

Fighting COVID-19 Pandemic: Evaluation of the Government Crisis Communication by Prime Minister of Malaysia

K.C. Low*

School of Government, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.

E-mail: kahchoon@uum.edu.my

S.L. Chong

Independent Researcher, Kedah, Malaysia.

Received September 13, 2021; Accepted December 12, 2021

ISSN: 1735-188X

DOI: 10.14704/WEB/V19I1/WEB19183

Abstract

Malaysia recorded the first case of COVID-19 on the 25th January 2020 and is going through the third wave of this pandemic crisis. By 28th April 2021, the cumulative numbers reported confirmed cases of COVID-19 had reached 401,593 cases including 1,477 deaths. Key leaders such as the Prime Minister were responsible for governing effective crisis communication by giving quick responses on the pandemic situation and ensuring the citizens received and acted on the information provided by the government and other agencies. However, there is no “one size fits all” communication approach and this study attempted to evaluate the crisis communication approaches by the Prime Minister during the pandemic. This study conducted a thematic analysis of the Malaysian Prime Minister’s crisis communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic via the Prime Minister Office's Official Website. The Prime Minister's crisis communication was collected from public speeches and press statements released during March 2020 and June 2021. This study provides insights on the importance of crisis communication by key leaders to inspire public confidence and suggest future approaches to government crisis communication for social well-being.

Keywords

COVID-19, Government Crisis Communication, Prime Minister, Governance, Media.

Introduction

Crises referred to the difficult or dangerous point in a situation (Boin, Stern, & Sundelius, 2016). The term crisis was related to a threat that exists in one way to another (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). In academic discourse, crisis related to a temporal slice of process and usually linked to the term of crisis management that emphasizes the elements of

vulnerability, risks, threat, trigger, process, response and outcome (Boin et al., 2016). Crisis researchers were interested in exploring issues related to the crisis, emphasizing the roles and responsibilities of actors in managing the incident. Covid-19 pandemic was a global crisis because it has created harm on human health, impact on economic and posted political and social challenges to the world. The pandemic hit was an unstructured event and required instant actions to prevent and reduce the negative impact. Leaders were the key to take the roles and responsibilities to address threats and helped to avert the danger with minimised harm and chart a path to safety.

Public leaders played important roles in shaping citizens' perception of risk, framing the picture of the situation and conveying the action plan of managing the public crisis (Malecki, Keating, & Safdar, 2021). The influence of the public leaders on citizens was substantial particularly in the time of the pandemic. A leader's public speeches and statements influenced citizens' sense-making through illustrating the problems, conveying the remedies to the problems and guiding citizens' interpretation and understanding of the nature and implications of the crisis (Sobral, Carvalho, Łagowska, Furtado, & Grobman, 2020). In times of emergency, effective crisis communication of public leaders helped to reduce uncertainty, attracted citizens' trust in government and improved compliances with government enforcement (Wong & Jensen, 2020). In contrast, if a leader failed to communicate effectively with the citizens, it could cause the people to underestimate risks and thus resulted reduced in their compliance with government enforcement.

As of 30th May 2021, Malaysia recorded the highest Covid-19 infected cases at 9,020 positive cases, with 98 deaths and 844 patients in the intensive care unit (Loo & Letchumanan, 2021). The pandemic outbreak caused Malaysia's healthcare system at breaking points and the intensive care units are operating at almost full capacity (Lee & Jung, 2021). The current situation is different compared to the first outbreak in Malaysia in March 2020. Despite the closure of major economic activities in this current time, the infected cases were not reduced as expected. Public attitude and trust towards the government from the first outbreak in March 2020 was high and later sinking when the cases rose. Explicitly, the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* (failed government) was tagged on Twitter showed a hint that the current government was losing public trust in their effort in managing the pandemic (Malaysiakini, 2021).

Covid-19 crisis brought unprecedented chaos and brought tremendous challenges to policymakers around the world. Ambiguity and uncertainty of the current situation caused the crisis management to be overwhelmed compared to other crises before. Limited information regarding the virus and changing variants of virus type caused difficulties in

monitoring and contained the virus spread. From the outbreak until now, the public did not see how this pandemic is coming to an end or at least controllable. Therefore, crisis communication for Covid-19 is a never-ending process, and leaders should keep that as a routine to deliver messages on planned strategies to control the pandemic crisis. This is important especially in Malaysia, whereby the public attitude and trust towards the government were less optimistic due to uncontrollable numbers of Covid-19 infection cases in the country.

Given the current situation, the analysis on how the prime minister (key leader in a nation) managed crisis communication and disclosures about Covid-19 information to the public was essential to recognise the role of leadership sense-making in the time of the pandemic. This study seeks to examine the crisis communication approach used by the Malaysian Prime Minister through analyses of formal public speeches and media statements made by him during the Covid-19 pandemic that can be found on the Prime Minister's Office official website. More specifically, the study posted research questions as following, (1) what are the messages emphasised by the Malaysian Prime Minister to the public at different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic?; and (2) what crisis communication approach used by the Malaysian Prime Minister to communicate the information to the public?.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Malaysia when the first COVID-19 case was reported on 25th January 2020. The active cases were increased to 117 cases, and the government declared a movement control order (MCO) on 18th March 2020. The MCO has effectively flattened the COVID-19 infection curve after the first MCO. Following the MCO, the government relaxed the movement control restrictions started early of May 2020 under Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and allowed most businesses to open on 4th May 2020. Subsequently, the government further relaxed the restrictions under Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) which allowed interstates movement until 31st August 2020.

