INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON READERS' NARRATIVES

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL

APPROACH

KEVIN KOMORA NDUMARI

RESEARCH SUPERVISOR: Ms CHIOK PHAIK FERN

A RESEARCH PROJECT

SUBMITTED IN

PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE AWARD OF

BACHELOR OF COMMUNICATION (HONS) JOURNALISM

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DECLARATION

I declare that the material contained in this paper is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

Name   : KEVIN KOMORA NDUMARI

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Approval Form

This research paper attached hereto, entitled INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON READERS NARRATIVES AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH prepared and submitted by KEVIN KOMORA NDUMARI in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Communication (Honours) Journalism is hereby accepted.

Date: 9th May 2024

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Supervisor

Supervisor's name

PREFACE

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only been an unprecedented global crisis due to the significant health challenges but also because of the avalanche of misinformation, and fake news surrounding it that influenced perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours of individuals in Malaysia. This study delves into the intricate realm of how fake news related to Covid-19 has impacted the perceptions and beliefs of readers during these uncertain times. By exploring the multifaceted dimensions of misinformation, our aim is to understand the psychological, emotional, and cognitive effects on individuals as they navigate through an overload of information, often conflicting and confusing. This research the author seeks to unravel the following key aspects:

Perceptual Influence: How has exposure to fake news affected individuals understanding of the Covid-19 crisis? What perceptual shifts or biases have emerged due to exposure to misinformation?

Belief Systems: To what extent has fake news influenced the beliefs and attitudes of readers regarding the virus, preventive measures, vaccination, and government interventions?

Emotional Responses: What emotional responses—such as fear, anxiety, trust, or scepticism have arisen from encountering false or misleading information about Covid-19?

Behavioural Implications: How have individuals altered their behaviours or decision-making processes in response to consuming fake news during the pandemic. Ultimately, this research aspires to provide actionable insights to combat misinformation, enhance media literacy, and foster resilience against the detrimental effects of fake news during public health emergencies in a Malaysian context.

ABSTRACT

Misinformation, fear, and anxiety can often lead to emotional and irrational responses during times of crises thus rendering the public to vulnerably engage in implausible conspiracies. This compels the public to give credence to simplistic and unscientific misinterpretations and misconceptions about the origin and remedies of such crises. With a special focus on Malaysia, this paper explores the significant influence of unethical reporting in shaping the audiences' perception during the Covid-19 pandemic between 2019 to 2022. Through extensive qualitative analysis that draws upon insights from media ethics and crisis management, this study will examine real-time case studies and empirical evidence across Malaysia to demonstrate how misinformation through fake news altered the public belief and decision making. Data will be collected from medical practitioners, scientific papers and reader and comparison with the popular public narrative at the pandemic time. This will form a key basis in the study to analyse the reporting and its impact on the readers perception. This study will also delve into the motivations driving the sharing of online fake news during the unparalleled COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative approach the study aims to suggest a tentative guide for truthful and objective crisis reporting and during pandemics by ensuring the sanctity of facts and observing ethical and integrity standards.

Keywords: Fake news, misinformation, disinformation, Covid-19, pandemic, misconceptions., conspiracies, infodemic, narrative, confirmation bias.

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LIST OF ABREVIATIONS

1   World Health Organisation (WHO)

2   Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)

3   Electromagnetic fields (EMFs

4   Movement Control Order (MCO)

5   Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).

NTRODUCTION

1.1Background of Study

The announcement of the detection of the first Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19),

(a novel pneumonia disease believed to have originated in Wuhan) cases in Peninsular Malaysia by then Health Minister Dzulkefly Ahmad on January 25, 2020, marked a sudden change in different aspects of life for Malaysians. The Covid-19 is a respiratory infectious disease caused by the novel pneumonia coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 which was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The virus primarily spread through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks, and could also spread by touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and then touching the face, particularly the mouth, nose, or eyes. It since developed into a global pandemic causing widespread global infections and fatalities.

Like in many other countries, travel, social interaction, healthcare systems to work and supply chains in Malayasia were greatly disrupted due to the closure of interstate borders. A host of several stringent measures to prevent the spread of the of the virus such as mass screening, rapid testing and mass vaccinations were introduced. However, as result of the rapid rise in the number of infections Malaysia experienced the first wave of Covid-19 cases by late February 2020. Therefore, the beginning of the second wave in early March called for further response, which led the government to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) effective on March 18. On the other hand, the local mass media also played an active role in ensuring people observed the outlined standard operating procedures (SOP) such as promoting, regular handwashing practices and #stayhome to encourage compliance with the aim of breaking the chain of Covid-19 transmission.

Additionally, various other initiatives were undertaken by the government to ensure the spread of infections was controlled were also introduced during the same period. However, as efforts to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus intensified, the spread of Covid -19 fake news became uncontrollable. Conspiracies and misinformation about the pandemic became common among the public thanks to the media.

This was partly because the social media became the go to place to seek information and pass time given that the pandemic caused health anxiety and information hunger. As such, the rate of fake news proliferation shot up as many people sought information regarding how the pandemic could be prevented or treated (Taylor, 2019). Misinformation across social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok led to a significant challenge in controlling the infiltration of fake news, therefore, causing detrimental effects on various aspects of the country's effort to fight against Covid-19 as misinformation spread at a much faster rate than the truth (Depoux, et al 2020). For instance, social cohesion, national security, and public health efforts were derailed as misinformation contributed to vaccine hesitancy and apathy in some sections of the public, therefore, resulting in delays carrying out mass vaccinations and testing (Izugbara & Obiyan, 2020). On the other hand, the absence of clear, timely information from governmental sources exacerbated the problem, hindering the individual ability to make informed health decisions such as which vaccine to prefer depending on the availability (Gray, 2020). As a result, Malaysians experienced pressing need for reassurance and safety which made them easily susceptible to misinformation if it appeared to offer answers (Douglas et.al, 2020). It is from this kind of misinformation that the public formed their own preconceived narratives of the Covid-19 pandemic that sometimes were untrue.

While the mainstream media generally ought to exercise factual reporting, ethical crisis reporting was sometimes not adhered to, thereby, leading to further distortion of facts which consequently contributed to the emergence of inaccurate narratives. For instance, some people held the belief that the pandemic was aim at enforcing mass vaccinations or that vaccines could alter genetic composition.

Additionally, there were myths circulating, such as the idea that Covid-19 could be treated with homemade remedies or by avoiding hospitals and health facilities to reduce the risk of contracting the virus.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although, it is evident that Covid-19 fake news affected readers by making them alter some of their behaviours and practices or choices, there has been limited studies revealing the true extent to which fake news led readers to alter several of their health-related choices, interaction behaviours, their trust in mainstream media as well as public health institutions.

1.3 Research Objectives

Therefore, based on the occurrences and experiences of readers during the pandemic, this study endeavours to determine objective to determine the influence of fake news on the perceptions, beliefs, emotions & behaviours of regular news readers in Malaysia during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study will also determine how the exposure to misinformation influenced the readers' trust in the media, public health policies, public health institutions such as the ministry of health (MoH) as well as the participants perception on the conventional measures of preventing the pandemic.

1.4 Research Questions

a) What is and what constituted fake news with a focus on the Covid-19 pandemic.

b) How did Covid-19 fake news change the daily choices and practices of readers such as in healthcare and vaccine preferences.

c) How did misinformation impact the participants' trust in media sources and the perceptions of the accuracy of information?

1.4 Research Significance

Through a comprehensive phenomenological analysis this study will proposes mitigation strategies and develop recommendations aimed at countering misinformation, foster media literacy and factchecking initiatives that will create a more informed and resilient society in case of future misinformation or fake news crises.

Additionally, the study will also provide insights to media practitioners on how misinformation can create a psychological restlessness in readers therefore, prompting the need for objective and factual crisis reporting practices in order to remain credible.

