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## WHAT NEW NORM? THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN COVID-19

Viloshinni Murali<sup>1</sup>, Normahfuzah Ahmad<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia  
Email: viloshinni\_murali@smtc.uum.edu.my

<sup>2</sup> School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia  
Email: normahfuzah@uum.edu.my

\* Corresponding Author

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### Abstract:

This research is developed to study COVID-19 and the use of social media among students. Specifically, on social media applications used by tertiary university students in Malaysia to obtain current information regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. Apart from that, the pilot study was conducted prior to distributing the main questionnaire to ensure that questions designed are suitable. Changes were made upon feedback received from pilot study. Finding suggests students are aware on the implementation of Standard Operating Procedures by the Malaysian government. However, students cannot fully differentiate the differences to the variations of imposed lockdowns. The finding also shows that Malaysian university students are aware of Malaysia's current issues and the many variations of rules and regulations which have become the new norm. This study expands further literature on the use of social media particularly among the young generation. Additionally, this study adds new knowledge to studies pertaining to the use of social media in times of health crisis in the nation.

### Keywords:

COVID-19; Tertiary Institutions; Malaysia; Social Media

### Introduction

COVID-19 has impacted each and every lives globally. The virus has not only affected our health but also puts pressures on finance, education, an individual mental state, a nation's economy and many others. The outbreak has changed the operating conditions in many industries across the globe and has forced many to work, learn and study from home (Shahzad et al. 2020). Initially labelled as an epidemic across China and several other locations, the infectious disease became the focus of the World Health Organisation by March 2020. It was

then re-labelled as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 upon wider spread of the disease worldwide. The virus spread to Malaysia at the untimeliest manner – as the nation went through a sudden government change. Upon his appointment as the Prime Minister and after setting up his cabinet the new Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin began to implement steps in tackling the infectious disease. This includes shutting off international borders as part of its border control. Domestically the government implemented various forms of Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Malaysians to adhere as part of methods to curb the spread of the disease.

The SOP and other new regulations have impacted all lives in the nation in various demographic. Students of the higher institutions were impacted with classes switching to online rather than face-to-face, among many others. Studies regarding the usage of social media applications among Malaysian tertiary students are growing. This research intends to expand further literature and look at the role of social media and its relations to COVID-19 amongst students in Malaysian tertiary education.

This study intends to look at students' awareness on rules and regulations established by the Malaysian government in regard to curbing the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Specifically, this study intends to identify students' awareness to new norms imposed by the Malaysian government in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic through their use of social media. Building on the research objective, the research question aims to answer the following:

Are students aware of the new norm imposed in Malaysia due to the COVID-19 outbreak?

## Literature Review

### *Measurements To Stop The Spread Of COVID-19*

Variations of movement control orders were implemented since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. Along with these variations, public were exposed to key messages pertaining to developments on the disease, rumour, misinformation, falsehoods and many others. The convulsion of information has resulted to the World Health Organisation, United Nation along with some other global humanitarian aid organizations to describe the situation as 'infodemic'. Similarly, a deluge of information on the pandemic were disseminated to the Malaysian public. Various forms of lockdown were implemented in Malaysia to curb the spread of the disease. It began with the Movement Control Order (MCO) followed by the Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO). With many forms of lockdown types led to rules and regulations imposed which the public need to be educated upon. Additionally, it is argued that many countries reported various aspects of COVID-19 from the identification of the first infected case to the gradual spread, the fatalities and the initiatives to fight COVID-19 (Parvin et al. 2020). This situation is similarly observed in Malaysia. Ultimately this led to information overload among news consumers.

A series of measures have been suggested to reduce the transmission of diseases through personal hygiene, including strict hand hygiene, cough etiquette, social distancing, disinfecting surfaces, and avoiding crowded and infected areas (Chen Bin, 2020). During the worldwide crisis, there is an urgent need to increase the public's awareness about COVID-19 and provide them with appropriate and factual health information to stop the spreading among people and prevent death due to this deadly virus spread. The major concerns regarding COVID-19 are the

rapidly increasing infection rate within a relatively short period of time, lack of information about the novel virus, and lack of information about the sources of the infection. Simultaneously this information has led to the spread of misinformation.