The second wave began on 8th September 2020 with two main clusters contributing from Kedah's Tembok cluster and Sabah state. According to the Institute of Medical Research Malaysia (IMR), the detected infection cases from the cluster was associated with D614-G type COVID virus mutation that can cause a higher infection rate due to its' higher transmission rate (Suppiah et al., 2021). The second wave infected cases are mostly local, and this is different compared to the first wave whereby the infected cases were mostly imported. The situation became worsen when Sabah declared state election on 26th September 2020. The number of infected cases started to rise on 30th September 2020 and reach the peak on 29th January 2021 with a reported 5,725 daily infected cases (Organization, 2021). From time to time when there were high numbers of positive cases,

the government declared either Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO) or Targeted Enhanced Movement Control Order (TEMCO) at high-risk areas.

Malaysian Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin admitted that the Sabah elections in September 2020 were the cause of the second wave of Covid-19 infections. The cumulative infection cases spike from 808 cases on nomination day on 12 September 2020 to 1,547 cases on polling day on 26th September 2020. The number of infection cases increased by 91.5% after the election. The Prime Minister blamed that compliance to the standard operating procedures (SOPs) during the election was very weak and resulted that the pandemic was hard to control. He added, he observed public did not follow SOPs such as practising social distancing and wore a mask during the election campaigns although Election Commission (EC) has set tight SOPs for the election.

Lessons from the Sabah election, the Prime Minister annotated a state of emergency was needed to cancel and postpone the by-election to prevent the increase of infection cases. The first emergency declared by the Prime Minister was on 5th December 2020 to postpone the Batu Sapi by-election. Due to the increasing number of infection cases, the Prime Minister advised the 7th King to make the emergency declaration. The Prime Minister declared MCO 2.0 by states on 11th January 2021 followed by the palace proclamation of a state of emergency on 12th January 2021 until early August 2021. The declaration of MCO 2.0 by states referred to the level of movement control (MCO, CMCO, RMCO, EMCO, or TEMCO) switch between states depending on the number of infected cases of the states.

The Prime Minister claimed that the declaration of emergency was the appropriate action to ensure that the pandemic can be managed effectively with the power given to propose a suitable policy to control the pandemic. After the emergency declaration together with MCO by states and reinstatement of MCO restrictions during Chinese New Year, the infection cases dropped to the range between 1,063 and 1,671 cases from 16th March 2021 to 9th April 2021. As a result, the flattened curve of the number of infection cases has made the government declare CMCO on March 2021 with more relaxed movement restrictions.

The number of infection cases again spiked up to 9,020 cases on 29th May 2021 after the relaxed movement restriction. The situation getting bad to worst with detection on the new Covid-19 variant- Beta variant and Delta variant that was found in Malaysia. According to World Health Organisation (2021), the Delta variant became the dominant variant due to its higher transmissibility with about 60% greater transmissible than the alpha variant. The Malaysian Government faced a great push from people to call for a full lockdown to control the pandemic. However, the Prime Minister expressed his concerns on the balance between

lives and livelihoods in the force by the citizens to declare a full nation's lockdown and decided not to call full lockdown during the time.

Unlike previous MCO, the infected cases were not seemed to have improved with stricter movement control, and the anger from the public posted “#KerajaanGagal” (failed government) and trended on Twitter over the Muhyiddin's government alleged incompetence in curbing pandemic in the nation. Their urge for total lockdown further pressured the government, and Muhyiddin made a sudden announcement to enforced MCO 3.0 “total lockdown” from 28th May 2021 until 27th June 2021. The National Recovery Plan (NRP) followed on 16th June 2021 and highlighted four phases as a resilience plan in the pandemic. The transition between each phase is based on the thresholds and the adjustment of the phases can be switched according to the current situation.

Literature Review and Basic Theory

The crisis generally emphasised a temporal process when the disaster emerged and induced a sense of urgency, threat and accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty (Boin, Hart, & Kuipers, 2018). Covid-19 pandemic is a crisis that is characterised as a natural disaster that is widely impacting the world population's health, economy, and social welfare. The crisis required great attention from policymakers to reduce the damage made on people. The crisis is closely intertwining with crisis management. Crisis management is defined as “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted” (Coombs, 2014). In the arena of crisis management, crisis communication was the depiction of crisis management. Crisis communication incorporated the act of understanding the unexpected event, seeking to answer questions of the situation, and finding the solutions to minimize the impact. The Covid-19 crisis was a mega-crisis that is different compared to the past (Dada, Ashworth, Bewa, & Dhatt, 2021). The present virus variant caused the situation harder to manage and the endpoint of the pandemic never seemed to lift. In this regard, crisis communication was an ongoing process that continuously evaluates and update according to changes (Seeger, 2006).

Leadership and crisis communication were discussed together when the crisis occurred. This especially true in the current situation whereby policymakers everywhere in the world fell into a fog of uncertainty. Policymakers were the key leaders in a nation that played a pivotal role in dealing with pandemics and communicating with the public. Public leaders in crisis performed the role of engagement in authentic human acts, such as comforts the public, helping individuals to make sense of the crisis and preparing them for the future (McGuire, Cunningham, Reynolds, & Matthews-Smith, 2020). Public leaders were the

figurehead in a nation and responsible to deliver institutional messages to the public (Gigliotti, 2016). For example, the meaning-making by the leaders will influence the public understanding of the crisis (Glenn, Chaumont, & Dintrans, 2020).

