means the announcements reach people of all social strata. In China where the COVID-19 virus was first detected, Zhao's (2021) analysis of PSA showed positive influence on people's determination to overcome adversity. Some studies have also investigated the connotations and manner of presentation in COVID-19 PSA. For example, Marbun et al. (2021) used a descriptive approach to identify the types of implicatures in eleven (n=11) PSA made by the Indonesian Ministry of Health on Instagram and found the use of more conversational implicatures compared with conventional ones. Other studies focused on how PSAs were conveyed through social media platforms (Belobrovkina & Rodgers, 2021; Hashim & Salleh, 2021) during the tense pandemic. In this regard, Belobrovkina and Rodgers (2021) explored the themes and goal appeals in sixty-three (n= 63) PSA on YouTube and found themes such as instructions and humor in the conveyed messages.

In the Malaysian context, past research has generally focused on information-seeking behaviour among the public (e.g. Mohamad et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2020) and practices such as the use of face masks and hand hygiene (Azlan et al., 2020) during the pandemic. Additionally, researchers have also studied how the announcements were delivered (Hashim & Salleh, 2021; Jerome et al., 2021). For instance, Mohamad et al. (2020) studied where the Malaysian public sourced for their information on COVID-19 and whom they referred to for reliable information. The researchers identified television and internet news portals as the main source of information, and the Malaysian Ministry of Health was the most preferred source. Therefore, the current study focused on the categories of news, official sources, and platforms from which crucial information on COVID-19 were conveyed to the people.

1.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

This study adopts a hypothetical viewpoint of the Persuasion Theory to explore the categories, sources, and platforms for the Malaysian government's COVID-19 PSAs. The development of Persuasion Theory is credited to Carl Iver Hovland during the 1940s and 1950s (Hovland, 1957). The theory deals with messages aimed at subtly influencing the receivers' attitudes. According to the Persuasion Theory, messages have to be designed to capture people's attention and activate an attitude change that can modify behaviours generally (Hovland et al., 1953). In this perspective, audiences are considered passive throughout the scope of the campaign. Some critical factors that reinforce the persuasion process include the communicator's credibility and reputation as well as the arrangement and completeness of the information (Hovland, 1957). Also, messages are successful only if they embed the needed information. As such, information might be unsuccessful in terms of persuasion if any relevant topic is omitted from the message content. Based on this viewpoint, we presume that the Malaysian government's COVID-19 PSAs can serve their purpose if the content is rich in terms of COVID-19-related information.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to generate data from three selected Malaysian online newspapers: Malay Mail, The Star, and New Straits Times. These three represented the most widely read local English newspapers with online popularity and high number of site visitors. The study employed content analysis to categorise the government PSA during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, taking cue from Wimmer and Dominic (2011) who state that content analysis is suitable for studies seeking to examine the content of recorded information through a systematic process. A total of ten (n=10) most relevant PSA was drawn from 1 to 31 March 2022 from all the three digital archives. Search keywords of "COVID-19" and "Public Survive Announcement" were used to search for the articles with pertinent information in the text and headlines. Further, a self-designed open coding was employed to explore the categories, official sources, and platforms for the data. The textual content of each PSA was coded and categorized using the thematic analysis procedure proposed by Cohen et al. (2007) which were: generating the units of meaning; classifying, labeling, and arranging the units; creating narratives to describe the data; and finally, interpreting the data. The analysis of qualitative data, as explained by Cohen et al. (2007), seems unavoidably interpretative, which is the case in this study.