### ***Misinformation During The Pandemic***

Misinformation about how COVID-19 spreads, susceptibility of different demographic, type of treatment or effective prevention methods can emerge and spread from individuals who are antagonistic toward rigorous scientific investigation (Lobato et al. 2020) or have other vested interests. Misinformation about COVID-19 is a major threat to public health (Roozenbeek, 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic depends on the actions of individual citizens and, therefore, the quality of the information to which people are exposed. Unfortunately, misinformation about COVID-19 has proliferated, including social media (Frenkel, 2020). It is contended that social media posts advancing inaccurate reports, conspiracy theories and bogus cures are viewed more often than information from authoritative sources (Article 19 2020). One study suggests about 37% of those interviewed had come across a great deal of misinformation about COVID-19 in social media like Facebook and Twitter (Newman et al. 2020).

There are many more myths circulating people from all over the world, such as one that the COVID-19 virus was engineered in a lab in China. A recent analysis of the most viewed coronavirus YouTube videos found that over 25% of the top videos contained misleading information and totaled 62 million views worldwide (Li et al. 2020). Previous study suggests repeated exposure to fake news increase one's belief in information presented (Pennycook et al., 2018). One study contends that misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms required urgent intervention (Su et al. 2021). Therefore, the spread of fake news and misinformation via social media remains a big concern.

### ***Social Media And The Pandemic***

In light to recent health crisis, social media platforms were used to provide information to individuals about the COVID-19 pandemic (Merchant and Lurie 2020). Social media applications play a vital role in spreading the news that the audience needs during this COVID-19 outbreak. This is partly due to the nature of social media – its instantaneity. It is contended that fast news have become the characteristics of our lives (Pavlik 2021) and social media platforms fulfil the role of instant information provider. Additionally, social media platforms are easy to access especially through mobile phones.

Further, applications such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram are pushing various forms of content to the general public and simultaneously enables users to voice their point of view across through comments and post shares. Furthermore, it has been argued that social media has been a boon for individuals and communities to stay connected during the lockdown period due to COVID-19 (Salman 2021). All these factors make social media platform a preference in news consumption particularly during the pandemic.

### ***Methodology***

The research designed a questionnaire as part of data collection. This is because a questionnaire is a suitable and preferable approach to collect huge quantitative data from students in tertiary education all over Malaysia. Students can also answer the questionnaire anonymously. Apart from that, quantitative data are also best for measuring, ranking, categorizing, identifying the

patterns, and making generalizations regarding a topic. Data in the form of numbers, percentages, and measurable figures can be calculated or conducted by a computer through the use of a statistical package for social science (SPSS) (Gorard, 2001), which saves a lot of energy and resources. However, this research analyses manually due to its small sample and presents its data in charts and graphs. In this study, a quantitative research design was used to investigate the social media applications used by students of tertiary institutions on COVID-19 information retrieval, which involves university students from all over Malaysia as respondents.

Primary data is real-time data, whereas secondary data relates to the past. Primary data is collected to address the problem at hand, while secondary data is collected for purposes other than the problem at hand and a very involved process. Primary data sources include surveys, observations, experiments, questionnaires, personal interviews, etc. On the other hand, secondary data are sources which may be obtained from government publications, websites, books, journal articles, internal records, newspaper cutting, brochures and various others.

The research utilises questionnaire as primary data. A questionnaire as one of the primary data sources is an observational technique that comprises a series of items presented to a respondent in a written form. An individual is expected to respond in writing. Here the respondents are given a list of written items which he responds to by ticking the one that considers being appropriate. It is an excellent way to collect a large amount of information from a given population. Surveys can be used to describe a population in terms of who they are, what they do, what they like, and if these identified characteristics, behaviour, preferences, and satisfaction. Surveys yield the most meaningful data when they ask the right questions of the right people in the right way, so care should be taken both to develop survey questions respondents will find relevant and interesting and to determine which method of conducting the survey (online, telephone or in-person) is most appropriate. Taken the current pandemic into consideration questionnaires were distributed online.