Prime Minister was the key leader in a country and meant to narrate important information and conveyed their action responses to the public. Past research indicated that key leaders' statements were likely to influence social attitudes and trust towards government policies (Dada et al., 2021). A recent study revealed that speeches by Brazil President, Jair Bolsonaro, on Covid-19 prevention measures have impacted citizen's adherence to social distancing policies (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, & Da Mata, 2020). The language used by the leader in crisis communication consists of information exchange with the public and was significantly shaping individual behaviour. Likewise, Donald Trump (U.S. ex-President) and Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel ex-Prime Minister) used the war analogies and described Covid-19 as "war" and "battle" in public speeches to spurred the publics' fighting spirit against the pandemic (Ajzenman et al., 2020; Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020). Indonesia President, Joko Widodo, used stern warning language to call the obedience from the public. Specifically in his speech, "don't hesitate to reprimand those who are not disciplined in keeping the distance" (Glenn et al., 2020). On the other hand, New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, used a more empathetic approach emphasised shared experience of the crisis in a soft language tone and positioning herself on a common level with the public (McGuire et al., 2020).

Many countries all over the world declared a state of emergency to combat the pandemic, for instance, Italy, Finland, and Malaysia. While an emergency state was necessitating, providing a legal basis in an unprecedented environment that requires speedy legal actions, there is always room for subsequent review on the action taken. Declared a state of emergency can cause public panicking and affected a national economy. Crisis communications of key leaders of a nation were essential to keep the public calm and avoid panic emotions. In this regard, clear and accurate information delivered to trigger positive responses from the public was important. Moreover, information delivery must be aligned from top-down to shake off misinformation and this helped to build public trust in the message delivered by the leaders. Lessons from Italy, conflicts of information among the central government and regional authorities and political actors called for elections in crisis moment destabilised internal safety and demolished the trust of citizens towards the leaders (Ruiu, 2020).

Leaders were considerable in the context of sense-making. Sense-making enabled leaders to better confront ambiguous situations by making sense of the unfolding events and

rationality in actions (Ruiu, 2020). In a crisis communication context, a leader's messages were showed in two communication frames, that was optimistic frame and the pessimistic frame (Sobral et al., 2020). The optimistic frame suggested a positive communication frame by shaping positive emotions among the public. On the other hand, the pessimistic frame indicated communication to prepare and manage public expectations on the worst. Singapore's President, Lee Hsien Loong, adopted a pessimistic frame in his speeches. In his speech "I hesitate to talk about success because we are right in the midst of a battle, which is intensifying... I am under no illusions that we have won. We are just going in, and there is a long battle ahead" (Tan, Cook, Logan, Rozanova, & Wilder-Smith, 2021). His speech was intended to prepare the people for future risks and heightening the risks perceptions among the public. In opposite to pessimism, many of the country leaders were practising optimistic communication frames. For instance, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in his speech, declared "victorious nation in the fight against Covid" (Bisht, Saharia, & Sarma, 2021) and United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, that postulated a statement "nation should be very proud in handling pandemic" (Dewi et al., 2020; Osborne, 2021), were leaders practising optimistic communication frame. Countries such as India and the United Kingdom that practised optimistic communication failed to control the spread of the virus. Whereas countries that prepared their people for the worst leading them to adopt preventive behavioural responses during the pandemic.

In crisis communication, it was important to identified crisis types and stages of crisis to design a suitable crisis communication approach. Based on situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), actors' responsibility and approaches to response in the crisis take into consideration of crisis types and the stages of the crisis (Osborne, 2021). The SCCT classified three clusters of crises, which were the victim cluster, accidental cluster, and intentional cluster. Covid-19 was classified as a victim cluster and Coombs defined the pandemic as a "black swan crisis" (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). This suggested that Covid-19 has unique elements, and this mega-crisis was not often viewed in the past. Although there were several pandemics in the past, such as the HIV pandemic, the Flu pandemic and the SARS pandemic, however, Covid-19 was spreading fast and caused a huge impact on the economy of the world and created chaos in the public health care system of a country (Ramdani, Agustiyara, & Purnomo, 2021). Based on the current situation, the pandemic was likely to continue, hence leaders' crisis communication responses needed to continuously assess the various segments and adjust if certain segments were overestimating or underestimating the threats. For instance, Donald Trump during his tenure as the United States' President practised denial crisis response strategies with the denial of the exists of the crisis and discourage the public from practising masks wearing

and social distancing in early Covid-19 spread and blamed China that released the virus that caused the pandemic out of control. However, the current United States President, Joe Biden, has different crisis communication responses compared to Donald Trump. He communicated clear crisis management plans to the public and explained how the plan will be implemented. Experience from the United States revealed that crisis communication responses were necessitous to address the threats and the practice of continuously adjusting the communication strategy was crucial to keep the public trust and reduce negative emotional impact among the public.