3.0 FINDINGS

A total of 10 newspaper articles were analysed to explore COVID-19 PSA categories, official sources, and platforms. The first objective of this study was to explore the categories of information contained in the Malaysian government's COVID-19 PSAs. Altogether, 19 themes emerged from the content analysis, as presented as in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of COVID-19 Public Service Announcements

| SN | Categories/Themes | Representative Quotes | Count |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1 | Virus detection in 2020 | COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia on Jan 25, 2020 | 1 |
| | | Three Chinese citizens tested positive for the disease on Jan 23 | 1 |
| 2 | Seeking clarification for COVID-19 vaccination | Malaysia will be seeking clarification from the European Union delegation | 1 |
| | | So we will seek further information on this decision with the EU delegation | 1 |
| 3 | Conditional approval for the vaccine | The Health Ministry has given conditional registration approval for Pfizer | 1 |
| | | To be monitored and evaluated continuously | 1 |
| 4 | Unawareness of COVID-19 infections | 91 percent of BID cases in the country were not aware they had contracted COVID-19 | 1 |
| | | 50 percent of family members assumed their relatives' symptoms were mild | 1 |
| 5 | High rate of death | 115 deaths were recorded in the last 24 hours | 1 |
| | | The highest rate recorded in a single day | 1 |
| 6 | Death announcement | A single death report is within 72 hours | 1 |
| | | Of 115 deaths, 54 percent were announced within the last 72 hours | 1 |
| 7 | Concern about elderly people and people with chronic illness | What we are most concerned about are elderly people | 1 |
| | | And those with critical illnesses | 1 |
| | | This is the group of people that we must protect | 1 |
| | | The focus for public healthcare right now is on the highest-risk group | 1 |
| 8 | High vaccination achievement | A total of 79 percent of the population had been fully vaccinated | 1 |
| | | 65.8 percent of adults have been boosted | 1 |
| | | 35.6 percent of kids aged five to below 12 had their first dose | 1 |
| | | Malaysia has a successful immunization rate against COVID-19 | 1 |
| | | Among the best vaccination coverage in the world | 1 |
| 9 | Home Recovery | The recovery process of positive cases in Malaysia is mainly done at home | 1 |
| | | 96 percent of active cases are being monitored from home | 2 |
| | | Only severe cases were required to seek treatment at hospitals | 1 |
| | | Boosted people may have mild symptoms and you can recover at home | 1 |
| | | High recovery rate | Recoveries exceed the new cases reported daily |
| 11 | Transition to the endemic phase | Active COVID-19 cases are inching downwards | 5 |
| | | Malaysia could continue with the recovery plan | 1 |
| 11 | Transition to the endemic phase | Malaysia transits to the endemic phase on April 1 | 6 |
| | | To enable people to return to a near-normal life | 1 |
| 12 | Malaysians can start to live with COVID-19 | This shows us that we can start to live with COVID-19 | 1 |
| | | Going forward with living with COVID-19 | 1 |
| 13 | No lockdown anymore | No need for us to look back to lockdowns or movement control orders | 1 |
| 14 | Abolition of quarantine for full-vaccinated travelers | For all travelers who have completed their COVID-19 vaccination | 1 |
| | | They do not need to undergo quarantine | 1 |
| | | Mandates remain for social distancing and wearing of face masks | 1 |
| 15 | Continuation of SOP | We must adhere to the current public health measures and SOP | 1 |
| | | The government would continue to implement existing public health measures | 1 |
| 16 | Ensuring a smooth flow of arrivals | To ensure that the flow of arrivals will be smooth beginning April 1. | 4 |
| | | Counters prepared for the international arrivals are also enough | 1 |
| 17 | Resumption agreement between Malaysia and Singapore | Agreed that the COVID-19 situation in both countries was stable | 2 |
| | | Reached the decision to reopen borders through safe methods | 1 |
| | | We can work immediately towards the full resumption | 3 |
| 18 | No COVID-19 test for air travelers from Singapore | They do not need to perform COVID-19 testing upon arrival | 1 |
| | | They only need to perform a COVID-19 test within two days prior to departure | 1 |
| 19 | Decision to impose COVID-19 saliva test | It is a good improvement to impose a COVID-19 saliva test instead of RTK | 1 |
| | | While RTK takes a longer time, the saliva test is about five minutes | 2 |

