



# Public Trust Toward Government Online Crisis Communication: A Malaysian Youth Perspective

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**Abstract.** Using the backdrop of economic crisis following COVID-19 pandemic, this study measures Malaysian youth perception toward trust and the characteristics of social media used in government online crisis communication. Youth, just like other group of citizens, is directly and indirectly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the implications faced by youth are severe economic consequences such as suffering extreme financial hardship and increased unemployment rate which could lead to the decline in trust toward their government. This study is guided by the network crisis communication theory to explain the role of social media characteristic as the medium to disseminate government crisis messages and subsequently restore the trust among youth. This study employs a cross sectional, quantitative approach using survey for data collection. Through two-stage sampling technique, this study selected public university students representing the Malaysian youth as the sample. A total of 373 respondents take part in the survey which was conveniently selected through sharing of the google form link to selected public universities in Malaysia. Three hypotheses were tested using Pearson correlation and were all supported. The implication of the study indicates that government should consider including trust and the social media characteristics in planning their crisis communication plans as well as in formulating policy regarding their online crisis communication.

**Keywords:** Government online crisis communication · Millennials · Public trust · Social media · Youth

## 1 Introduction

Global and national crises to certain degree will affect public trust toward government administration especially in managing the crises. COVID-19 pandemic for example, has impacted citizen trust and confidence toward government communication throughout the world [1]. Since public health has severely affected, with many families had lost the lives of their loved ones, the uncertainty toward government efforts to share and disseminate information of the current situation arose. Public uncertainty due to the communication void have potential to influence their evaluation and confidence toward the government which warrant further investigation on the government legitimacy and accountability

in doing what is deemed right. Previous study shows that in general, public confidence toward their government has long been decreased [2, 3]. Accountability and transparency become crucial during crisis in which government is seen as responsible in meeting public expectations in all aspects related to their wellbeing following a crisis, including economy and social development [4]. To be perceived as legitimate and accountable, government not only is expected to assume responsibility but also being transparent on all efforts taken in overcoming the crisis. To be transparent, most government has geared up their communication initiatives to keep the public informed of their crisis management plans. Nowadays, government throughout the world has fully switched to online communication including employing social media such as official pages, WhatsApp, twitter, and Facebook to reach out to their audience. The aim of this study is to examine the influence of Malaysian youth perception toward trust on government financial crisis communication via the said social media amidst the pandemic.

Youth, just like other group of citizens, are directly and indirectly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the severity of pandemic impacts around the globe, youth experience difficulties to adjust to the financial crises. Among the implications faced by this group are severe economic consequences such as suffering extreme financial hardship [5], increased youth unemployment rate [6, 7], depression and anxiety among youth [8, 9], pernicious effects of stress on youth mental health and its symptomatology [10], social, emotional, and academic functioning as well as developmental implications [11], and meeting youth physical activity needs [12]. All these challenges have motivated scholars across disciplines to assess and measure youth perceptions toward government performance in managing crises as to reduce the impact the crisis has on this group. Considering youth dominated the larger percentage of population in most country around the globe, thus, their opinion is invaluable and should be considered when making decision or formulating a new government policy.

## 2 Problem Statement

The outbreak of COVID19 has left a major impact on countries worldwide. In Malaysia, the pandemic not only affect the social aspect of the citizen where public health condition is still deteriorated, but it has also hit the country's financial performance tremendously due to the closure of many major industries. As a result, a great number of employees has lost their jobs, subsequently impacted the household income of many Malaysians. The situation is further worsened by the economic and political instability which has seen the change in Malaysian government at least two times within less than three years. The defeat of the ruling government of 60 years, followed by the formation the new coalition government and changes of the prime ministers in short period of time has raised the question of public trust which is indeed significant and relevant to focus on. It is worth noting that the collapsed of the Barisan Nasional government is due to the younger generation voters who have different perception toward the government as compared to seasoned voters. As a well-known fact, this scenario explained the "tsunami" in Malaysia political arena as a result of youth movement in 2018 general election.

Recent finding on Malaysia youth involvement in politic have shed some light on the important roles of youth perception toward the country important matters such as

political and social aspects [13]. Scholars further claimed that during Malaysia's pivotal 2018 elections, youths' votes have brought a new political landscape for the first time since independence [14]. A growing body of literature on youth participation on national and global issues indicated that social media plays an important role in voicing out their concerns toward the nation [13].