Crisis communication can be visualised in linear timelines. Coombs (Elsharkawy & Abdelaziz, 2021) divided crisis management into three phases, which is pre-crisis, crisis responses and post-crisis. Pre-crisis concerned with the preparation and prevention, whereas crisis response concerned with the management actions that respond to a crisis. The post-crisis phase was a follow-up phase, whereby the crisis is in the recovery stage and the situation beginning return to business as usual. In Malaysia current situation, the pandemic is an ongoing process between the crisis response phase and recovery phase. Hence, the analysis focused on between crisis response phase and the recovery phase because the Malaysian Government has already announced the National Recovery Plan on 15th June 2021. Next, this paper attempted to uncover the language crisis communication approach used by the Malaysia Prime Minister during the different timelines within the crisis response phase and recovery phase. Indeed, we did not look at the pre-crisis phase because our new government took control started on 1st March 2020 where the crisis already took place in Malaysia on 25th January 2020.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was employed to analyse the crisis communication approach used by the Malaysian Prime Minister to communicate the Covid-19 messages at different phases of the pandemic. Data were collected from the sample of public speeches (60 speeches text) and media statements (15 statements) made by him during the Covid-19 pandemic that can be found on the Prime Minister's Office official website using direct sampling of the related materials from March 2020 to June 2021 that covered closure periods (MCO 1.0- decisive action) and recovery plan (NRP- resilience and recovery). It was analysed concurrently to assimilate the viewpoint used using thematic analysis to develop the main themes based on the six steps introduced by Braun and Clarke (Azlan, Hamzah, Sern, Ayub, & Mohamad, 2020; Setiawana, Nurmandi, Purnomo, & Muhammad, 2021) as the following figure:

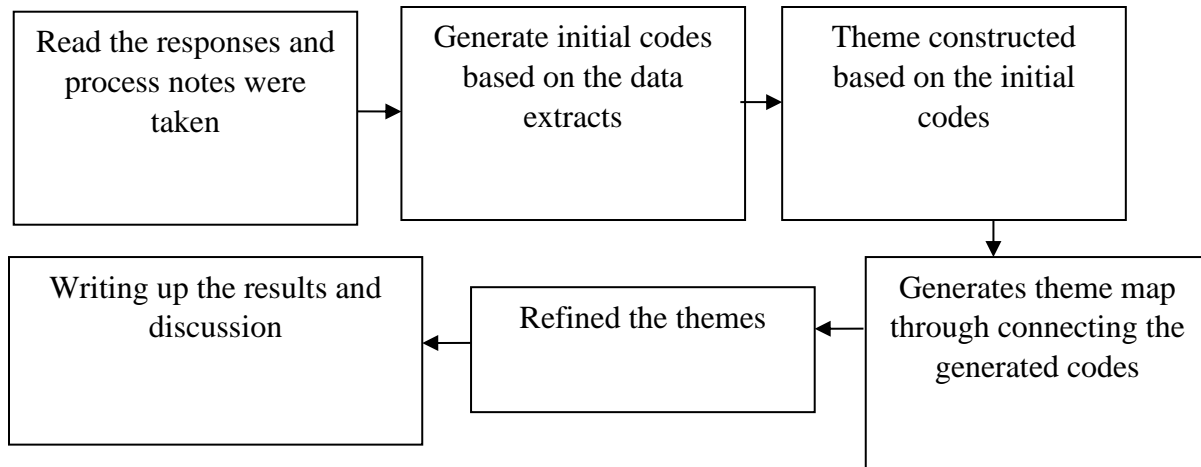


Figure 1 Thematic Analysis Steps

For analysis, the data was broken into four phases according to the timeline and thereafter analysed using NVivo 12. At the first phase (3rd March 2020 till 3rd May 2020), it involved the decisive action against Covid-19 whereby the government declared the Movement Control Order 1.0 (MCO 1.0) on 18th March 2020. Subsequently, the government moved into the second phase- crisis responses and recovery plan covering the period from 4th May 2020 to 10th January 2021 which announced the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO). Then between 11th January 2021 and 14th June 2021, the government moved into the third phase- crisis responses that set forth the MCO 2.0 and pushed to a total lockdown (MCO 3.0- since 1st June 2021). Currently, Malaysia is at the resilience and recovery phase (fourth phase) since 15th June 2021 by announcing the National Recovery Plan (NRP) which is a 4-phase road map out of MCO that based on three indicators namely, the average number of daily Covid-19 cases showing decline; capability of the public health system as Determined by ICU Bed Occupancy; And/Or Immunisation Coverage with Two Doses Of Vaccine.

Findings and Discussions

Phase 1: Decisive Actions against Covid-19

When the Muhyiddin's Government took over the control of Malaysia, Malaysia was recorded a significant increase in the Covid-19 infections cases caused by the Tabligh cluster. The instance actions were taken by Muhyiddin to declare a nation's lock-down with the first enforcement of Movement Control Order (MCO 1.0) on 18th March 2020. Lock-down measures proven as a useful method to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus, as China had successfully controlled the pandemic with the lock-down measures. The decisive actions by Muhyiddin were fast and it effectively reduced the number of infections

during the early stages. Along with the decision to lock-down the whole nation, he knew that the decision was a tough call, which involved an economic trade-off in costs. Human beings were facing the crisis and being encountered with intense uncertainty and a sense of fear, worry and panic (Malaysia Kini, 2020). Leaders in crisis communication were expected to reduce the negative emotions such as fear and panic among the public. An effective crisis narrative that channelled the public negative emotions was viable during the crisis (Boin et al., 2018). The theme associated with messaging that channelled the public negative emotions was the emotional appearance. He calmed the public by giving assurance on the sufficiency of the daily necessities supply during MCO.