As a phenomenological study, the expected outcomes seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of how fake news shapes readers perceptions, emotions, behaviours, and trust levels during the Covid-19 pandemic, which will be key in deducing solutions to the psychological impact that readers underwent at a time of high anxiety and uncertainty as posed by the fear of the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the degree of the fake news crisis, Malaysia did not only suffer the Covid-19 pandemic but also the Covid-19 Infodemic as well. With the proliferation of inaccurate information in the public at such high levels, the impact on public response behaviours of the people could not be overlooked.

2.1 Fake News

Although Fake News is often rendered as a subjective idea; meaning it mainly depends on the circumstance or context with which it happens, it can scientifically be defined as deliberately fabricated or misleading information presented as legitimate news which often involves distorted facts or misinformation that has an intention to deceive or manipulate the audience for various purposes such as political gain, financial profit, or ideological influence (Kai Shu et al., 2017). However, in a more conclusive description of fake news, in their book "Defining "fake news": A typology of scholarly definitions," Tandoc et al. 2018, add that fake news can encompass a wide range of misleading content which including fabricated stories, sensationalized headlines, manipulated images, and misleading. On other hand, (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) further argued that the rise of digital media and social platforms have been a huge accelerator of the spread of fake news.

Most notably, fake news is categorised into three main stages which include fake news stimuli, fake news actions, and fake news outcomes. According to Seidel et al., 2013, fake news stimuli are the core driving factors that trigger the disseminator to spread misinformation whereas fake news actions involve all the actions and counter measures undertaken to address fake news while the outcomes refer to the impact of fake news on the audience. Additionally, Lazer et al., 2018, adds that, one of the defining characteristics of fake news is its propensity for sensationalism,

which often uses emotionally charged language to attract attention and elicit strong reactions from readers.

As such, fake news often tends to be a confirmation of bias that reinforces preexisting beliefs rather than presenting objective information (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Fake news has taken different forms over the centuries occurring during of national crises, disasters, or global events like wars. In ancient societies fake news normally took the form of propaganda or spin to exploit the emotions of fear and anxiety of the public by authorities to either get the public support to certain actions or to offer false reassurances to the public.

2.2 Understanding the Covid-19 Infodemic

According to the World Health Organisation, (WHO) an 'Infodemic' is an excessive amount of information which consist of inaccuracies that make it difficult for the public to obtain meaningful and reliable information when it is required (WHO, 2020). As such, the Covid-19 infodemic was characterized by rapid dissemination of unprecedented volumes of misinformation, rumours, and conspiracy theories, facilitated by social media platforms among other online communication channels (Cinelli et al., 2020). It is undeniable that the Covid-19 infodemic had far-reaching consequences both locally and globally, for instance, the most notable effects were swaying of public opinion, influencing behavioural changes among the public, and damaging public trust in healthcare institutions. Therefore, making it more difficult for authorities to disseminate accurate information and implement effective public health measures (Zarocostas, 2020). Following these developments many governments had to introduce measures to combat the infodemic some of which included initiatives to promote media literacy and fact-checking.

Beside governments, some public health organizations, and social media companies also collaborated to identify and remove false information from online platforms although on a small scale and unsuccessful at times.

Like in many other countries the situation was no different in Malaysia. In Malaysia, social media platforms and messaging apps played a key role in the spread of fake news on the whole. Numerous false claims about the origins and transmission of the virus to unproven treatments and conspiracies about its causes and spread were common. Therefore, leading to confusion, fear, and mistrust towards the media. These unverified Covid-19 narratives included the false belief that the Covid-19 virus was intentionally engineered in a laboratory as a biological weapon (Cheah et al., 2021) which fuelled suspicions regarding the origins of the virus.

Additionally, conspiracy theories linking 5G technology to the spread of Covid-19 also gained traction despite lack of scientific evidence (Seetharaman, 2020). Some individuals falsely claimed that 5G technology was responsible for transmitting the virus or causing Covid-19 symptoms, leading to concerns and misinformation about the safety of telecommunications infrastructure.

In another case that happened on March 28th, 2020, the public was shocked by reports of a suicide incident at Serdang Hospital, with rumours suggesting that a patient took their own life after testing positive for Covid-19. However, subsequent clarification from the Ministry of Health revealed that the information was untrue (Astro Awani, 2020). Among other widely circulated pieces of misinformation involved claims that the then Minister for Health, Khairy Jamaluddin, had not been vaccinated despite actively advocating for mass vaccination of the public. However, this claim was debunked when it was revealed that Khairy Jamaluddin had indeed received the vaccine, with the moment captured on live television (Wong, 2022). In

October 2021, another incident surfaced on Twitter involving a user identified as @khalids, who shared a video claiming the deaths of several schoolteachers after receiving vaccinations. However, the Malay Mail reported that the Ministry of Health had not fully confirmed these allegations at the time (Malay Mail, 2021).

Meanwhile, a considerable portion of the Malaysian population opted against receiving the vaccine or visiting healthcare facilities due to rumours suggesting that hospitals and similar facilities could serve as easy points of Covid-19 transmission, akin to quarantine centres. Conversely, the then Minister of Health, Dr. Adham Baba, faced criticism for promoting false information by suggesting on a televised interview on TV1 that consuming warm water could prevent COVID-19 (MalaysiaKini, 2020). Moreover, the narrative surrounding the origin of Covid-19 as a bioweapon suggested that the virus was intentionally manufactured in a laboratory as a deliberate biological weapon. This theory posits that the virus was engineered rather than arising naturally, exacerbating extensive misinformation and conspiracy theories regarding its inception. (Srivastava, 2021)

2.3 Popular Narratives among the Public

In this context, narratives refer to the overarching message that is constructed to convey a particular perspective that was often based on false information and designed to shape the audience's perception of the Covid-19 pandemic (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)

Narratives often involve the selective use of facts, framing of issues, and the omission of crucial information to support a biased or misleading interpretation of events. Through constant exposure and influence to such kind of misinformation and fake news, readers tend to construct their own understanding of the reality around them through these narratives that shape their beliefs and actions (Bruner, 1990).

As such, fake news often leverages on powerful narratives, exploiting emotions, anxieties, and pre-existing biases to gain traction and influence individual interpretations (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The following are some of the narratives that popular in circulation in Malaysia.

2.3.1 *The 5G conspiracy theory*

The 5G Covid-19 narrative in Malaysia were part of a global phenomenon that linked the rollout of 5G technology to the spread of the virus. One of the main claims was that the electromagnetic fields (EMFs) emitted by 5G technology weakened the immune system thus, aiding the transmission of Covid-19 making individuals more susceptible to the virus. The narrative gained traction through misinformation spread on social media and led to several incidents of vandalism against 5G infrastructure in Malaysia, including the burning of 5G towers (Chong, 2020). It also contributed to public fear and confusion surrounding the pandemic, making it more challenging for health authorities to disseminate accurate information and control the spread of the virus. Despite the widespread debunking of this narrative by health experts and regulatory bodies, it continued to circulate online, highlighting the challenges posed by misinformation in the digital age.

2.3.2 *Scientifically prevention alternatives*

This narrative involved various misleading claims about supposed cures and prevention methods for the virus. It suggested that drinking bleach, consuming certain herbs, concussions, or spices, and using essential oils would prevent one from contracting the virus (The Star, 2020). The viral nature on the social media platforms allowed the misinformation to reach a wide audience, leading to confusion and potentially harmful choices that exposed part of the public to health risks. For example, bleach is proven to lead to poisoning and severe health complications.

2.3.3 *Blaming of other ethnic groups.*

In April 2020, The Star newspaper reference one of the most controversial and discriminatory narrative that sought to inflict blame onto specific ethnic groups for spreading the virus, therefore, pausing a great threat to social harmony between the different ethnic groups in the country (The Star, 2020). Although, the claims were proven to be baseless it later emerged that some of sections of the public actually bought into the claims leading to stigmatization and marginalization of certain communities. By unfairly targeting specific ethnic groups, the unity and solidarity needed to effectively combat the pandemic was greatly and undermined.