A recent study further confirmed that youth play a significant role in the nation building decision making process thus their participation and opinion is crucial and should be taken seriously by the policy makers [15]. The authors suggested that youth high engagement in social media increased their awareness on the political and social development which has shaped their perception on these matters. However, an extensive literature on Malaysia perspective did not find any verification on youth participation and evaluation on the economic perspective, specifically financial crisis. Therefore, this study pioneering the investigation on youth evaluation toward government online crisis communication based on their trust toward the crisis messages disseminated through government online communication. The perception of youth toward government online crisis communication is assumed to be influenced by the characteristics of the social media being used by the government in their online crisis communication.

Previous research on government administration has established a link between citizen trust and government communication [16, 17]. While some studies indicated consistent findings however, there are still areas needed further investigation due to several factors including the change in government operation, advancement of technology and public perceptions [16]. A massive review of literature on this subject confirmed little empirical evidence found on the influence of public trust toward government online crisis communication in an Asian financial crisis context. Thus, this study opens the opportunity to understand public perception toward government online crisis communication in the aspect of financial crisis as a direct implication of the outbreak as well as political unrest which has hampered Malaysia all at once.

The study is guided by the networked crisis communication theory. This theory aims to explain and predict how information is disseminated and shared with publics during crises [18, 19]. The NCCT has been vastly tested in recent years and is proven useful in guiding research on online communication. However, recent literature indicated that most of the study on NCCT were merely Western based [20], which may not be fully representative of Asian perspective. Furthermore, recent evidence showed that for managing secondary crisis communication (e.g. talking about the crisis communication), traditional media was more favourable among public than in the social media as traditional media is regarded as more credible. Taking into consideration the aggressive move organization has made in choosing the medium for their communication, this finding affirms further investigation and clarification.

This study also answers previous call who stressed the need for more complex models of crisis communication [18]. More recently, assessment of the evolution of social media in crisis communication revealed that social media crises should be explored across sectors and practice areas to deepen understanding on the approaches. This development has attracted scholars to also examined the evolution of computer-mediated communication in organizational communication research [21].

To fill up the theoretical gap and to answer these scholars' call [18, 21], this study embraces the NCCT in an attempt to understand how government crisis communication be perceived by Malaysian youth with the integration of public trust and financial crisis as the backdrop of the study.

The present study expects to bridge the practical gap by addressing the need for a formulation of concrete government policy regarding online crisis communication. At present online crisis communication has become a norm and comfortably taken over the role of traditional media, both in public and private sector. In a public sector, communicating online has certain characteristics which require close scrutinize from the administrator as to protect confidentiality and ensure accountability while being transparent. Thus, it is felt that understanding public trust is crucial in developing a solid, substantial policy for the government online crisis communication to foster national security and stability.

### **3 Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Government Online Crisis Communication**

In the absence of a solid definition of government online crisis communication, we proposed that the government online crisis communication construct in this study is conceptualised as 'the dissemination of information regarding the crisis messages from the government to its public through varieties of communication initiatives in the social media'. This includes Facebook, Twitter, official websites and pages. Recent study shows that social media enhance citizens' political interest and participation [13, 22]. Thus, taking from this stance most scholars believe that social media act as a powerful tool to bridge the gap between the government and its citizens especially during crisis. Citizens who actively involved in information seeking will engage in dialogue with the authority to reduce their uncertainty over the crisis and enhance their trust toward the government [23].

A growing body of literature also indicate that scholar paid a considerable amount of research on computed-mediated communication such as website and blogs as these platforms are administered by the organization hence are perceived most credible. For example, recent trend also shows that most government bodies have integrate the use of social media in their organizational communication strategies or e-government [24] as well as trust-building strategies to engage the public in communicating with the government during crisis [23]. In this study, government online crisis communication is operationalised as a construct with three dimensions namely, news coverage, news content and news credibility.

#### **3.2 Public Trust and Malaysia Youth Perception Toward Trust**

Researchers across multiple disciplines have attempted to understand how trust is built and maintained. Trust as a concept, has been studied from many different perspectives such as trust toward an organization [25], satisfaction and loyalty [26] as well as the role of trust in effective leadership [27]. Public trust, a construct measuring citizen believability

toward government administration has received serious attention from scholars. Among the key factors that influence citizen trust and confidence in government includes citizen satisfaction and expectations, government transparency and accountability, transformation of government, and government performance [16]. Recent study on trust indicated that even though this construct has been examined in various context, there is little evidence on what constitute trust toward government communication during crisis.

