



# Public Awareness and Government Measures in Tackling COVID-19 Fake News in Malaysia

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**Abstract. Background:** People's knowledge and behaviors about the COVID-19 disease are pertinent in influencing a society's response to it and the responsibility of providing the public with sufficient knowledge about the virus falls on the hand of the authorities.

**Objective:** This study aims to determine the relationship between public awareness and government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news among the Malaysian public.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional online survey of 400 Malaysian adults was conducted. Participant demographics, awareness surrounding COVID-19 and their perception of the government measures tackling COVID-19 fake news were assessed. Descriptive statistics, ANOVA, T-Test, single regression and Person correlation analyses were conducted to gauge the relationship between the demographics, awareness and government measures towards COVID-19 fake news.

**Results:** There is a high level of importance in both public awareness and government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news and exists only a low-levelled correlation between public awareness of COVID-19 and government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news ( $r$  value = .339).

**Conclusion:** Public understanding of COVID-19 is directly connected to the effectiveness of government measures in combating COVID-19 fake news. Thus, it is pertinent for government authorities, notably the health ministry, to establish an effective plan in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 fake news.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 · Fake News · Awareness · Government

## 1 Introduction

The fake news surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic is unlike any other previous events of widespread misinformation. Its scale is global and wide-reaching. Facts are frequently distorted, and notions that have yet to be proven are hailed as revolutionary breakthroughs. According to a Reuters Institute investigation of a sample of fraudulent COVID-19 content, 59 per cent is based on actual information that has been modified to some degree, while 38 per cent is wholly created (Brennen et al., 2020) [1]. The COVID-19 fake news challenges the governments in many ways as it causes unnecessary anxiety and panic among the public.

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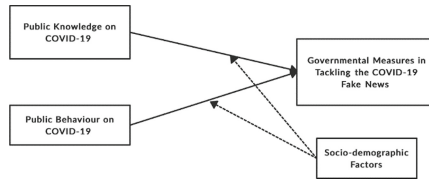
The first announcement on the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020, in Malaysia, triggered panic buying of essential items and massive crowds rushing back to their hometown which defeated the main purpose of the MCO which was to limit the spread of the infection (New Straits Times,2020) [2]. As if that did not contribute enough to the unnecessary anxiety and panic among the public, there was also fake news circling around on the occurrence of special military helicopters that will spray pesticides from the sky all over the country (Leong,2020) [3]. That news was actually manipulated from the government's announcement on being forced to bring in the armies to assist the enforcement (Choong,2020) [4] as the first two days of the MCO, only 60% of Malaysians obeyed the order. The public's awareness of the virus is the responsibility of the government measures in making sure that sufficient and accurate information about the virus reaches the public. Therefore, the government's role in tackling COVID-19 related fake news is very crucial as expectations from the intention and capacities of the government would affect the flexibility and behaviours of the public (Zarei, Shahabi,Sadati, A.K,2021) [5].

Tarlach McGonagle's definition of fake news states information that is purposefully created and distributed to deceive individuals into believing and accepting uncertain verifiable facts or lies (McGonagle,2017) [6]. This was like another scholar's view that fake news is classified as information that imitates a news story with dishonest content (Duffy,Tandoc,Ling,2019) [7]. The Malaysian Parliament's definition of fake news is any information, news or reports that are partially or entirely incorrect, independent of the form (Malaysia: Anti-fake news act comes into force 2018) [8].

The rapid spread of Covid 19 related fake news has fuelled unnecessary public panic whereby numerous news articles around the globe contained inaccurate or fraudulent COVID-19 material. Some examples of misleading or fake news include advising people to drink salty or warm water, as well as recommending bleach as a cure for the prevalent virus (Lampos,Majumder, M.Edelstein,Moura,Hamada,2021) [9], drinking silver particles in the liquid, known as colloidal silver, help with the virus (CNA,2022) [10] and eating oregano might heal them from the virus (Lampos,2020) [9]. The false information as such has the tendency to only confuse people, causing them to overreact, but also jeopardise their safety, luring them into undertaking false prevention measures that lead to terrible health issues (Pulido et al., 2020) [11].

Evidence suggests that public awareness is critical in combating pandemics (Chirwa,202) [12]. The Public's lack of awareness of the virus has a higher chance of contributing to the spread of fake news as any readily available information online about the virus seems to be newly acquired information for them, thus they start sharing it with others without fact-checking the information first. The public's knowledge and behaviour about COVID-19 are also likely to influence them in their decision making. By analysing public awareness and knowledge about the coronavirus, researchers can acquire a better understanding of current public perceptions and practices, as well as traits that influence the public's adoption of healthy habits and responsive behaviour (Podder, Paul, Dasgupta,Bandyopadhyay,Pal, Roy,2020) [13].