Declaration of MCO means that the public needed to stay at home, and restrictions on their movements. To avoid public panic during the MCO, one needed to acknowledge the public negative emotions. The crisis communication approach used by Muhyiddin was the people-centred approach, whereby he emphasised social solidarity which referred to the “interdependence between individuals in a society, which allows individuals to feel that they can enhance the lives of others” (Yong & Sia, 2021). The theme of social solidarity in this study involved the religious frame for Covid-19, empathy with shared experience, expressed concern towards front liners, called for the collective consciousness on Covid-19, stressed the importance of community and used language that was closed to the public. In Malaysia, the cohesiveness of social bonds was partly reliant on religion. The majority of the people in Malaysia were Muslims and the use of religious-related terms helped to shape the social bonds that unite people together. Typically, the terms used in the speech such as *jihad* and *ibadah* carrying messages to combat with Covid-19 and practising new normal during the crisis.

The creativity of Muhyiddin in designing his speech to get closer to the public had won the public trust during this phase. For instance, the lingo “*ke sana, ke sini*” had Muhyiddin’s humility sense of humour and was deeply snippets into the lives of the people. Besides, he used ordinary people names such as *Makcik Kiah*, *Encik Lee*, *Pak Salleh* and *Puan Rani* as examples to explain the stimulus packages were widely accepted by the public and the messages were deemed simple, easy to understand and felt close to the public. Besides, Muhyiddin also expressed his concern on front liners and stressed the community importance with the notion “no one will be left behind” showing the attention to reassure the public that key decisions were driven by communitarian values, sentiments that expressed interdependence between individuals in a society.

Meaning-making was the process to impute meaning to unfold the crisis to the eyes of the public (Boin et al., 2018). The messages from the leaders need to be responded to fast and

accurate on an official platform to avoid the public espousing various alternative information, such as rumours, reports, news, and/or social media posts. Muhyiddin has reported the updated information regarding Covid-19 cases and standard operating procedures (SOPs) of MCO. However, in his initial announcement of MCO, Malaysians reacted in panic and confusion (Oliva & Lazzeretti, 2018). The rumours and fake news started to viral throughout social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Muhyiddin called for the public not to share the fake news, and only rely on a reliable source of information. The channel such as "sebenarnya.my" was designed to enhance the efforts to tackle fake news and was promoted to the public during the crisis to give accurate information and avoid misunderstanding on Covid-19 information.

Covid-19 caused a tremendous social and economic impact on a nation. Movement restrictions and closure of economic sectors resulted in financial constraints for the public and the nation. Hence, Muhyiddin announced stimulus packages to reduce the impact and damage on the country's social-economic. Coordination with Financial Ministry has outlined business continuity and stimulus packages for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). PRIHATIN economy stimulus packages introduced on 27th March 2020, and the packages named according to Muhyiddin notions that referred to "*sentiasa prihatin kepada rakyat*" (always care for the people). In response to the tough financial situation of the country, Muhyiddin's Government took the accountability to cut the salary of the cabinet members to show the shared responsibilities towards the crisis. Assistance from the government as the theme in the study consists of the economic stimulus packages and salary cut from cabinet indicated the people-centred approach. Muhyiddin minimized the economic impact by introducing economic stimulus packages, as well as the offer for salary cuts to give monetary support during the crisis.

In essence, the crisis management and crisis communication by Muhyiddin signified initial success to curb the Covid-19. The public was mostly appreciated his efforts in managing the crisis. The crisis communication by Muhyiddin helped the public to cope with emotional disruption, called for public obedience and adaptability to information provided by the government. For instance, the creativity in the language used reminds the public's responsibilities during the crisis, and the simple and understandable examples used in his speech were easily understood by the public.

Phase 2: Crisis Responses and Recovery Plan

Muhyiddin announced the relaxed version of MCO, which in other terms called Recovery MCO (RMCO) started from 10th June 2020. The relaxation further eases the restriction

regulation which allowed interstate travel and reopens the majority of businesses in the country (Yıldırım & Güler, 2020). He claimed success in combating Covid-19 infections and was confident that Malaysia will proceed to enter the normalisation phase later (Haverback, 2020). Muhyiddin defined success in the following quotes:

"Alhamdulillah, after six months, Malaysia has almost succeeded in curbing the COVID-19 epidemic. Cases of local transmission are low. At certain times the number of daily cases reported is only one digit. The recovery rate was also high at 97 percent and the mortality rate remained low at 1.3 percent. Sectors of the economy have also reopened with over 15 million workers returning to work."

Prime Minister Office, 1st September 2020

With evidence suggesting the Covid-19 infections rate was under control towards the end of May 2020, economy and social recovery is the priority concern by Muhyiddin. A variety of key sectors are in distress and the tourism section is the one to be hit the hardest. PRIHATIN stimulus package provided financial aids to the most affected sector, however, the financial distress was not fully tackled. Reacting to the issue, Muhyiddin was aware that the short- and long-term plan for economic recovery was needed. The tourism sector was the hardest hit sector, hence, he announced tax relief of RM 1,000 to stimulate the shortterm economic return. In long term, he focused on the digital economy and fosters digital economy development in the nation. Moreover, the declaration of opening education sector phase by phase also was showing the social recovery in this phase. Particularly, Muhyiddin's resilience model in this phase was more on dynamic resilience- the ability to reconstruct and recover quickly, rather than instantaneous resilience in the first phase that prioritised the ability to limit immediate loss (Dzulkifly, 2021). The messages delivered to the public regarding the resilience plan were clear and this framed a positive picture for the public to tackle their fear of financial distress and social impact caused by the pandemic.