2.3.4 *Vaccine impact on reproductive health*

Another prominent narrative that was not popular in Malaysia but globally too was the claim that COVID-19 vaccines could impact fertility of individuals upon taking them despite, there being no conclusive scientific evidence according to an article in The Star newspaper; "Covid-19 vaccine: No evidence it causes infertility, say health experts," (Lim, 2021). However, the narrative gained popularity, particularly among those already who were sceptical about vaccines. The fear that vaccination could lead to infertility caused some individuals to question the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines, leading to high rates of vaccine apathy in the country.

2.3.5 *Gene altering ability of vaccines.*

Another assertion is that certain mRNA vaccines had the ability to alter the patient's genetic composition and properties (Kaur, 2021). And just like the other conspiracy narratives on fertility narrative, it increased fear and scepticisms despite government efforts to debunked.

2.4 Government policy intervention

As misinformation spread rapidly, the Malaysian government implemented several policy interventions and measures to combat the infodemic including the introduction of legal penalties for any person found spreading false information related to COVID-19, crackdowns on fake news propagators and the popular anti-fake news law ordinance. Although it was popular, the anti-fake news law was dimmed largely controversial between it lacked a concise elaboration and differentiation of what was considered fake news from what was not. The Anti-Fake News Act was initially introduced in 2018 and then repealed in 2019. However, during the height of COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian government under the leadership of Tan Sri Muhyyidin Yassin took various measures to control misinformation and fake news related to the pandemic. One of the key measures was the use of the Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance 2021, which allowed the government to act against individuals or entities spreading false information related to COVID-19. Under this ordinance, those found guilty of spreading fake news could face fines of up to RM100,000 and imprisonment of up to three years (The Star, 2021). Additionally, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) played also significant role in combating fake news during the pandemic. The MCMC monitored social media platforms and online channels for misinformation and worked to remove false information that could cause public alarm or harm (New Straits Times, 2021). The government also staged a crackdown on six purported fake news disseminators in collaborative efforts with MCMC and the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) through the Cyber Crime Committee to combat the persistent spread of fake news which was dimmed to have a potential to sow confusion and generate conflicts among internet users.

METHODOLOGY

This study has advanced a qualitative approach involving open-ended questionnaire as the main tool of data collection. The process of data collection was be carried out on three designated groups of sources key in this study. The three main groups of sources include regular news readers, practicing journalists and practicing doctors with each group having a separate questionnaire. The Open-ended questionnaire has been an indispensable tool for this study, making it possible to capture rich and nuanced data, explore diverse perspectives, and uncover insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomena of fake news. On the other hand, the study also deploys thematic analysis as a central part of the process of data analysis. Data derived from the open-ended questionnaires have been analysed through the thematic process to draw meaningful themes to build on the study's findings and arguments. Thematic analysis has also been key in organizing the study's complex data, identifying patterns and diverse perspectives. Additionally, all sources were be sampled through purposive sampling strategy to ensure diversity in the participants demographics, such as age, education, media literacy, political affiliation, etc.

3.1 *Research Design*

By utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study adopts a qualitative research design, well-suited for capturing the multifaceted nature of individuals subjective experiences and interpretations. The open-ended questionnaire has been the primary method of data collection, allowing participants to articulate their lived experiences, emotions, and reflections pertaining to their encounters with fake news amidst the Covid-19 crisis. Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse recurring themes and patterns within participants narratives, providing insights into the diverse ways in which fake news impacted reader perspectives and behaviours.

Additionally, the phenomenological approach, is aimed at unravelling the lived experiences and perceptions of participants who have encountered fake news amidst the pandemic, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which it shapes their understanding, beliefs, and behaviours of readers. The study anticipates this through altered behaviours, such as caution when sharing information or alteration of online engagement patterns due to concerns about fake news.

3.2 Why Open-ended Questionnaire

Some of the reasons why this study adopts open-ended questionnaire as the main data collection process are listed below.

3.2.1 *Rich data.*

Open-ended questions would allow participants to provide detailed and nuanced responses in their own words. This richness of data facilitates a deeper understanding of participants perspectives, experiences, and emotions towards different aspects being investigated by this study.

3.2.2 *Flexibility.*

Open-ended questionnaires give participants the freedom to express their views without constraints which in turn, encourages exploration of topics that may not have been anticipated by the researcher, leading to unexpected insights.

3.2.3 *Diversity.*

Given the nature of the study open-ended questionnaire offers the ideal tool to collect data without imposing preconceived responses or perspectives, thereby, capturing diverse viewpoints and experiences. It is this inclusivity that has been essential in representing the complexity and diversity of experiences of the different sources.

3.2.4 *Validity and trustworthiness.*

Open-ended questionnaires have also enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of this study by allowing for the triangulation of data from journalist, readers, and doctors perspectives. Therefore, raising the credibility of the study's findings.

3.2.5 *Privacy*

Another reason why this study adopted open-ended questionnaire as a tool of data collection is because questionnaires prioritize creating a safe and non-judgmental space for participants to while they freely express their thoughts and feelings regarding their encounters with fake news at the same time.

3.3 *Why Thematic Analysis*

3.3.1 *Systematic organization.*

Thematic analysis has been central to this study by providing a structured approach to organizing and making sense of the data collected. This approach helped in systematically identifying patterns, themes, and relationships within the data.

3.3.2 *In-depth exploration.*

Thematic analysis has also simplified the process of detailed exploration of the data, uncovering underlying meanings and complexities in the participants' responses. Through iterative coding, theme development, and refinement, thematic analysis has fostered a deep understanding into the experiences and interpretations of the data.

3.3.3 *Integration of multiple perspectives*

Given the diversity of viewpoints and responses from the three different groups of sources, thematic analysis has been ideal in allowing the integration of multiple perspectives within the

data. The ability of this process of analysis to consider divergent or conflicting perspectives has been a key strength to the study.

3.4 Sampling

The study sampled several Malaysian readers, doctors and journalist aged twenty years and above who have been exposed to fake news, interacted with patients exposed to fake news or reported about fake news related to Covid-19 during the pandemic.

The study adopted Purposeful sampling technique to determine the sample size of the study while ensuring diversity in participants demographics, experiences, and levels of exposure to fake news and media literacy levels. The process of recruitment of sources was conducted through various channels, including social media platforms especially (WhatsApp), emailing, in-person approach as well as approach through a second person aiming to reach a broad spectrum of individuals of diverse backgrounds, ages, and genders to capture a wide range of perspectives across board. The target sample size of the study includes 10 regular news readers of diverse local news outlets, 5 journalists from both independent and government owned media and 5 medical practitioners. This brings the total number of sources for the study to twenty participants which the study determines as the data saturation point.

3.5 Data Collection

Taking into account the needs and requirements of this study the data collection process was executed with the consideration of different factors such as, the different kind of detail required depending on group of sources for instance doctors, journalists and readers. The following are some of the steps the study undertook to carried out the data collection process.

3.5.1Development of open-ended questionnaires.

Open-ended questionnaires designated for readers, journalists and doctors were developed separately while guided by key considerations and the study's unique demand of data from each group.

For instance, the estimated aspects of emotional impact of fake news such as declined trust in the media and public institution were far more likely to manifest among readers than among journalists or doctors. As such, the questionnaires were developed to deeply explore this aspect in among readers than in among journalist and doctors. However, there were a few common questions featured across all three questionnaires, this suggests that the questions carried data that was relevant and worthy getting the perspective of each of the participants of the study.

Therefore, although these kinds of questions had a similar aim, the participant's diverse perspective and viewpoints was what the study was looking for. An example such questions included questions that asked participants of their recommendation to ways of combating fake news. Generally, the questions, contained in all three questionnaires were guided by the primary Research objectives outlined in this study which is to primarily seeks to unravel the following key aspects, perceptual influence of fake news on readers, changes in belief systems among readers, emotional responses of readers and behavioural implications as a result of exposure to fake news.

