Understanding the Perception and Engagement of the Public on COVID-19 PSAs (Public Service Announcement) During the MCO Period.

Researchers:

1. Dr. Shifa Faizal

2. Dr. Suffian Hadi Ayub

3. Dr. Suhaimee Sahaar@Sabaar

4. Dr. Khairudin Murad

5. Pn. Nurul Hanani Omar

6. Pn. Raja Putri Nadiah

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam

Background

- In Malaysia, PSAs are commonly related with programmes run by the government or voluntary agencies on health issues such as the anti-smoking, obesity, and cancer awareness campaigns, among others.

MAKCIK KIAH & COVID-19

Makcik Kiah's Family & COVID-19

Covid-19: A Perfect Storm

- The changes were so sudden and abrupt, leaving organisations and the public with barely enough time to plan, prepare and implement new setups and arrangements; leaving them to adjust and find alternative approaches (Lohani, 2019).

- In a time of crisis like the current COVID-19 outbreak, PSAs are widely used to disseminate information about the pandemic to the public with the aim to improve the public's awareness, prevention and intervention strategies through the use of mass and digital media.
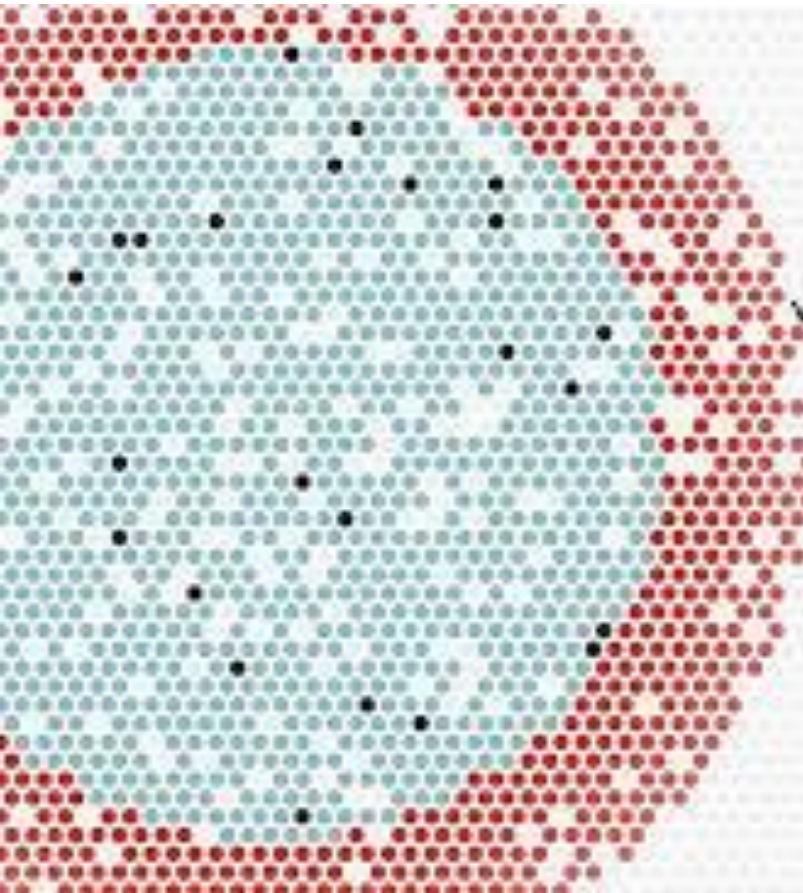
- PSAs on Covid-19 in Malaysia focused on issues concerning the public to increase awareness, knowledge and recommending solutions.

- The messages were tailored to each and every phases of the pandemic. It attempts to persuade public beliefs, attitude, and stimulates positive behavioural changes.

- This research is conducted to understand at the ground level, the perception and acceptance of the society on the PSAs directed at them particularly on COVID-19.

PSAs are not new to us

- Public service announcement (PSA) is an integral communication practice especially for government campaigns focused towards the society.