Self-efficacy played an important role in crisis communication because it affects the public to enact danger control (Braun et al., 2016). An individual's confidence was his or her ability to successfully execute their part of the response in pandemic control (Arumugam, 2021; Setiawana et al., 2021). The dangerous responses from the public contributed to resolving the public health crisis by taking their part to adopt preventive behaviours to avoid Covid-19. Likewise, Coombs (Braun et al., 2016) noted that public self-efficacy plays a central role to cope with the pandemic. Leaders need to develop the public's self-efficacy by providing training, information, and resources for them to execute their part of the response. In this matter, Muhyiddin used a persuasive communication approach to disclose public about mask-wearing and social distancing were the steps to prevent the further spread

of the virus. Moreover, he launched the Covid-19 campaign to embrace new normal adaptation in the community to raise awareness on the virus and empowering people to protect themselves. The persuasive approach taken by Muhyiddin is articulated in the following quotes:

"... wash hands more often. Use soap, hand sanitiser and so on. Also wear a face mask."

Prime Minister Office, 10th April 2020

"... new normal practices in life such as not gather in crowded places, not shaking hands, social distancing and wearing face masks."

"... employers can encourage employees to work from home. This is a new norm that we must practice."

Prime Minister Office, 1st May 2020

Building self-efficacy belief during a pandemic was a difficult task. Verbal persuasion impacted efficacy when the one who gives the persuasion was credible and others were convinced of his or her capability (Tetteh, 2020). The Prime Minister in a country is symbolic for the public. Muhyiddin is a country leader, and he is symbolic of the country. Indeed, he is the credible one to convince people to practise the new normal and following SOPs. However, the alleged claim of "double standard" on his management declined the public trust and self-efficacy belief. The issues of breach Covid-19 SOPs by Minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities, Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali that failed to do mandatory 14 days home quarantine after returning from Turkey on 7th July 2020 had set a bad example to the eyes of the public.

In response to the case, the Prime Minister Office released a statement, "escalate the case to the relevant department for investigation and relevant action was taken following the law". The action was finally taken on Khairuddin, with a fine of RM 1,000 on 7th August 2020. Despite a similar case such as breach of quarantine rules by Sivagangga, a super spreader in Kedah was fined RM 12,000 and jailed five months, however, Khairuddin's law punishment was not commensurate with his social status. Although the clarification by Muhyiddin was clear, however no instance action and serious criticism on Khairuddin's breach of SOP upshot the concern of double standard. What is more important was when Muhyiddin attempted to trademark a fatherly tone to persuade public obedience to SOPs in his speech on 6th October 2020 that triggered public complaints on his minister's bad example in law compliances. His speech quote "Sorry if this Abah (father) starts using a cane!" with sterner language and did not call for the collective sense from the public in convincing public obedience on SOPs.

Following the relaxed restrictions, the second wave began with a new variant found in Kedah state on 8th September 2020. The situation getting from bad to worse when the Sabah election took place on 26th September 2020 and infection cases was seen to rise after two weeks from the election. Muhyiddin admitted that the Sabah election was the cause of the Covid-19 infection wave. He also blamed that people were not following the SOPs during the elections. The blaming indicated scapegoat approach in Muhyiddin communication, and the speech highlighted in the following quotes:

"I am aware that the Malaysian Election Commission has set certain SOPs to ensure that the Covid-19 virus does not spread as a result of the election campaign. But unfortunately, some SOPs are not followed."

"As I went down campaigning in many places, I saw the SOPs on social distancing were somewhat poorly complied with. Although almost all wore face masks, still many sat close to each other in a relatively crowded space. So much that I had to make my own SOPs."

Prime Minister Office, 6th October 2020

Phase 3: Crisis Responses and Reinstatement of Movement Control Order

The infection cases hike and forced the government to promulgate targeted movement control order. This action caused the multiple restrictions rules announcement, namely MCO, CMCO, EMCO, TEMCO, and RMCO that switched between the states. The different types of MCO associated with different guidelines of movement restrictions and SOPs. Communication to clarify the restrictions guidelines was hereby essential to make sure the messages reached the public. The government applied the switching styles of multiple MCOs from 11th January 2020 to 31st May 2021. Muhyiddin made announcements on MCO types according to the Covid-19 infections cases numbers and R-naught value of Covid-19.

The call for total lock down was getting stronger when the number of infection cases spiked up to 9,020 cases on 29th May 2021. During this phase, Muhyiddin was not showing his decisive action that response quickly to the crisis such as phase 1. The announcement in his speech on 17th March 2021 stated "no longer using the movement control order" as a tool against Covid-19 showing the government has no intention to declare total lock-down MCO like phase 1. He applied the cookie-cutter approach which adapts the approach that is likely to be poorly matched to the exigencies of the current situation. The number of infections cases hike can result in the collapse of the health care system. Muhyiddin sense-making in this phase likely to underestimated the crisis and being optimistic about his current

strategies in response to the crisis. Refused to listen to the voices of the public to call for lock-down to control the virus spread had caused the number of infections to keep growing.

At last, Muhyiddin declared a total lockdown on 1st June 2021 through his press statements from the Prime Minister Office. The declaration does not make live on formal and informal media like former live speech announcements for lock-down in the past. The public received information on paper and via formal and informal media published materials. The communication by Muhyiddin implied that the government was not well prepared for the lock-down declaration. After three days from the declaration, the total lock-down started from 1st June 2021 until 14th June 2021. The SOPs guidelines for total lock-down announced on 31st May 2021, and later another announcement of SOPs guideline released on 2nd June 2021. The SOPs guidelines have confused the public and raise conflicts between enforcement agencies. This suggested that poor coordination between the government agencies and weak communication alignment within the government occurred. Further, the fines raised to RM 10,000 since 11th March 2021 was the highest and was a burden to the public and the unclear SOPs possibly caused the public to get fines for not complying with the so-called right SOPs.