In Malaysia, the government launched SEBENARNYA.MY which means "in actuality" or "in reality" is a widely known fact-checking platform on 14th March 2017, managed by the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) that



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual Framework of The Relationship Between Public Awareness & The Governmental Measures in Tackling The Covid-19 Fake News

plays an educational role to make certain that the public receives authentic information. The second initiative taken by the government in combating fake news was introduced by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) whereby a legal liability was imposed on WhatsApp Group Admins to oversee misinformation being circulated in the group. The next one is the implementation of the Anti-Fake News Act 2018 established on the 11th of April 2018, initiated by the Parliament of Malaysia in order to prevent the spread of fake news or deceptive content regardless of whether it is online or offline. Based on the literature review, a conceptual framework was developed to demonstrate the relationship between public awareness and the government's measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news.

## 2 Method

This study was carried out using a quantitative research approach using a set of questionnaires that were produced using Google Form and distributed online. The form consisted three segments. The first segment, Section A, was used to collect demographic information from the respondents. The second half of the questionnaire was followed by Section B focusing on the public's knowledge and behaviors towards COVID-19 and section C, the third section focused on the governmental measures on fake news revolving COVID-19. The language used throughout this questionnaire is English. The Likert scale measurement that was adopted from Sekaran and Bougie (2016) was used to assess both the independent and dependent variables, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral/I don't know), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree) (strongly agree). The target group of this study is Malaysian adults ranged from 19 to 65 (Franssen, Stijnen, Hamers, Schneider, 2020) [14].

Snowball sampling, which is a type of convenience sampling, was utilized in this study. Because the target market includes Malaysian adults from all walks of life, obtaining responses is made easier because they are easily available and very accessible. This is owing to the fact that Malaysia has a population of around 21.82 million adults (Hirschmann, 2019) [15]. The sample size of this specific research was achieved using the Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1973).

After coding and editing, the data answers from the study's 400 participants were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). In addition, the data gathered from the respondents' responses were also double-checked for errors before being entered into the SPSS system. A descriptive statistical analysis was also used to summaries the data in a clear and visually appealing manner. Means and standard

deviations were used to assess and analyze the respondents' perspectives on the study's issue.

A pilot study was conducted involving 50 respondents ( $N = 50$ ). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient in the pilot study is .730 mark which shows that it is reliable for research purposes (Whitely, 2002; Robinson, 2009) [16]. The KMO and Bartlett's Validity Test for both the Independent Variable and dependent variable is adequate or sufficient as both the variables' value for the KMO test is .716 and .735, respectively which is of a good value (Hadi, Abdullah & Sentosa, 2016) [17].

### 3 Results

The results obtained included the statistical fact that there is a high level of importance on both the independent variable and dependent variable garnered a score of ( $N = 274$ ,  $\% = 68.5$ ) and ( $N = 370$ ,  $\% = 92.5$ ) respectively. When analyzed the independent variables individually, a high level of importance is found on the independent variable, the public's knowledge of COVID-19 ( $N = 381$ ,  $95.3$ ), but only a moderate level of importance was on the independent variable, public behavior on COVID-19 ( $N = 248$ ,  $\% = 62.0$ ).

The correlation value, or  $r$ , of this study also indicates there is a relationship between public awareness and government measures to combat COVID-19 fake news. This is because the  $R$ -value is .339, which statistical strength may be described as a low relationship because it is between .20 and .40, according to Guilford's Rule of Thumb. However, when looked into the broken down independent variables, the test revealed that there exists only a low correlation between public knowledge of COVID-19 and government measures in tackling the COVID-19 fake news, specifically with a correlation value of .369 ( $r = .369$ ) whereas as for public behavior on COVID-19 and government measures in tackling the COVID-19 fake news, there exists no correlation as the correlation value was .057 which is considered to be a negligible relationship according to Guilford's Rule of Thumb (1973).

The results on differences in knowledge and behavior of the public and the government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news based on the socio-demographic seem to have a significant difference as both the independent variables and dependent variable in terms of education and location have the  $p$ -value below the 0.05 alpha value.

Additionally, the results also state that contributing factors of knowledge and behavior of the public towards the government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news. Based on the data, it is evident that both public knowledge and behavior on COVID-19 have a contribution of 13.6 per cent ( $r$  square = .136) and 0.3 per cent ( $r$  square = .003) respectively towards the dependent variable, government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news.