As shown in Table 1, COVID-19 PSA in Malaysia revolves around virus detection, vaccination, infections, death, recovery, transition to the endemic phase, lockdown, quarantine, Standard Operation Procedure (SOP), border reopening, and saliva test. This outcome suggests that the content of the government announcements touched on various information of critical action to overcome the outbreak. The content emphasized the transition to the endemic phase, followed by recovery and opening of international border. For instance, as indicated in the count column, the most common expressions include “Malaysia transits to the endemic phase on April 1” (n=6), “Active COVID-19 cases are inching downwards” (n=5), and “To ensure that the flow of arrivals will be smooth beginning April 1” (n=4). The tinge of positivity in the PSA not only offered information on the outbreak but the words also offered the public a sense of hope and recovery. For instance, on March 24, 2022, a PSA disseminated by Malay Mail stated that “Malaysia is indeed ready for the transition to the endemic phase”. On the same day, The Star Newspaper mentioned “the nation prepares to enter the transition to endemicity”. This news reflected the government’s readiness to embrace recovery.

The second objective of this study aims to identify the official sources and platforms through which the information was conveyed. This outcome is presented in the following table.

Table 2. Official sources and platforms for COVID-19 PSAs

| SN | Content | Sources | Platforms | Representative Quotes |
|----|--|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| 1 | Vaccine recognition | Health Minister (Ministry of Health) | Press conference | He said at a press conference in Parliament |
| 2 | COVID-19 brought-in-dead (BID) cases | Health Minister (Ministry of Health) | Press conference | He said at World Hearing Day 2022 |
| 3 | Age and health factors | Health Minister (Ministry of Health) | Annual Dialysis Conference | He said at the Annual Dialysis Conference 2022 |
| 4 | COVID-19 vaccination exercise | Health Minister (Ministry of Health) | Annual Dialysis Conference | He said at the Annual Dialysis Conference 2022 |
| 5 | Living with COVID-19 | Health Minister (Ministry of Health) | Annual Dialysis Conference | He said at the Annual Dialysis Conference 2022 |
| 6 | Border reopening for international travelers | Health Minister & Prime Minister | Twitter | He said via Twitter today |

Table 2 depicts the emerging themes obtained from the Malaysian government’s COVID-19 PSA on sources and platforms. It was found that the PSA consisted of vaccine recognition, mortality rate, age and health factors, vaccination exercise, recovery, living with COVID-19, and finally, border reopening for international travellers. The range of themes signified that the PSAs disseminated by the Malaysian government reflected the initiatives taken to combat COVID-19 in its various facets within the country. Another point noted was that the PSAs were mainly delivered by the Minister of Health instead of officials like the Health Director or the Minister of Information. However, the PSA on the issue of border reopening was made by the Prime Minister himself. This finding on who authoritatively made the PSA, consistent with the emerging themes from the first objective of this study indicated utmost importance in governing transition from pandemic to new norms for the public.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Using qualitative content analysis, the findings of this study showed that the PSAs delivered by the Malaysian government constituted relevant COVID-19 information needed to inform citizens about the various facets of the pandemic. This outcome parallels Jerome et al.’s (2021) study on the various PSA infographics on Covid-a19 related topics. In particular, the current analysis on the texts show the multiple means of communication to the masses undertaken during times of duress that consist of verbal, textual, and visual content (Azlan et al., 2020). Additionally, the quality and clarity of PSA content, to a certain

extent, defined the audience's comprehension of the message. This feature, as mentioned by Hashim and Salleh (2021), can be critical in ascertaining the ability of PSAs to influence public perceptions. In this regard, previous studies affirmed that COVID-19 PSAs must contain relevant information needed to impact public perceptions of the pandemic (Azlan et al., 2020; Hashim & Salleh, 2021; Mohamad et al., 2020).

Likewise, these findings are consistent with the theoretical viewpoint of the Persuasion Theory. It was mentioned that despite the general tense and fear, the PSA messages carried positive notes as though there was a glimpse of hope. In Persuasion Theory, such an approach to communicating is labelled as "positive peripheral messages" as they are viewed favourably by the audience and create a positive affective state. The messages could have positive changes in attitude (Dainton, 2004). In this case, for example, if one is reluctant to use face mask but see the government encouraging it, he could be swayed towards using it. However, a change in attitude does not predict a change in behaviour. In the same scenario, a person may believe masking up is important but may not actually do so when in public area. Therefore, there is an incongruence between a belief (using face mask is important) and behaviour (actually using it).