Muhyiddin advised the palace for declaration of emergency received controversial views from the public and politicians. Muhyiddin was allegedly claimed by opposite parties in using the Covid-19 crisis to advance his political interest through the declaration of emergency state [38]. In response to the allegation, he explained the reasons for the emergency declaration was not due to politics (in the 12th January 2021 speech). Emergency Ordinance allows the government to propose amendments on emergency allocation or certain Acts or regulations that are necessary to control the pandemic without having to go through Parliament, which takes a longer time for approval. The analysis from his speeches has pictured the political instability situation during the time. He called his coalitions not to politicized the issue and stay together to fight the Covid-19. There are leaders around the world who claimed to advance political interest during the crisis. For example, both Benjamin Netanyahu (ex-Prime Minister of Israel) and Narendra Modi-India Prime Minister were also involved in the political interest claimed during crisis time (Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020).

Phase 4: Resilience and Recovery

At this phase, Muhyiddin used the resilience-based communication strategy by identifying the risks, in particular for being able to deal with uncertainties and potential surprises. This is because resilience is seen as a pillar of risk management and risk analysis. Based on the

three indicators under the National Recovery Plan, he emphasised a lot on the National COVID-19 Immunisation Program (vaccination and herd immunity). This is because there will be 16 million doses of vaccine that will arrive in Malaysia at the end of July and he is feeling more confident with that amount of vaccine stocks, the NRP will be a successful one as indicated in his speech:

"... the increase in the supply of vaccines of 16 million doses at the end of this July as well as the increase in the rate of daily vaccination makes us more confident in the success of the National Recovery Plan."

Prime Minister Office, 15th June 2021

However, the challenge in NRP was the other two factors, (1) the average number of daily Covid-19 cases showing decline and (2) capability of the public health system as determined by ICU bed occupancy. To reduce the numbers (Covid-19 cases and ICU bed occupancy), vaccination needs to be expedited and covers more groups of people as quoted in his speech:

"... I am confident this effort will continue to be enhanced to over 300,000 doses a day in the coming months."

"Recently, the government is studying the vaccination of our children aged 12 to 17 years."

Prime Minister Office, 15th June 2021

After assessing the risks, he is optimistic about moving out of MCO if the public adheres to the ultimate goal of herd immunity.

"This positive development in the daily vaccination rate gives confidence to the Government that we can succeed together in the National Recovery Plan. This is because the more people are covered with vaccinations, the looser the movement control we can exercise, the more economic and social sectors we can open up, and we can begin to move regularly and safely to pre-pandemic living norms..."

Prime Minister Office, 15th June 2021

In essence, NRP was an exit policy that emphasised the plan starting from monitoring the current situation until recovery from the crisis. The core of NRP was dependence on herd immunity by fostering vaccination programs nationwide.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the crisis communication approach adopted by the Malaysian Prime Minister and provide insights on the ways of crisis communication by him were depicted in real-time. Moreover, the study drawn upon crisis communication literature and addressed how crisis communication by the Malaysian Prime Minister can be aligned with effective crisis communication suggested by scholars and policymakers. Covid-19 is a pandemic that can extend over a long period. The infection cases spike up and force the government to promulgate targeted movement control orders. This action causes the multiple restriction rules announcement, namely MCO, CMCO, EMCO, TEMCO, and RMCO.

The beginning of the implementation of movement control order was confusing and the parameters of the restrictions were not properly underlying. Communication to clarify the restriction guidelines is hereby essential. In the Covid-19 context, public leaders face a large amount of information from multiple resources and this is especially true for key leaders-Prime Minister in a country. Hence, leaders play a pivotal role in providing and communicating information to the public throughout the time due to changing nature of the crisis from time to time. Leaders not only require to provide appropriate context during crisis communication, but to ensure the transparency and accuracy of the information delivery. The ways of a leader in crisis communication determines the constituents' responses in addressing the issue and taking the appropriate actions. In essence, the study has contributed to academics and policymakers through addressing the crisis communication approaches and suggested approaches to improve crisis communication in the future.

Acknowledgement

This work is ostensibly supported, financially and/or non-financially, by the School of Government, UUM COLGIS, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

References

- Ajzenman, N., Cavalcanti, T., & Da Mata, D. (2020). Leaders' speech and risky behaviour during a pandemic. *VoxEU. Org*, 2.
- Arumugam, T. (2021). *Specify parameters for levels of MCO, says former deputy minister*.
- Azlan, A.A., Hamzah, M.R., Sern, T.J., Ayub, S.H., & Mohamad, E. (2020). Public knowledge, attitudes and practices towards COVID-19: A cross-sectional study in Malaysia. *Plos One*, 15(5).