- In Malaysia, PSAs are commonly related with programmes run by the government or voluntary agencies on health issues such as the anti-smoking, obesity, and cancer awareness campaigns, among others.

- Like the current crisis- the COVID-19 outbreak, PSAs are widely used to improve public's awareness, prevention and intervention strategies through the use of mass and digital media.

- Messages such as frequent hand washing, social distancing and regular sanitisation were the main focus of these PSAs at the initial stage, and later PSAs also focused on vaccination etc.

Image source: https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/july-2020/global-health-coodination-necessary-in-a-pandemic/

The way we use media has changed

The main challenge in our digital society today is the engagement with media and the way media is used to retrieve information and how it impacts the targeted audience.
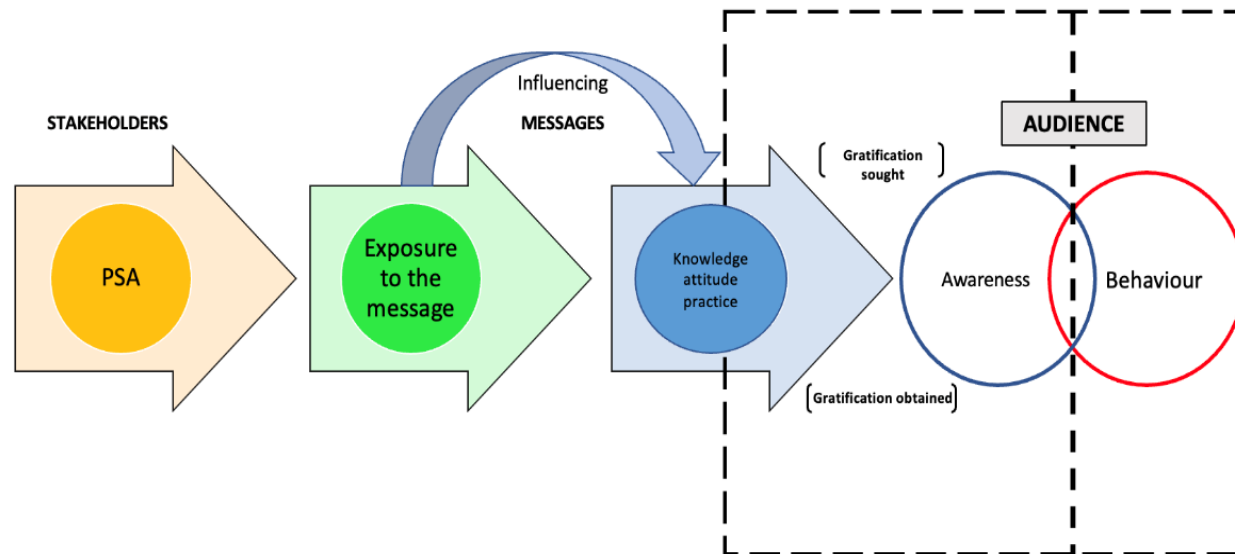
Thus, the role of national agencies such as MCMC is not only to monitor and safeguard people's safety on their media usage and engagement, but also to ensure the health information (in this case on the COVID-19) crafted by the government is disseminated strategically and efficiently.