A study of public trust has been dominating research on good governance and political administration with scholars emphasising on credibility, believability, trustworthiness, and expertise of organizational entities [28]. Trust in government and political leader is crucial as it is considered as a reliable indicator of political stability and strong social capital [1, 29]. Citizen will trust their government when they perceived the government a possessing expertise, capacity, and technical knowledge to serve the nation in the best way possible. While trust can be regarded as reputational capital in a democracy country, it is also like reputation, is fragile and can be abolished overnight. During time of uncertainty like COVID19 pandemic, trust between the government and its public determine the legitimacy of the social contract. When the public perceive that the government as not having the capacity to protect their wellbeing or not being capable to serve to their best of interest, they will be likely to exercise their political rights. Government who lost their citizen trust will be perceived as weak and instable. Trust in this study is operationalised as youth perception toward the government as having the credibility in their communication, accountable and reliable in decision making, know their priority and fulfil their responsibility as described in the social contract.

In Malaysia, youth represent 'The Millennials' and also known as Generation Z. This generation is technology savvy, independent, self-reliant, educated, confident, passionate, upbeat, and socially conscious with high degree of integrity [15]. Measuring their perception toward trust and online crisis communication would furnish some invaluable indicators to the government in adjusting or enhancing the effectiveness of their future crisis communication plans.

### 3.3 Characteristics of Social Media

It is estimated that an approximate 5 billion people worldwide will use social media by 2025 [30]. He also asserted that Facebook is the most popular social media with the largest users followed by Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp. The popularity of these social media is very much determined by their unique functions and characteristics. Social media is a generic term which refers to online platforms characterised by various attributes, communication formats, and sociability functions [31]. In organizational context, social media is utilized to fulfil organizational formal functions to meet the organization goals. Since the beginning of IR 4.0, social media has become the driving force of Web 2.0 and has been profoundly utilised by Internet users, marketers and organizations for various purposes. Likewise, government communication has relied on their social media to reach out to their citizens. Even though social media has played major roles in government communication, not much evidence can be found on what constitute to the effectiveness of the social media employed by the government. This is due to the fact that research on social media usage in government agencies is still in infancy. Previous studies on this area are often examined as a collective medium which

neglected the importance of the role of social media characteristics in determining the message effectiveness conveyed through the medium [32]. Scholars [31, 33] have identified the specific attributes of social media as consisting of five dimensions: participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness. Previous finding has added six unique characteristics of social media which are media richness, self-disclosure, variety, diversity, intensity, and connectivity [34]. The study subsequently proposed that further research is needed to ensure clearer consequences of each dimension of social media among users. To accommodate government context, this study proposed two relevant dimensions of social media which is reliability and preferences. Reliability and preferences have been regarded as keywords in government communication which reflect organizational credibility as the source of information. Based on this premise this study examines the influence of public trust on government online crisis communication by assessing the characteristics of the social media.

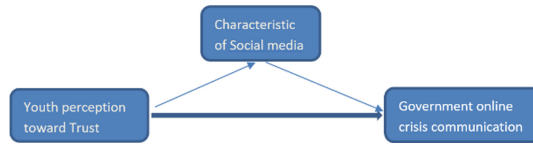
### 3.4 The Networked Crisis Communication Theory

The networked crisis communication theory is described as “challenges classical crisis communication theories by showing that the medium used affects the impact of crisis communication” p. 41 [18]. This model attempt to comprehensively explain the role of social media in delivering crisis messages as more effective, impressive, up-to-date and as credible as, traditional media. As an extension of attribution theory and situational crisis communication theory, the networked crisis communication theory (NCCT) focusses on the medium, which is the digital-oriented tools used to channel the messages to and from the organization and its public. The channel in this context is characterised by the internet connectivity, computer-based and highly interactive. The common practice of NCCT use the organizational website as the platform to disseminate information to the audience. However, this platform has its own limitation due to it one-way communication setting which refrain immediate feedback.