3.6 *Pilot Tests*

After the development of the questionnaire and prior to the data collection, all three questionnaires were handed out to separate pairs of readers, journalists, and clinicians to run a pilot test of the questionnaires. It was key to perform the pilot test for the following purposes:

3.6.1 *Identifying flaws.*

The test helped identify potential errors, repetition and ambiguities in the questions, methodology, or detect and address unforeseen logistical, technical problems before the main study began.

3.6.2 *Refining procedures.*

It helped refine and optimize study procedures, such as data collection protocols, questionnaire design, and questions structures and techniques which would enhance validity and reliability of the study.

3.6.3 *Testing feasibility.*

The test also helped assess the feasibility of the research plan in terms of time, resources, and participant recruitment as well as the practicality of the proposed study procedure.

3.6.4. *Recruitment of participants.*

The step mainly involved reaching out to potential and willing participants to be sources of data to this study. The exercise of recruiting participants involved three main approaches for contacting potential participants through various channels such as Microsoft Teams and social media like WhatsApp, Instagram. Apart from social media, in-person approach which involve persuading participants to part of this survey as well as recruiting participants through the persuasion of a second person like friends, workmates. Generally, it was quite easy and fast to find and recruit readers than it was with the other groups, above all, participants were recruited based on their willingness to participate and their experiences with fake news.

3.6.5 *Process of data collection.*

The questionnaires were then distributed out in the form of google forms links among all groups of participants to the survey. Each questionnaire had an average of ten questions excluding demographic and essential information questions and was estimated to take participants an average of twenty minutes to complete. However, participants were allowed up to a period of three weeks which the perceived to be ample to source sufficient information for the study. However, regular reminders to would be sent to participants who seemed to take longer than usual to respond. After just over three weeks all response scripts had been collected which involves downloading from the drive, after which the process of verification and compiling of scripts (electronic scripts) began.

This stage mainly involved cross-checking individual scripts for any missing particulars or essential information, sorting all individual scripts into their respective groups, and reviewing them to check whether all questions were responded to. Once sorting and grouping ended separate filing to avoid duplicates and ensure order among scripts.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data from the survey was then be analysed using the thematic analysis of qualitative research. The Thematic analysis approach, followed a six-phase process of identifying patterns and themes within the data to gain insights, coding, and reviewing themes and interpretation of various themes etc.

3.7.1 *Thematic analysis process.*

The following is the six-phase process of thematic analysis as outlined in Using thematic analysis in psychology; Qualitative Research in Psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

3.7.2 *Familiarization with the data*

This stage was key to gain a deep understanding of the data through by self-immersing in the data to gain a deep and holistic understanding of its content. As such this process involved reading and re-reading through the data transcripts to become familiar with the breadth and depth of the information collected.

This stage was crucial to the study as it helped to archive the following: -

• Develop a sense of understanding the overall context and scope of the information.

• Identify key recurring ideas, concepts and patterns within the data which were important to lay the groundwork for developing themes later in the analysis.

• Engage with the data objectively without any preconceived notions or biases to allow for absorption of raw insights.

• Although it's not in the primary focus of this stage, it was possible to start deducing the initial codes or labels that summarize and describe portions of the data.

3.7.3 *Generating initial codes.*

This stage involved keen analysis of the data to identify and label meaningful segments with codes were key in developing the themes in the latter stages of the study. Precisely, the initial codes we created by systematically breaking down the data into smaller meaningful and manageable units and assigning brief descriptive labels to these units. The following are some of the preliminary initial codes generated; -

a. Misinformation Sources

• Social media platforms

• Messaging apps

• Online news websites

• Traditional media sources

b. Types of Fake News

• False cures and prevention methods

• Blaming ethnic groups for the spread of COVID-19

• Conspiracy theories about 5G technology and COVID-19

c. Emotional Responses

• Fear

• Anger

• Confusion

• Anxiety

d. Behavioural Changes

• Changes in information-seeking behaviour

• Changes in social interactions

• Changes in health-related behaviours

e. Trust in Information Sources

• Trust in government health agencies

• Trust in mainstream media

• Trust in social media influencers

f. Impact on Perceptions

• Perceptions of COVID-19 severity

• Perceptions of government response to the pandemic

• Perceptions of personal risk

Although the initial codes provide a starting point for organizing and analysing the data it is worth noting that as the analysis of the study progresses the codes may be, filtered, refined, merged with other codes, or expanded to capture a wider range of experiences and perceptions that a related to this study. As such, it was crucial to remain open to new ideas and patterns in the data to allowing for flexibility in coding in case unexpected new themes emerge.

3.7.4 *Searching for themes*.

This step was a key part of the study as it was central to the creation of the themes of the study. While under the universal guidance of the objectives of the study but still open to accommodating new emerging themes, codes were clustered and systematically organized into overarching themes that capture the essence of the data. The main being to create meaningful patterns, concepts, and topics within the data. he main four themes of the study were developed directly in line with the primary research objectives which are.

• Perceptual Influence

• Belief Systems

• Emotional Responses

• Behavioural Implications

• Counter measures to Covid-19

3.7.5 *Reviewing themes.*

The stage of reviewing themes is an iterative process that involves careful examination and evaluation of the themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data and provide meaningful insights into the research question It lays the foundation for the final stages of thematic analysis, including defining and naming themes and writing the report.

The process of reviewing themes involved examining the themes created in the previous stage to ensure they accurately reflect the data and provide meaningful insights into the research question. Individual themes were thoroughly examined in relation to the coded data and the study objectives. Reviewing themes helped achieve the following functions.

• Achieve theme consistency – reviewing the themes ensured that each theme is supported by multiple instances of coded data and that there are no conflicting or contradictory findings within the themes.

• It offered an opportunity to refine or modify themes to better align with the data, as such some themes were merged up together, others split or revised in wording to better reflect the participants response.

• Get rid of any bias or preconceived ideas through critically evaluating the themes and considering alternative interpretations of the data.

• Considering theoretical frameworks or concepts that may help to explain further or contextualize the themes. This was done through relating the themes to existing theories or concepts in the literature to enhance the understanding of the data.

       3.7.6 *Defining and describing of themes.*

This stage largely involved developing clear and precise definitions and meaningful descriptions of the reviewed themes to clearly articulate the meaning behind each individual theme based on the data as it would help to ensure that the themes are clearly defined and named for reference during the coding process. Additionally, it would ensure that the themes are distinct and do not overlap as well as ensuring clarity and precision.

3.8 Coding process

In thematic analysis, qualitative coding refers to the process of categorizing data into meaningful units based on similarities, differences, and patterns.

It involves systematically assigning descriptive labels or codes to segments of data, such as interview transcripts or field notes, to identify key ideas, concepts, or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding also helps to make sense of the data and develop meaningful interpretations. In an effort to simplify the coding process and reduce errors the study adopted the usage of the Nvivo 14 software which a qualitative data analysis tool that analyses and visualises unstructured text, audio transcripts, including but not limited to interviews, in-depth interview,

focus groups discussions, surveys and web content. The following is a concise overview of the of the coding process as adopted by this study.

3.8.1 *Data importation.*

The initial step would import all the data transcripts into the software and creating respective folders within the software for instance "interview scripts" to ensure clarity and organized work.

3.8.2 *Generation of codes.*

At this stage the process of coding begins by selecting sections of text or other data and assigning descriptive labels or codes to them. However, it is worth noting that this step can be done manually or using NVivos automated coding features. As such, in this case this step involved transferring and keying-in the codes developed earlier.

3.8.3 *Organization of codes.*

All codes were then organized into a coding structure that reflected the primary research objectives. This was done through creation of parent codes (themes) and child codes (sub-themes) to categorize your data.