This study **aimed** to explore and understand the engagement and perception of the public on COVID-19 related PSAs and to better understand whether the approaches used were efficient in delivering the intended message to a multicultural Malaysia, which also includes disadvantaged groups such as children, the disabled and the elderly.
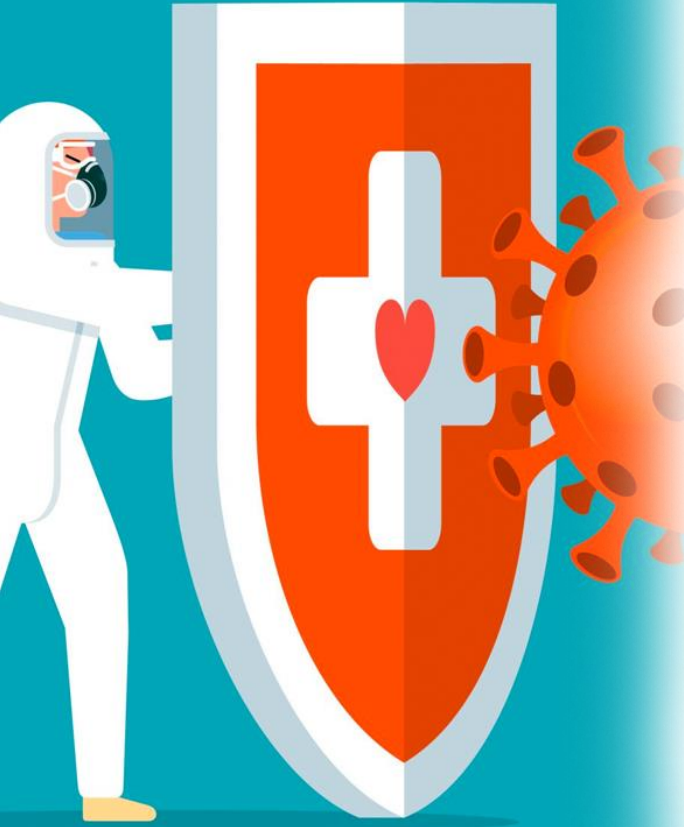
Theoretical Framework

- Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) was the primary tool used to guide this research to fulfil the research objectives. The PSA as a means to disseminate information deliberately creates a vacuum of information to those who are exposed to it. The influencing messages embedded in the PSAs are determined by three factors; knowledge, attitude, and practice (KAP)- are prerequisites for individuals to achieve satisfactory gratification that can then affect their cognitive behaviour from awareness to the modification of that behaviour.

Focus Group Discussion

Informants	Malaysian exposed to the selected PSAs
Number of groups	Four (4) groups, comprising of: 1. Urban - Klang Valley and major towns in Peninsular Malaysia Consist of eight (8) participants- three males and five females 2. Semi-rural – semi-rural towns in Peninsular Malaysia Consist of eight (8) participants- four males and four females. 3. Orang Asli Consist of eight (8) participants- five males and three females 4. Sabah & Sarawak and disable persons For Sabah and Sarawak participants, there were six (6) participants with four males and two females. As for the participants from the disabled-group- 3 male participants.
Group composition	• 6-8 per group • Ages 18 and above (a balance mix of digital natives and digital immigrants) • A good mix of gender (male and female) • A good mix of ethnicities

- The collected data was analysed by using NViVO 12.

- The sessions were conducted online using either Google Meet or Zoom, or even face-to-face interactions at designated venues depending on the COVID-19 situation and as per government regulations.

- All FGD were conducted between December 2021-February 2022.

#SAVE THE W

Findings & Discussion

- The three predetermined themes are:

  i. Public Information Seeking Behaviour
  ii. Perceptions and Indicators of PSA
  iii. Effectiveness of PSA as Communication Platform

- Each of these three predetermined themes resulted in a total of nine sub-themes that further reinforced the findings.

Key Findings of the Study

1. PUBLIC INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

Cognition
- the internet and social media paved the way to the selection of various other media when searching for information.
- The cognitive elements are crucial when searching for information as instrumental and beware surveillance
- Repetitive (contents in the media) would usher in familiarity to the public. This is crucial in ensuring strict adherence to instructions or standard operating procedures (SOPs) by the Ministry of Health, which are reflected in the PSAs.

Internet Usage
- Informants admitted its importance and significance during the pandemic when the government imposed MCO, which hindered them from social outings.

Social Utility
- All informants viewed the finding of information within the spectrum of the internet usage and how it helps them as part of social utility
- The content of the PSAs can be further utilised as engagement tools that serve as conversational catalysts among the public, which then could assist in the awareness on COVID-19 issues at large.