- Bisht, R., Saharia, R., & Sarma, J. (2021). COVID-19 and the burden of ill-health: a double crisis of disruptions and inequalities. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 23(S2), 342–356. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40847-020-00117-x>
- Boin, A., Hart, P., & Kuipers, S. (2018). The crisis approach. In *Handbook of disaster research*, 23–38.
- Boin, A., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2016). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*. Cambridge University Press.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise*, 213–227.
- Coombs, W.T. (2014). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*. Sage Publications.
- Dada, S., Ashworth, H.C., Bewa, M.J., & Dhatt, R. (2021). Words matter: political and gender analysis of speeches made by heads of government during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMJ Global Health*, 6(1).
- Dewi, A., Nurmandi, A., Rochmawati, E., Purnomo, E.P., Dimas Rizqi, M., Azzahra, A., & Tri Kusuma Dewi, D. (2020). Global policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: proportionate adaptation and policy experimentation: a study of country policy response variation to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, 10(4), 359–365. <https://doi.org/10.34172/hpp.2020.54>
- Dzulkiily, D. (2021). *A month on, Dr M claims Muhyiddin's 'real reason' invoking Emergency rule laid bare*.
- Elsharkawy, N.B., & Abdelaziz, E.M. (2021). Levels of fear and uncertainty regarding the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) among university students. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 57(3), 1356–1364.
- Gesser-Edelsburg, A., & Hijazi, R. (2020). When politics meets pandemic: how Prime Minister Netanyahu and a small team communicated health and risk information to the Israeli public during the early stages of COVID-19. *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, 13, 2985.
- Gigliotti, R.A. (2016). Leader as performer; leader as human: A discursive and retrospective construction of crisis leadership. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 24(4), 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2016.1208660>
- Glenn, J., Chaumont, C., & Villalobos Dintrans, P. (2021). Public health leadership in the times of COVID-19: a comparative case study of three countries. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 17(1), 81-94.
- Haverback, H.R. (2020). Middle Level Teachers Quarantine, Teach, and Increase Self-Efficacy Beliefs: Using Theory to Build Practice during COVID-19. *Middle Grades Review*, 6(2).
- Lee, Y., & Jung, S.J. (2021). Saving Our Healthcare Workers Again During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines. *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health*, 54(5), 382–383.
- Loo, K.Y., & Letchumanan, V. (2021). COVID-19: Malaysia's fight against this deadly virus. *Progress In Microbes & Molecular Biology*, 4(1).
- Malaysia Kini. (2020). PM announces “recovery mode” MCO from June 10, various activities allowed. *Malaysiakini*. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/529155>

- Malaysiakini. (2021). #KerajaanGagal_ Twitterjaya vents over PN's "incompetence" on Covid-19, economy.
- Malecki, K.M.C., Keating, J.A., & Safdar, N. (2021). Crisis communication and public perception of COVID-19 risk in the era of social media. *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 72(4), 697–702.
- McGuire, D., Cunningham, J.E.A., Reynolds, K., & Matthews-Smith, G. (2020). Beating the virus: an examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(4), 361–379.
- Oborne, P. (2021). *The assault on truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the emergence of a new moral barbarism*. Simon and Schuster.
- Oliva, S., & Lazeretti, L. (2018). Measuring the economic resilience of natural disasters: An analysis of major earthquakes in Japan. *City, Culture and Society*, 15, 53–59.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2018.05.005>
- Organization, W.H. (2021). *COVID-19 weekly epidemiological update, 25 May 2021*.
- Ramdani, R., Agustiyara, & Purnomo, E.P. (2021). Big Data Analysis of COVID-19 Mitigation Policy in Indonesia: Democratic, Elitist, and Artificial Intelligence. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 717(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/717/1/012023>
- Rosenthal, U., Boin, A., & Comfort, L. K. (2001). *Managing crises: Threats, dilemmas, opportunities*. Charles C Thomas Publisher.
- Ruiu, M. L. (2020). Mismanagement of Covid-19: lessons learned from Italy. *Journal of Risk Research*, 23(7–8), 1007–1020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1758755>
- Seeger, M.W. (2006). Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(3), 232–244.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880600769944>
- Setiawana, A., Nurmandi, A., Purnomo, E.P., & Muhammad, A. (2021). Disinformation and Miscommunication in Government Communication in Handling COVID-19 Pandemic. *Webology*, 18(1), 203–218. <https://doi.org/10.14704/WEB/V18I1/WEB18084>
- Sobral, F., Carvalho, J., Łagowska, U., Furtado, L.M.G.P., & Grobman, M. (2020). Better safe than sorry: leadership sensemaking in the time of COVID-19. *Revista de Administração Pública*, 54(4), 758–781.
- Suppiah, J., Kamel, K.A., Mohd-Zawawi, Z., Afizan, M.A., Yahya, H., Md-Hanif, S.A., & Thayan, R. (2021). Short Communication Phylogenomic analysis of SARS-CoV-2 from third wave clusters in Malaysia reveals dominant local lineage B. 1.524 and persistent spike mutation A701V. *Tropical Biomedicine*, 38(3), 289–293.
- Tan, J. B., Cook, M. J., Logan, P., Rozanova, L., & Wilder-Smith, A. (2021). Singapore's pandemic preparedness: an overview of the first wave of COVID-19. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(1), 252.
- Tetteh, H.A. (2020). A Leader's Guide to Crisis Communication: Lessons from Ebola for COVID-19. *Military Medicine*, 185(9–10), e1371–e1375.

- Wong, C.M.L., & Jensen, O. (2020). The paradox of trust: perceived risk and public compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore. *Journal of Risk Research*, 23(7–8), 1021–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1756386>
- Yıldırım, M., & Güler, A. (2020). COVID-19 severity, self-efficacy, knowledge, preventive behaviors, and mental health in Turkey. *Death Studies*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1793434>
- Yong, S.S., & Sia, J.K.M. (2021). COVID-19 and social wellbeing in Malaysia: A case study. *Current Psychology*, 1–15.