3.8.4 *Coding of data.*

Begin coding by selecting a segment of text in your data and assigning it to one or more nodes. You can do this by right-clicking on the interviewee's response or selected text and choosing the corresponding code on the "Codes" section.

This process would be repeated for each segment of text you want to code. Additionally, the study adopted the same coding principles consistently across the entire data to ensure reliability and consistency in the coding process.

3.8.5 *Reviewing of codes.*

When coding was done, a review of all the codes by revising and refining codes based on the data content to enhance accuracy and consistency.

3.8.6 *Theme development.*

This stage mainly involved identifying overarching themes that emerge from the coded data. Additionally, this process of developing themes was guided by the research questions and objective stated at the outset of this study. However, new themes that were unexpectedly present in the data and that which captured the main ideas and concepts of the study were not left out.

3.8.7 *Data visualization.*

Using NVivos query and visualization tools such as the frequency charts, word cloud, hierarchy charts, pie charts, and comparison diagrams data was explored and patterns and relationships between the data were easily identified. This stage also involved reviewing coded data to ensure accuracy and consistency.

3.8.8 *Data exportation.*

This is the final stage. it involves exporting or transferring the code book (which contains all the coded data) and the visuals from the software.

FINDING AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Overview of Participants

This study involved twenty participants who were sampled based on their experiences with encountering fake news related to Covid-19 and its impact in Malaysia. The participants were of diverse backgrounds and ages, providing a range of perspectives on the impact of fake news. However, the twenty were divided in three groups of readers, doctors and journalist in a ratio of 2:1:1 respectfully.

4.2 Findings

Through thematic analysis of the data, several key themes, sub-themes and terms emerged to be common across the scripts of all the three groups of sources.

      4.2.1 *Popular terminologies.*

This includes terminologies related to this study that had the most frequent number of appearances in the responses of participants of the study. They represent a highlight of the common idea related to the subject the study present or experienced by most of the participants. For instance, the study found out that the most participants expressed common terminologies in their responses such as *fake Covid-19 news*, *misinformation*, *influence*, *patients* etc These words serve as indicators of the primary topics explored in the study, such as the prevalence of misinformation, its sources, vaccines its effects on readers, and strategies to combat it.

Fig 1.4. Word frequency

4.2.2 *Popular themes.*

On the other hand, the after rigorous analysis and evaluation of the responses and perceptions through the coding process the study found the following themes to be the most common and frequently exhibited in the responses of the participants of this study. The following is a list of the themes with their description in figure 1.4

Behavioural Implications & Coping mechanisms

Change in Belief Systems

Emotional Response

Perceptual Influence on readers

Covid-19 counter Measures.

Theme	Description
Behavioural Implications & Coping mechanisms	This theme encompassed all codes that assessed the following: • How fake news affected the participants' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about Covid-19.It examined changes in risk perception, trust in authorities, or conspiracy beliefs. • Whether the exposure to fake news influenced the participant's behaviours related to Covid-19 prevention, such as mask-wearing, social distancing, or vaccination uptake. • Examine strategies individuals use to verify the accuracy of information, such as fact-checking websites, consulting multiple sources, or seeking information from trusted authorities. (coping mechanisms)
Change in Belief Systems	• Assessed the participants' initial beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about Covid-19, public health measures, government responses, and trust in institutions. • Investigated how social networks, peer influence, and group dynamics shaped individuals' susceptibility to and acceptance of fake news. (Social influence) • Assessed how demographic factors (e.g., age, education, political ideology), prior beliefs, and cultural context moderate individuals' susceptibility to fake news and their subsequent belief changes.
Emotional Responses	• Investigate how exposure to fake news about Covid-19 contributes to feelings of fear and anxiety among readers. This could include sensationalized reports of infection rates, mortality statistics, or misleading information about the efficacy of preventive measures. (Fear and Anxiety)

Theme	Description
	• Explore instances where fake news incites anger or frustration, such as misinformation about government responses, perceived injustices, or conspiracy theories blaming specific groups for the pandemic. (Anger and Frustration) • Analyses how contradictory or misleading information leads to confusion and uncertainty among readers, impacting their ability to make informed decisions about their health and safety. (Confusion and Uncertainty) • Source Credibility: It also assessed whether the perceived credibility of the source affects the intensity of emotional reactions. Fake news originating from trusted sources or authoritative figures may elicit stronger emotional responses than content from unknown or fringe sources. • Content Characteristics: The examined how the content, tone, and framing of fake news articles influenced emotional reactions. For example, if sensationalized headlines, alarming imagery, or emotive language heightened emotional responses. •
Perceptual Influence on readers	• Perception of Risk: It examined how exposure to fake news influenced the participants' perceptions of the risk posed by Covid-19. It involved assessing whether misleading or exaggerated information affected the perceptions of the virus's severity, transmission rate, or mortality risk. • Perception of Efficacy: It investigated how fake news regarding preventive measures (e.g., masks, social distancing, vaccines) influenced perceptions of their efficacy. It analysed whether misinformation undermined confidence in public

Theme	Description
	health interventions or promoted ineffective or harmful alternatives. • Perception of Government Response: It assessed how fake news shaped perceptions of government actions and policies related to the pandemic. It included examining whether misinformation fostered distrust in authorities, conspiracy theories about government motives, or perceptions of incompetence in handling the crisis by the Malaysian government. • Confirmation Bias: It explored how participants selectively sought out and interpreted information that aligned with their pre-existing beliefs or biases. It sought to examine whether the exposure to fake news reinforced existing perceptions or led to the rejection of contradictory information or overwrote the truth.
Covid-19 fake news counter Measures	• Government Policies: Investigated how exposure to fake news shaped the participants' perceptions towards government-implemented measures such as lockdowns, movement restrictions, border closures, and economic stimulus packages. • It also assessed whether misinformation influenced attitudes toward the necessity, effectiveness, and fairness of these kind policies. • It also determined the participants' opinions on the measures they would recommend for instance media literacy campaigns, factchecking initiatives, conducting awareness campaigns and debunking misinformation.

Fig 2.4. Table of themes

4.3Theme 1: Behavioural Implications & Coping Mechanisms

    4.3.1 Code 1: vaccine apathy.

Participants expressed a displeasure in taking the widely promoted Covid-19 vaccines. Despite the Ministry of Health Campaign to vaccinate, majority of the participants cited numerous reasons as a result of misinformation raised safety concerns and side effects fears.

    4.3.2 Code 2: increased news fact checking behaviour.

Majority of the participants expressed a changed in how they consumed news from sources such as social media and at times mainstream media. For instance, in a case where they did not carry out proper fact checking, they inadvertently found themselves having to factcheck and verify information instead of taking everything at face value.

    4.3.3 *Code 3: altered social media behaviour.*

Majority of the participants reported heightened scepticism while using social media, others reported spending less time while other actually increased their time spent on time media as coping mechanisms.

4.4 *Theme 2: Change in Belief Systems*

    4.4.1 *Code 1*: *scepticism of Vaccine Effectiveness.*

From the data collected, some of the participant's admitted to have at some point be concerned or had come across other people who questioned the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine.

    4.4.2 *Code 2: Preference for alternative treatments.*

Doctors reported encountering many participants who out of influence would rather prefer alternative treatments or therapies for Covid-19.

4.4.3 *Code 3: Covid-19 misconceptions.*

Participants reported misconceptions about the nature of the virus, its transmission, and its impact on health. For example, they believed that Covid-19 was a hoax or a prearranged scheme for population control.

4.5 *Theme 3: Emotional Response*

4.5.1 *Code 1: Distrust in pharmaceutical companies.*

The findings suggest although the participants were not in full trust with qualified and publicly certified health official, they expressed a sense of distrust in the private pharmaceutical outlets which sometimes have official not publicly certified prescribing alternative remedies for the public.