### 4 Discussions

The disease's novelty, as well as its uncertainties, makes it critical for health authorities to implement effective strategies for preparing and managing the public. Therefore, it is critical to investigate public awareness in order to guide these efforts. Both the

independent, public awareness and dependent, government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news had a high level of importance. The average knowledge score of Malaysians regarding COVID-19 was high, indicating that most of the respondents had a high level of awareness about the disease and its effect. These findings further prove that the public does take the fake news issue seriously and expects the government to maximize their effort in curbing the widespread of fake news.

N = 300 strongly agreed with the statement that COVID-19 is an infectious disease and N = 262 strongly agreed with the statement on COVID-19 spreads via respiratory droplets. These scores can be interpreted as a high level of awareness among the Malaysian public in terms of how contagious the disease is. Being aware that COVID-19 is an infectious disease and the way it spreads is one step closer to curbing it.

The following statement on the COVID-19 virus being able to remain viable for up to 72 h on plastic and stainless steel also garnered a high score (N = 154). As mentioned by WHO (2020) the virus can remain viable for up to 72 h on plastic and stainless steel, and additional information - up to 24 h on cardboard. Thus, there is a high possibility of someone being infected just by touching the contaminated surface and without realizing it, touching their mouth, nose or eyes after that. Hence, not being aware of such information can also contribute to the risk of getting infected.

The statement on kids being at a lower risk of being infected by COVID-19 was disagreed by N = 234 but agreed by N = 84 and about N = 81 of them fell in the not sure and do not know category. The difference in results can be on account of the way the public perceives it. One possible explanation can be because of children seldomly take part in a lot of outdoor activities and undertake less international travel which puts them at a lower risk of infection the virus (Lee, Hu, Chen, Huang, Huseh, 2020) [18]. On the contrary, a recent article published mentioned that there has been a 160 per cent increase in the number of COVID-19 cases among Malaysian children below the age of 12 in February 2022 (The Straits Times, 2022) [19]. Mr. Khairy Jamaluddin, the minister of health stated there the sharp rise might be because of the recent reopening of schools (Hassan, 2022) [20]. Thus, kids are not at a lower risk of being infected by COVID-19.

Besides that, the statement on people aged 60 years and above being at most risk severe infection from COVID-19 received a high number of agreement (N = 356). These people are at most risk due to their age factor especially if they have underlying conditions such as high blood pressure, heart and lung problems, and diabetes which then have a higher risk of it developing serious illnesses (WHO, 2020) [21]. This indicated that the public is somewhat aware of the risk pertaining to people aged 60 years and above and will take the necessary precautions to prevent from getting infected by the virus.

About N = 263 disagreed that without symptoms, an individual infected with COVID-19 is not contagious whereas N = 72 agreed and the remaining of them did not know or were not sure of the statement (N = 64). This could be due to the emergence of asymptomatic. However, even without symptoms, the person can continue to spread the virus (Maragakis, 2022) [22]. Not being sure of such a thing could also contribute to the increase in cases as an individual would probably not wear a mask or take any precautionary measures around the said infected individual, causing a cluster on its own.

In conjunction with that, the statement on N95 being the preferred mask to curb the spread of COVID-19 also got a high agreement ( $N = 298$ ). However, there were respondents that were not sure about the statement as well ( $N = 65$ ). This could be due to the Malaysian Ministry of Health which seems to have been stern that medical face masks should only be worn by those who have been infected by COVID-19 or similar illnesses in the early stages of the virus being spread. This was done to ensure that there was an adequate supply of personal protective equipment for front-line medical workers. Nonetheless, different authoritative bodies had communicated conflicting messages to the public about the use of face masks public (Azlan, Hamzah, Sern, Ayub, Muhamad, 2020) [23]. Thus, it is possible that the lack of supply, as well as the confusion caused by mixed messages, contributed to the divided response on the preferred type of face masks.

The statement on vaccination certificates can be purchased also had a mixed response.  $N = 294$  disagreed, however,  $N = 69$  agreed and the remaining  $N = 41$  did not know. Though there was a high number of disagreements towards this statement, the number of agreements seems rather alarming. This could be due to COVID-19 vaccine certificates being sold online, which is illegal. Selling or buying vaccine certificate is a crime and be charged with bribery (Hassan, 2022) [24]. In an arrest that took place on January 17, 2022, Johor police caught a syndicate that sells the certificates. The syndicate has been operating for a month and they have issued the COVID-19 certificates to about 30 people. The Johor police chief Commissioner Datuk Kamarul Zaman Mamat stated that all those who purchased the digital certificates are anti-vaxxers (Hassan, 2022) [24]. With, it could also be said that those who agreed with the statement can be ones that refuse to take the vaccine and choose to get the certificate in order to move around freely. Similarly, to the statement on Malaysians being able to travel abroad without being vaccinated. It is mandatory to be vaccinated unless there is an exception that can only be allowed on health grounds 24(Person, 2021) [25].