To overcome this constraint, organization has shifted to employing social media because it is highly interactive in nature. Apart from that, the richness of social media enables real-time update, fast and considerably reliable information. Recent study on social-mediated communication model confirmed that Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social media among users, be it organizations or audience [20]. In this study, NCCT is used to explain how government administration employs social media in their communication initiatives to deliver the crisis messages. Considering the nature of social media which are wide in coverage, enable instant feedback with unlimited amount of information, permits the sharing of visual, graphics and videos and many more, all these characteristics served as an advantage to the government to restore and increase public trust.

Being a young and far from established however, this theory certainly has its own limitation. Rather than guiding crisis managers rebuilding reputation, the NCCT focuses more on mitigating reputational threats that organization might have faced should the crisis occur. Considering the limitation that NCC is facing, the present study proposes a new framework to deal with these complexities of online crisis communication.

Based on the literature discussed above, the research framework of the study is developed as follows:



**Fig. 1.** The conceptual model for government online crisis communication

Derived on the conceptual model that has been presented, this study advance three research hypotheses as follows:

- H1: Public trust is significantly related to the characteristic of social media used in government online crisis communication
- H2: Characteristics of social media is significantly related to government online crisis communication
- H3: Public trust is significantly related to government online crisis communication.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This quantitative study is a cross-sectional and employs survey research. The unit analysis in this study is the individual students of higher learning institution in Malaysia. The study measures individual perception which is appropriate and consistent with the purpose of this study.

### 4.2 Population, Sampling Technique and Sample Size

This study selected Malaysia youth as its population. Youth form a significant part of the Malaysian 32.7 million population [35] with working age of 15–65 of age caters for 22.7 million (statistic for youth specifically is currently unavailable). From Fig. 1, almost half a million of youth are university students, comprising both undergraduate as well as postgraduates [36]. Thus, their participation ascertains that youth have adequate skills for future decision-making and ensures the future development of the nations [37].

To measure the perception of students of higher learning institutions in this study, public universities across the country has been selected and were categorised based on the regions. Therefore, participants were selected from northern region, eastern, central as well as the southern region. To be conclusive, the study includes public universities from Sabah and Sarawak so that the findings is representative of public university students in Malaysia. The rationale of choosing students of higher learning institutions in this study is based on the following criteria: (1) Students of higher learning institutions in Malaysia aged between 19–30 years of which represent youth category; (2) They are highly computer literate as part of the online learning practices; (3) Majority of the student have access to internet (4) Majority of the students have social media accounts and are active users of those media; (5) Being a university student, respondent is assumed to have some degree of knowledge on current issues such as financial crisis faced by the country following the pandemic; (6) Youth group is categorised as educated, technology



savvy and belong to the upper middle class who were raised to acknowledge and embrace integrity hence their perception is fundamental to this study.

To sum up the criteria mentioned above, measuring youth perception is relevant and significant for this study since they are the future leaders whose opinion matters for the betterment of the county's administration and good governance in the years to come.

The sampling technique were selected in two stages which combine convenience and stratified random sampling. In the first stage, the link to the survey's google form was shared conveniently with public universities students through Whatsapp, Facebook and pages of the relevant ministries. Student's centre of each university was approached to disseminate the link to their students. The data received through this first step is treated as the sample frame of the study of which stratified random sampling would be exercised in the second stage. Based on the responses received, respondents were selected randomly using their ID. The study exclude foreign students as the assessment of government online crisis communication is solely reflective of government of Malaysia of which they are considered unfamiliar with.

Based on data obtained from the Ministry of Education [36], total population of students at Malaysian public universities across all levels (postgraduate and undergraduate) is 463, 563 students. Based on the population, the appropriate sample size according to [38] is between 341–363 respondents with confidence level of 99% and margin error of 5%.

### 4.3 Instrumentations and Design of Questionnaire

The present study developed new measurement items for the government online crisis communication (GOCC) consisting of 35-items, social media characteristics (21 items) while instrument for public trust was adopted and adapted from previous studies comprising of 13-items. All items were measured based on Likert scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree. Participants in the study were asked to recall and evaluate their level of trust and the government online crisis communication (GOCC) through the Ministry of Finance social media. The questionnaire was structured into four parts. Part I is Personal Information, Part II Public Trust Part III Social Media Characteristics and Part IV Government Online Crisis Communication. Prior to the actual study, a pilot study was conducted for validity and reliability of the constructs. The results show all items have a factor loading above .5 and reliability above .7 which was acceptable for newly developed instruments [39].