4.5.2 *Code 2: Declined trust in media.*

Given the proliferation of fake news and conspiracies most of the participants of this study had low trust in the media.

4.5.3 *Code 3: emotional distress: fear and anxiety.*

Majority of participants exhibited emotions of fear and anxiety on many occasions as a result of the pandemic scare and threat of contacting the virus.

4.6 *Theme 4: Perceptual Influence*

4.6.1 *Code 1: confirmation bias.*

Patients exposed to fake news expressed confirmation bias, seeking out information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and dismissing contradictory evidence. This further entrench misinformation and hinder efforts to educate patients about the virus.

4.6.2 *Code 2: perception of risk*

Evidently, fake news distorted individuals perception of the risks associated with Covid-19. For example, sensationalized or false reports may exaggerate the severity of the virus, leading individuals to perceive a higher risk than was actually present.

4.6.3 *Code 3: Perception of credibility of the media.*

Exposure to fake news can impact individuals perceptions of the credibility of different sources of information. Individuals may struggle to discern reliable information from misinformation, leading to confusion and uncertainty.

4.7 Theme 5: Covid-19 Counter Measures

4.7.1 *Code 1: evidence-based reporting.*

Among the most suggested measures to combat fake news in the Malaysian media landscape was that journalists have a duty to practice evidence-based reporting not the least during a time of crisis.

4.7.2 *Code 2: factchecking*

Participants reported that readers have a duty to exercise factchecking of the any information before considering to reshare it to others. This is because it emerged that many readers had the tendency of resharing any news via messaging apps such as WhatsApp which often turned out to rumours.

4.7.3 *Code 3: promoting media literacy.*

Media literacy among readers was reported as a factor of concern to be improved as media literacy was essential in recognizing misinformation and fake news. It also equips individuals with the skills to fact-check information and verify sources, reducing the spread of false information.

4.8 *Analysis*

Following the findings in this study, it is evident that Covid-19 fake news played had a key impact on the readers view of the pandemic behaviours, perceptions, emotional imbalances as well as their belief systems which culminated into shaping the whole narrative of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.8.1 *Creation of fake news.*

As espoused by (Nickerson, 1998), in the book "Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises," this study concurs that, one of the many triggers of spreading misinformation during a crisis is because many people tend to seek and believe any information that confirms their own existing beliefs or biases as such they tend to share the same information that aligns with their preconceived notions. For an audience, that constantly came across misinformation or fake news (which is likely to spread much faster than factual news), readers in this study reported of subconsciously building preconceived perceptions of the pandemic which tended to overwrite the external opinion at time. However, given the diversity of the participants, "Confirmation bias" could not be the sole reason for them sharing fake information. As such, the study also unravelled that lack of media literacy among readers played a key role too. Although, the media literacy levels varied in value across the participants, it is evident that a significant number had very minimal to only average levels. Therefore, majority of the participants were not proficient enough in evaluating the credibility of information. The lack of critical thinking skills then made people more susceptible to falling for false information more regularly (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017).
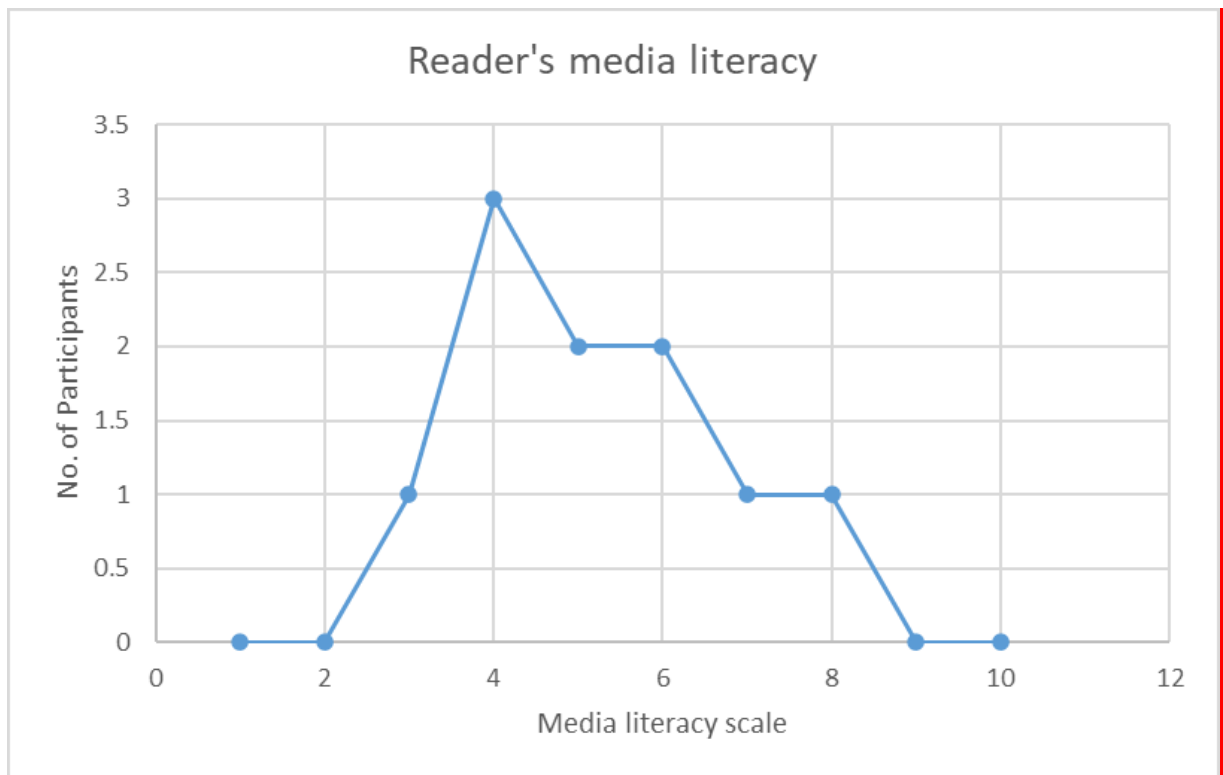
Fig.4.01: A graph representing the levels of media literacy of readers.

4.8.2   *Amplification and circulation.*

The study also found that social media platforms had a greater role in disseminating Covid-19 misinformation, therefore, acted as a fanning tool.

As argued earlier in this report, at a time when movement of people across Malaysia was restricted and the pandemic scare cause high tension and anxiety, social media and messaging platforms were the leading go to platforms to share personal opinion and access information that was not in the mainstream media. Majority, of the participants reported to encountering misinformation on social media groups and communities where which shared Covid-19 information that was unverified to a wide audience.