2. PERCEPTIONS & INDICATORS OF PSA

Media Consumption

- Media mix gave them the flexibility in receiving and attaining information.
- The pattern of media consumption among the participants saw a significant inclination towards the internet or digital communication platforms. This pattern can be seen balanced throughout all four FGD participants.
- Participants seemed to agree that the information shared on COVID-19 on the internet, or social media is the fastest and most current (social media, WhatsApp and Telegram was fast and readily accessible).
- Internet was also credited for making TV accessible to everyone regardless of geographical location.
- TV has been noted as an important media platform during the first phase of the MCO. However, as the phases changed and more information was made available on other media and platforms, TV lost some of its prominence. However, some participants agreed that TV is still relevant, especially in informing the mass and to the less tech-savvy people, or people with certain disabilities

Traditional TV

- Traditional TV takes precedent in ensuring authenticity of information during the pandemic. Although television is mostly used as a 'secondary screen' or a tool for background noise, the concept of watching TV is still relevant even with the proliferation of online streaming, and the wide availability of numerous devices.

- The gatekeeper that traditional TV offers sets it apart from information disseminated on the internet and social media, as in the latter two, the gatekeeper's presence is often debated and is considered to be almost non-existent.

- Informants also agreed that the content shown on traditional TV correlates with the importance of the context that they live in.

- Personality and key opinion leaders were mentioned- highlighted on traditional TV could make a good strategy to enhance audiences' confidence. The PSAs could take note of this by selecting appropriate persons to send out the awareness message either to the general population or to specific target audiences.

SMS

Negative

- The use of SMS as a means of reaching out to the masses brought mixed reactions

- The repetition of messages, due to the information flow from various media sources, as well as the backdated content in the SMS has conditioned the participants to ignore or delay reading the SMSs received.

- SMS was also cited as providing conflicting messages with information announced by the government on social media and mass media. This is due to the slow data transfer to the recipients' phones.

Positive

- However, there are quite glaring differences in terms of the acceptance of SMS from the FGD participants. The Orang Asli group as well as participants who travel stated the importance of the SMS messages

3. Effectiveness of PSA as Communication Platform.

Expression

- Media preference and its content have given the informants the ability to connect and express their feelings about MCO and the pandemic in general, either positively or negatively.

- The exposure to effective content that provides an emotional storyline about COVID-19 survivors, experience sharing of the deceased's family members or even the front liners' stories are considered by the informants as an outlet for them to express their feelings over MCO and pandemic in general.

- Expression as prescribed by UGT also denotes the informant's social capacity and how they present themselves online or offline as a result of the exposure of various PSAs. This is where social utility serves as a support system in allowing them to expressively pronounce their experience with the content of the PSAs. Social connectivity also means that it may not necessarily revolve around online presence but also real-life interaction, even during MCO.

PSA Approaches

- When discussing the types of PSA that they expect to watch more, informants suggested creative elements are very crucial in PSAs other than the content itself. The use of animated features, visuals and infographics have been found to be some of the many effective features highlighted in the PSA contents that the informants were able to recall. This is especially true for not only the characters featured in the PSAs, but most pertinently, the message they convey.

- Real-life experience sharing also catches more of the informants' attention. Storylines of COVID-19 survivors, frontliners, or the victims' family members seem to carry a 'hook' element in PSAs and thus engage more audiences- the combination of education and 'dramatic' elements .

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Recommendations

Content & Context

- There must be a strong correlation between content created for the PSA and the context that the intended audiences are familiar with. Important as familiarity will essentially breed holistic understanding of the issues highlighted in the PSAs.

Media selection

- Must be a concerted effort by the content creator to ensure consistent message across platforms.

Creative approaches

- After two years into the pandemic and as COVID-19 moves into the endemic stage, these participants also felt that the creative approach of the PSAs should also take a creative leap.

- Participants were attracted to compelling visuals and audio paired with visceral real-life experiences, emotion-evoking narrative and drama; they are much more effective at grabbing the audience's attention.

Thank you