### 4.4 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were randomly distributed among the public university students through google form. Participants were advised to read through the invitation letter which was placed at the beginning of the survey. The invitation letter outlined the research process, solicited voluntary participation, and assured confidentiality. In this study, participant measures their perceptions based on the three constructs by relating to their prior knowledge or experience in dealing with the financial crisis following the outbreak.



## 5 Findings and Discussion

A total of 373 respondents participated in the survey. Since google form was set not to permit respondent to skip any question, thus, this study does not have any missing data which allows for preliminary data analysis to be conducted. Out of 373 participants, 254 (68.1%) are female and the remaining 119 (33.9%) are male students. Majority of the respondents are between 21–23 years old (201, 54%), while the rest of the respondents' aged between 24 to 3 years old. A total of 295 (79.1%) of the respondents are undergraduates, while the remaining 21.9% are postgraduate students. Northern region caters for the majority of respondents with 240 (64.3%), followed by Central region, 70 (18.8%) and the remaining are from Sabah and Sarawak accordingly. A total of 347 (93%) of the respondents are full time students while 26 (7%) are studying part time.

Based on the preliminary analysis, statistical analysis of the study was conducted using SPSS for the mean value, standard deviation as well as normality assumption such as skewness and kurtosis as to ensure the sampling distribution of the mean across samples is normal. The results in this study indicated that the standard deviance of the sample data is less than the mean values, which implies that the sample data is more uniform while less dispersed and spread. Table 1 present the skewness and kurtosis for all construct of the study.

Based on Table 1, all value for mean, skewness and kurtosis fell under acceptable ranges of normality assumptions of  $\pm 2.00$  as suggested by scholars [39, 40]. All constructs indicated high degree of reliability with Cronbach alpha exceeded the minimum acceptable level; public trust (.977), government online crisis communication (.963) and social media characteristic (.960). Thus, the study proceeds with the test of hypotheses which results presented in Table 2.

Table 2 indicated that public trust is significantly related to the characteristic of social media used in government online crisis communication ( $\beta = .869$ ,  $\rho < .01$ ).

**Table 1.** Result of Skewness and Kurtosis for all constructs

	N	Mean	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
GOCC	373	3.7678	-.528	.126	.606	.252
PT	373	3.5407	-.713	.126	.402	.252
NS	373	3.6369	-.696	.126	.714	.252

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations and Inter-correlations among the variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
GOCC	3.7678	.67739	1.000	.737	.781
PT	3.5407	.92725	.737	1.000	.869
NS	3.6369	.82971	.781	.869	1.000

Note:  $p < .01$ ,  $n = 373$

The findings also reveal that characteristics of social media is significantly related to government online crisis communication ( $\beta = .781, \rho < .01$ ) and that public trust is significantly related to government online crisis communication ( $\beta = .737, \rho < .01$ ). All three hypotheses are supported.

The findings are consistent with previous findings that public trust and the characteristics of social media influence public perception toward government online crisis communication [20, 24]. This study also supports previous findings by [27, 29] by reaffirming their suggestion on factors constituting to trust on government communication and their origins [41].

The findings have also confirmed the accomplishment of the research objectives as well as validated the conceptual model being proposed in this study. The theoretical implication implies that the network crisis communication with the integration of public trust and characteristic of the social media has extended the framework of the theory. This study offers a practical implication to government to consider including trust and characteristics of the social media in their online crisis communication initiatives.

## 6 Conclusion

This study has certain limitation as it takes into account only youth in the public universities. Working adults or students in private universities may have different views. Also, a mix approach would be useful to obtain a deeper understanding on the findings of this study. Future research is recommended to include interview of focus group discussion with this population focussing on the post pandemic context.

Taking into consideration the current change in the government administration following the general election 15 recently, youth perception maybe shaped by the way they evaluate the content as well as the effectiveness of the crisis messages being received online. Therefore, this study remains significant to understand whether government online crisis communication should focus on the message criteria rather than the medium itself. It is also important to note that these findings would be beneficial to corporate communication professionals to formulate their crisis communication strategies.

As a conclusion, this study offers a new insight toward the way government manages the economic crisis during pandemic from the Malaysian youth perspective. It also set a platform for scholars and practitioners to investigate the communication strategies that would be likely effective for the new millennials.

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