Some of the reasons why it was easy to spread misinformation is lack of robust content moderation in digital platforms as well as the fact that some messaging apps such as WhatsApp, are popular among older populations who may be less digitally literate and more susceptible to believing and sharing fake news.
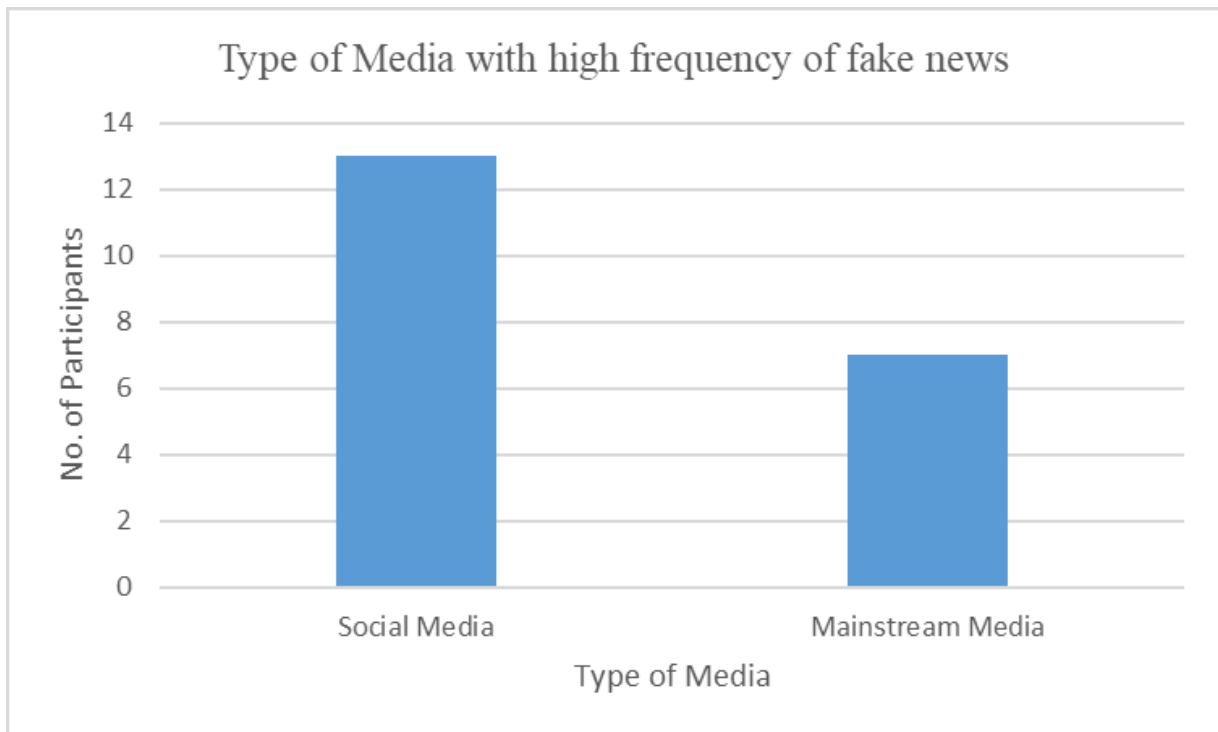
Figure 4.02: A bar graph showing the type of media with the highest frequency of fake news according to participants of the study.

4.8.2 *Consumption of fake news.*

Besides the mechanisms of creating and sharing COVID-19 misinformation, the motivations of fake news consumption by the readers was also an aspect of concern to the study. The study revealed among the key reason cited by participants as consumption out of fear and anxiety.

This was often caused by the sensationalised nature of fake news which normally elicits an emotionally reaction which normally attracts readers seeking entertainment or validation of their emotions. On the other hand, others appeared to consume misinformation out of social influence. This case was mainly common among participants who were part of social media groups or online communities i.e WhatsApp & Facebook communities where they happened to encounter fake news because they see others in their social networks sharing it, leading to a perception that the information is popular or credible just because it being share widely.

4.8.3 *Impact of fake news.*

The study determines that the most notable impact is vaccine apathy although it does not rule out other possibilities. Although it was still scientifically unproven many its narrative gain prominence leading to low numbers in those willing to take the vaccination. As evident in the data collected: Natasha who is journalist, recalls an encounter with some reports that a certain brand of vaccine was pure water that led to patients to resort to other alternatives. "For one, I think there was news about how certain vaccines like Sinovac were just water and it wasn't effective. If I recall, many complained when they received Sinovac instead of other alternatives. There are other examples on this such as people preferring to use home remedies instead of taking the vaccine, and how the govt is using the vaccine as a tracking device," she said. Additionally, the spread of misinformation has led to fear, anxiety, and confusion among the public, affecting their perceptions and behaviour. It has also highlighted the importance of reliable and trustworthy sources of information in times of crisis.

4.8.4 *Remediation and correction*

On the other hand, by analysing the participants responses the study concludes that factchecking and media literacy campaigns to educate the public about literacy and critical thinking could help mitigate the effects of fake news. Some cited that cultivating fact checking habits readers and journalists can play a crucial role in debunking and correcting misinformation.

Figure4.03 below represent the most recommended counter masures to fake new and the spread of misinformation which readers perceived to be effectives in comparison with their experiences or with Covid-19 fake news.
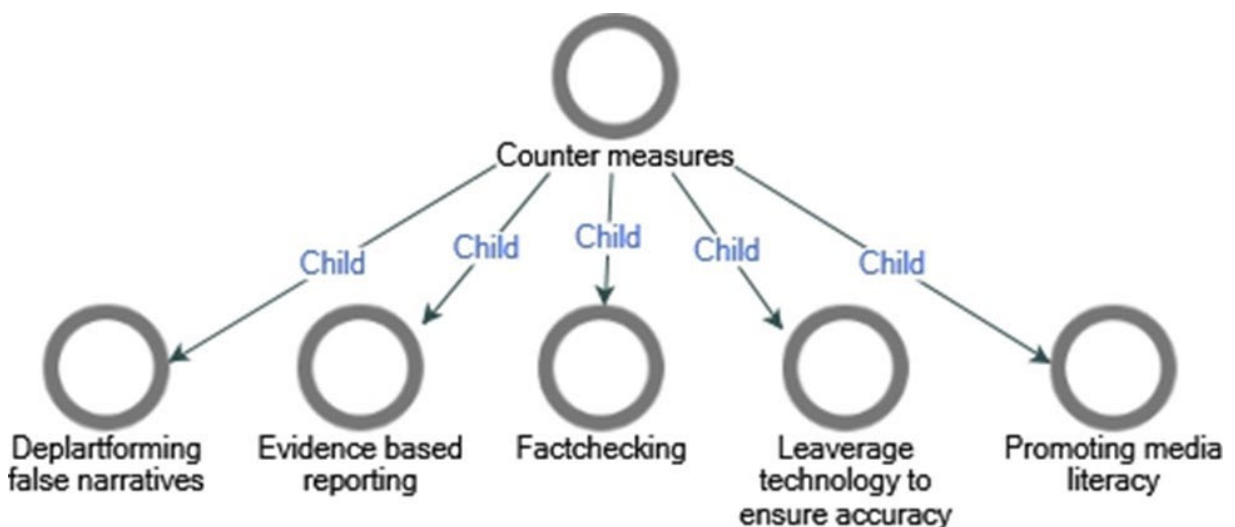
Figure 4.03: A flow chart showing the most suggested counter measure to fake news by participants of the study.

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 *Discussion*

This approach offers a framework for exploring how the participants findings have or can be interpreted to make sense of their experiences of the impact of fake news in the context of this study. As discussed in the analysis, fake news exhibits five distinct stages, it is therefore during these stages that the entire narratives and views of readers gets shaped.
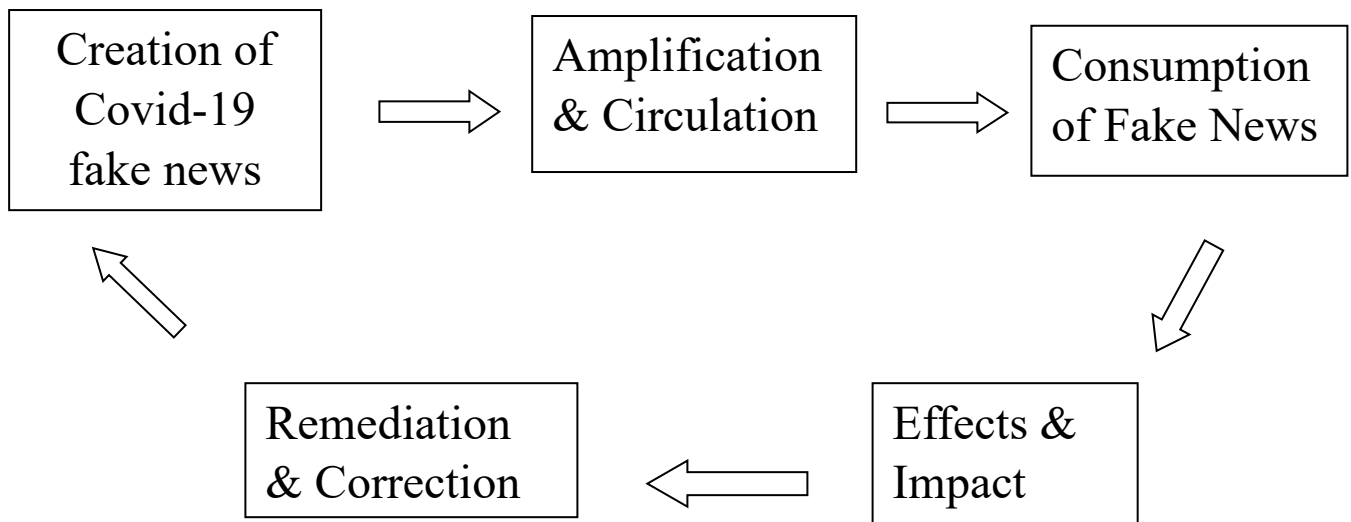
Figure:4.04 The Covid-19 fake news cycle