Secondary data were obtained from literature review. The researcher can obtain various information by reading and referring through the articles published on online platforms such as Google Scholar, Sci-Hub, ScienceDirect, books, journals, internet articles, and UUM Library. This helps to obtain information from various scholars and their views and opinions regarding the topic. Since secondary data collection is less expensive and can provide knowledge to research undertaken, the research was initiated through secondary data.

A population is a distinct group of individuals, whether that group comprises a nation or a group of people with a common characteristic. The population includes students from various public and private institutions in Malaysia. Among selected tertiary institutions are Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UNIMAP), Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), SEGI University, Sunway University, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM), Crescendo International College and various others. The targeted sample size in this research is 100 participants.

Snowball sampling was adopted for data collection in this research. In this sampling procedure, the initial respondents are chosen by probability or non-probability methods, and then, additional respondents were obtained by the initial respondents' information. For example, questionnaires were distributed to a respondent from UUM which the respondent later shared with another respondent from UKM. Similar process is seen for other institutions and colleges.

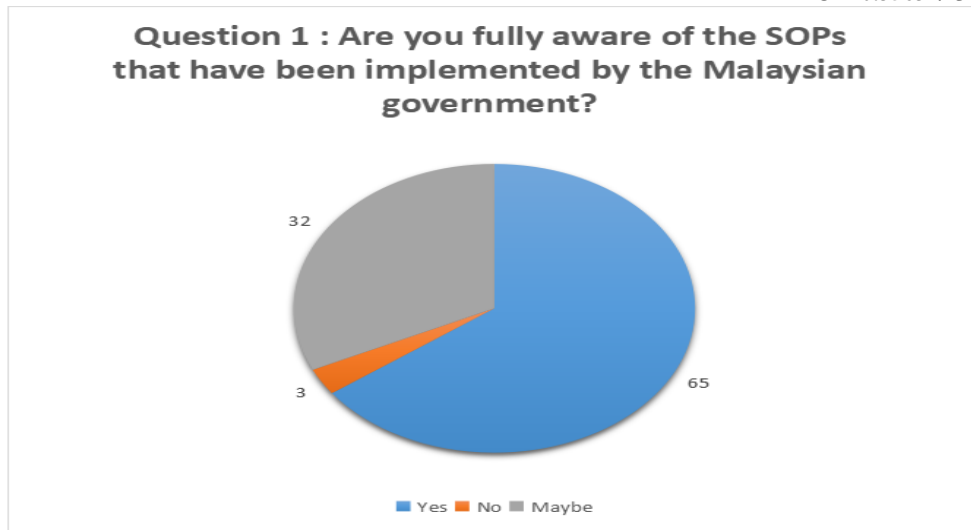
## Results

A pilot study is the first step of the entire research protocol and is often a smaller-sized study assisting in planning and modifying the main study. The advantage of conducting a pilot study prior to the real study is to allow the researcher the opportunity to identify mistakes in the study and improvise accordingly. Pilot studies provide the opportunity for researchers to assess the feasibility of the undertaken study on a large scale.

Some changes were made upon pilot study to ensure better comprehension of the questions. For instance, a few questions in section C were given another choice of answer to make sure the respondents answer the questions in a more specific way. The answers for the questions in section C initially had two options: "Yes" or "No", which were changed to three options (yes, no, or maybe) after distributing the pilot study to the respondents. The initial question was "are you aware that regulations for MCO, EMCO, CMCO, and RMCO are different from each other?" and the initial answers were "Yes" or "No". Upon review, an additional option – "Maybe" was included. This is because some of the respondents may be aware, may be fully aware, or may not be aware of all regulations and SOP for COVID-19. This explains the need to provide multiple options for the respondents to choose from and the advantages of conducting a pilot study.