Besides the public's awareness of COVID-19, the government also plays an important role in tackling COVID-19 fake news which is what section B of the questionnaire analyzes - The public's perception of the government measures in tackling COVID-19 fake news. The first statement on The Ministry of Health playing a crucial part in tackling COVID-19 fake news without doubt garnered a high agreement ( $N = 325$ ). Similarly, the next statement on fake news regarding vaccination disrupting the government's initiative on getting Malaysians fully vaccinated had a high agreement as well ( $N = 337$ ). These two statements further prove that the public is aware of the important announcements related to the deadly virus.

The next two statements are on the websites that are used to check on information related to COVID-19. The statement on SEBENARNYA.MY being a frequently used platform in Malaysia to check on fake news received a wide range of responses from disagreements to the agreement.  $N = 160$  agreed,  $N = 157$  did not know and remaining  $N = 82$  disagreed. On the flip side, the statement on Malaysians being able to refer to the COVIDNOW website to verify COVID-19 related data and curb the spread of fake news on vaccination, infection, and the death toll had a higher agreement as compared to the website SEBENARNYA.MY ( $N = 278$ ). These indicate that the public is not so aware of the SEBENARNYA.MY website as they of the COVIDNOW website it is also

clear that the COVIDNOW website is where they get most of their information on the virus.

In parallel with this finding is another statement that also received a mixed response. The statement on current laws and regulations being enough to tackle the issue of fake news had  $N = 157$  agreed,  $N = 138$  disagree and the remaining  $N = 104$  were not sure. According to this finding, it can be said that there is room for improvement in terms of the current laws and regulations. Though most of them agreed with that statement, quite a number also disagreed with it which can be stated that the current laws and regulations are not enforced enough for them to visibly see the impact.

Next in line, is the statement on the government banning social media during crises, like those done by countries like India Sri Lanka to combat the spread of fake news. This statement had a high number of disagreements ( $N = 225$ ). On the other hand, the following statement on the government enhancing its censorship/monitoring of social media platforms to tackle the issue of fake news on COVID-19 had a high level of agreement ( $N = 238$ ). This could be due to the dependency on social media for information (Ariff,2019) [25]. In an article written by Ariff (2019), it was stated that fifty-four per cent of Malaysians agreed that people are capable of spotting fake news and that they would not support the banning of social media during crises.

The last four statements that touched on the possible government efforts all had a high number of agreements respectively. The statement on the government should conduct targeted programs, especially in the rural areas on ways to identify fake news on COVID-19 ( $N = 327$ ), They should also be awareness created in schools on fake news in general and specifically on healthcare and COVID-19 to ensure a well-informed future generation ( $N = 352$ ), the government should collaborate with the private sector to tackle the spread of fake news ( $N = 329$ ) and finally the statement on the government's battle against fake news on COVID-19 has no deadline ( $N = 352$ ). These findings further prove that the public does take the fake news issue seriously and expects the government to maximize their effort in curbing the issue. As stated in a study, the need for more comprehensive education programs that puts an emphasis on the consistency of information provided by the government and other authorities. COVID-19 education efforts should be proactive, focusing on dispelling misinformation in the form of contrary opinions and inaccurate information (Azlan,Hamzah,Sern,Ayub,Muhamad, 2020) [28]. Hence, proven the importance the government plays in tackling COVID-19 fake news.

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**Authors' Contributions.** In terms of the study's research implications, this study contributes to additional empirical data on the relationship between public awareness and government measures, specifically focusing on the COVID-19 fake news in Malaysia. Hence, this research contributes to the body of information about the variables and relationships. Furthermore, from a non-western standpoint, this study provides much-needed empirical evidence on the relationship between public awareness and government efforts in combating COVID-19 fake news.

A third contribution that can be highlighted is that this study gives additional research or expertise when it comes to establishing an effective plan for government authorities, notably the health ministry, to prevent the spread of COVID-19 fake news. This is because the outcomes of this study's findings that revealed public understanding of COVID-19 is directly connected to the effectiveness of government measures in combating COVID-19 fake news.

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