The study found that social media played a huge role in disseminating fake news as compared to the mainstream media which had a minimal contribution. This is because as previous studies have found that, unlike mainstream media social media is algorithmic driven, therefore, the algorithms are designed to prioritize engaging content, including sensationalized or false information. As such the more algorithmic engagement a piece of information gets the higher the amplification it receives meaning it can reach a wider audience.

This makes the viral spread of fake news on social media platforms is much faster compared to other platforms (Guess et al., 2019). This, therefore, explains how narratives were easily formed and circulated among social media groups and communities during the pandemic.

For instance, one participant in this research said, "*Covid-19 misinformation circulated much faster due to this kind of news spreading in WhatsApp messages, group & forums.*"

This caused an anti- vaccination group to rise out of nowhere, spreading misinformation and discouraging the public from taking the vaccine. This obviously has the profound effect of lengthening the pandemic as herd immunity could not be achieved if people won't receive the vaccine." On the other hand, the study found profound implications of the COVID-19 misinformation on the participants' day to day choices and decisions besides healthcare decisions. For instance, the purchasing behaviour of participants in this study show that it was impacted by misinformation about product shortages or effectiveness of certain products like masks and hand sanitizers. Participants admitted to stockpiling or hoarding large piles of Covid-19 of equipment unlike before. The best example would be the purchase of the special three-ply K95 facemasks which were hailed as the most protective face masks during the pandemic (Guess et al., 2019). Additionally, all participants reported a general alteration of their social interaction habits in the fear of contacting Covid-19 many people had to keep off social gatherings and interaction with others even at the workplaces not to say the least.

Meanwhile, the impact on media credibility has been one to overlook. Like previous studies, this study found significant decline in trust in media credibility. Participants expressed a grim view of most of the information coming out of the media about vaccines, some said sometimes the number of cases felt too high to be true, therefore, increasing the mistrust between media and audience. Nevertheless, studies carried out by the Malaysian Communications and

Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and leading local newspapers suggested a similar phenomenon. In 2020, found that fake news during the Covid-19 pandemic had led to increased mistrust in traditional and social media sources (Bernama, 2020) attributed to constant untrue information coming out of them.

Elsewhere, the New Straits Times paper noted a sense of confusion and doubt among its readers (NST, 2020) while a survey by Al Jazeera showed that fake news tainted the reputation of mainstream media outlets in Malaysia with readers questioning the reliability and accuracy of reporting (Al Jazeera, 2020). As such, the high proliferation of fake news underscored the importance of fact-checking and verifying information before sharing, with organizations like the MCMC and Malaysia Fact Check working to debunk false information (The Star, 2020).

In regard to public health guidelines, doctors in this study reported of several encounters with patients who did not think that some of the Covid-19 measures did much to help. Dr Lim a practicing doctor at Hospital Sultan Aminah, Johor Bahru, said, "It's evident that a section of the public does not buy the idea of social distancing or masking. Of course, there it could be because of various reasons but you can never rule out misinformation among them," he said. In 2020, the New Straits Times and Malay Mail newspapers, reiterated this phenomenon, reporting that a section of the public had been degrading health guidelines or engaging in risky behaviours based on misinformation (Malay Mail, 2020) .

Overall, the study concludes that Covid-19 fake news in Malaysia had a tangible impact on readers adherence to their overall approach to personal safety highlighting the grave importance of accurate and reliable information in public health communication.

5.2 *Conclusion*

The findings in this study reflect the pervasive nature of fake news that took place in Malaysian society that shaped public discourse and decision-making primarily due to confusion, fear, and mistrust among readers, affecting their adherence to health guidelines and overall approach to personal safety. As such in concurrence with the suggested strategies to counter future misinformation the study recommends that beyond on mere factchecking practices at a personal it is vital that initiatives that foster a culture of accountability and transparency both in public discourse and public institutions be promoted in the society. As such, the media as a watchdog in the society needs to extra vigilant is upholding accountability not only fake news matters but overall, as well. Initiatives such as *Sebenarnya.my* which is the countrys official fact -checking portal need to be expanded their reach to have the ability to verify any misleading around social issues, health, politics among other topics.

At the same time, media literacy is among the key components of fighting misinformation in society. While there is easy access of the media in Malaysia the study established that not all participants who interacted with the media are media literate. Therefore, this suggested that given similar case as the during the pandemic it is highly like media illiterate individuals would still be susceptible to misinformation. This, therefore, calls for initiatives that would teach or help Malaysians gain literacy in their usage of the media. Such initiatives can be in the forms of physical campaigns, through media campaigns (Ads), or incorporated in the school system. This would be key to educated Malaysian from a young age to be responsible users of the media and thereby entire society. Furthermore, by empowering individuals to discern credible information from misinformation, we can mitigate the negative effects of fake news and promote a more informed and resilient society. Going forward, it is imperative that stakeholders, including

government agencies, media organizations, and technology companies, work together to address the spread of fake news by upholding the ethics and integrity of information dissemination, for it is only by fostering a culture of truthfulness and accountability, can we better protect the public from the harmful effects of misinformation in case of future challenges.

5.3 Recommendations

a) Given that this kind of study is subject on the researchers' interpretation of the participants views and responses, the author would recommend a larger sample size in order to obtain a true reflection of extent of impact of COVID-19 fake news on the Malaysian society.

b) In order to obtain rich in-depth data insights, the author recommends that future researchers should immerse themselves with the Malaysian society to understand the different cultural practices and beliefs on subjects such as conventional or mainstream ways of medication i.e Western medicine & vaccines compared to cultural ways of medication or alternative ways of medication because some people might have been influenced to keep mainstream medication for cultural treatment.

c) In quest to obtain results that reflect the true reality of the impact of fake news to society, the author recommends that future researchers in this subject designate ample time of not less than six months in order to collect rich and diverse data.

5.4 Study Limitations

5.4.1 *Generalisability.*

Given that this is a phenomenological study the findings are often too context-specific, therefore, generalizing the findings to other populations may not bring out the true scale of the impact of fake news on reader's narratives in those populations.

5.4.2   *Limited scope.*

This study provides insights of the experiences with COVID-19 fake news to the group of twenty participants who are the study's sources. However, it may not wholly capture the broader societal or cultural factors that influence the impact of fake news in Malaysia such cultural beliefs and practices towards conventional Western medicines and vaccines that some people may possess or literacy levels among the different people in the Malaysian society.

5.4.3 *Bias & re-existing assumptions.*

Although the study endeavours to offer an almost true reality, achieving a zero degree of inaccuracy is challenging. This is because it relies heavily on the researchers interpretations and the participants descriptions of their emotions and views. As su ch preconceived bias and assumptions have an equal probability of being carried into the research.

5.4.4 *Time constraints.*

Due to limited time, the study could not accommodate a larger sample size considering that the thematic analysis process, coding, and transcription are highly time consuming. Therefore, dealing with a limited sample size would be more viable in this context.

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