Moreover, the findings of this study demonstrated that the Malaysian government's COVID-19 PSAs tend to be made by the Ministry of Health. Similar to this outcome, Mohamad et al. (2020) found that the Malaysian Ministry of Health was the most preferred source for COVID-19 related information compared to sources such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and unofficial or online sources. This reference indicates the Malaysian citizen's reliance on the COVID-19-related information released by the Health Ministry, perhaps due to the communicator's credibility and reputation, as presumed by the Persuasion Theory (Hovland, 1957). In this regard, Liew et al. (2020) affirmed that the Malaysian government has realized the need for reliable and effective COVID-19-related information to allow for successful strategies and policies. Yet, citizens continue to rely on the government's PSAs despite viral sharing of misinformation that occurs "rapidly through social media and group text messaging" (p. 1).

Furthermore, this study discovered that the Malaysian government's PSAs tend to be made through conferences. However, border reopening PSA was made even through social media platforms, which indicates the importance of social media platforms in reaching a global audience. However, for local consumption, Mohamad et al. (2020) found that Malaysians mainly used television and internet news portals to source COVID-19 information. When the government releases COVID-19 PSAs, particularly via conferences, different print and broadcast media outlets, as well as online platforms, disseminate the information to the general public media outlets (Zhao, 2021). Thus, the government's use of social media platforms for COVID-19 PSAs on border reopening might be informed by the government's desire to reach an international audience. This decision also indicates the government's seriousness to reopen its borders and move to the transition to endemicity. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that moving towards the endemic phase does not mean the end of COVID-19 (Rus, 2022).

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the categories of COVID-19 PSAs made by the Malaysian government during the pandemic. According to the findings, the Malaysian government's PSAs contain rich information that covers several COVID-19 related issues within the country. Also, the content tends to reveal the issues of transition to the endemic phase, recovery, and international arrivals as dominant themes. Additionally, COVID-19 PSAs are mostly made by the Health Minister via press conference. However, on the issue of border reopening, the PSA was made by both the Health Minister and the Prime Minister through various platforms, including social media. These outcomes reflect the Malaysian government's continuous efforts and initiatives to manage the COVID-19 pandemic through effective communication with the public.

The uncertainties created by COVID-19 made it imperative for health authorities to design effective campaign strategies against the pandemic through official sources like PSA. Findings of the current study could inform the government agencies regarding the information quality and relevance as well as the use

of various platforms. Also, this study could advance our understanding of PSA during emergency trends, particularly in the Malaysian context. However, this study is limited to a qualitative content analysis of COVID-19 PSAs with limited samples. Thus, investigating the public perceptions of official PSA can be an important step for further research to determine their efficacy. The implications of the findings revealed that the spokespersons for the authorities could craft the way they convey information to the public. Ideally information should be conveyed in a language that is palatable to the various segments of the populace especially when critical information is involved. Future research could take into consideration the implications of gender differences in how PSAs are viewed and applied.

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8.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The researchers do not have any conflict of interest.

9.0 CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

The first and fifth authors conceptualized the research. The first author also wrote the introduction section and conducted the literature review. The second, third authors collected the data and analysed them, the fourth author completed the conclusion, and the fifth author edited the paper.

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About the Authors

Nalini Arumugam is an associate professor at Segi University. She has more than 23 years of teaching at the higher education level.

Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi is currently at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kuala Terengganu. He areas of research interest is English Language and Literature.

Alice Shanthi is an associate professor at the Academy of Language Studies, University Teknologi MARA, Kuala Pilah Campus, Negeri Sembilan.

Puwarno teaches at the Islamic University of North Sumatera. He is a senior lecturer and teaches literature.

Kaarthyainy Supramaniam is an associate professor at the Department of TESL, Faculty of Education, University Teknologi MARA, Kuala Pilah Campus, Negeri Sembilan. Her interest is teacher education and applied linguistics. She can be contacted at: kaarthyainy@uitm.edu.my



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