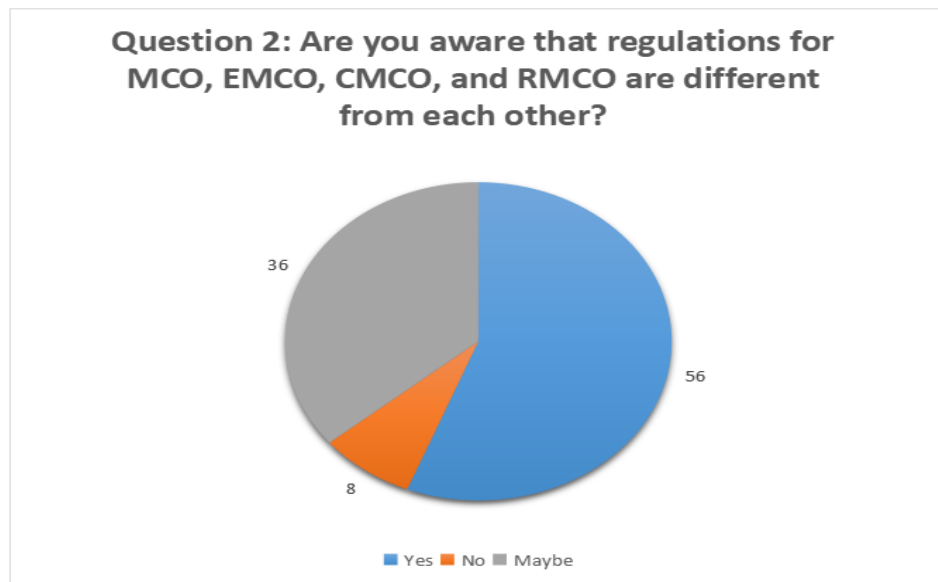
A total of eight questions were designed to determine whether the students from tertiary institutions in Malaysia are aware of the new norm due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This is in response to research question: Are students aware of the new norm imposed in Malaysia due to the COVID-19 outbreak?

Respondents were given answers to choose from in the form of a nominal scale with three choices of answers - yes, no and maybe. There was also a question that had answers for respondents to choose from to test students' awareness of the SOPs' imposed by the Malaysian government.



**Figure 1: The Awareness Of SOPs Imposed By The Malaysian Government**

The first question was to identify whether the tertiary institution students are fully aware of the SOPs that the Malaysian government has implemented. As shown in the pie chart above, 65 out of 100 respondents answered yes as they are fully aware of the SOPs that have been implemented. Furthermore, 32 out of them answered maybe as they might be or might not be fully aware of the SOPs related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

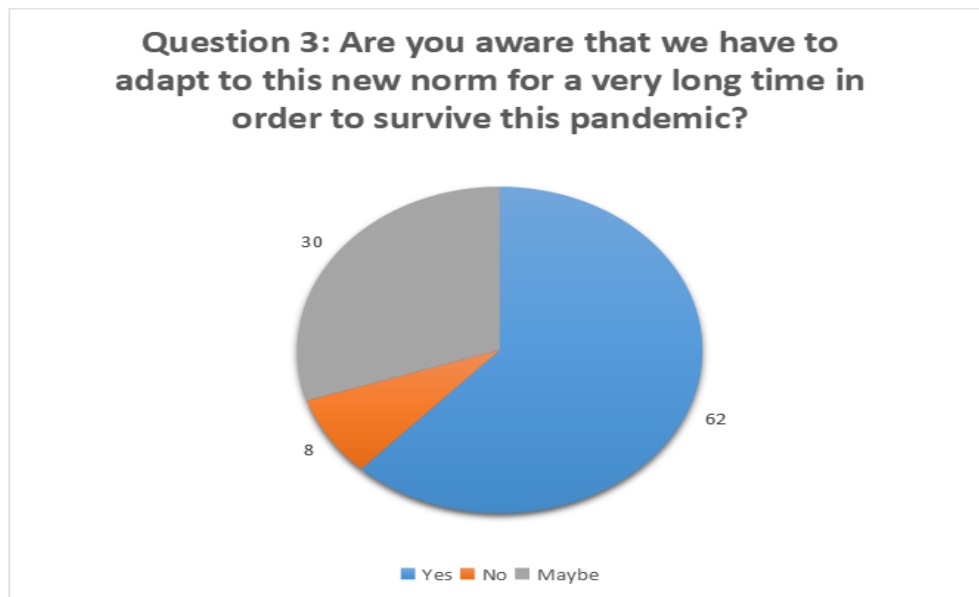


**Figure 2: The Regulations Of Different Stages Of Lockdown In Malaysia**

The second question was to identify whether the tertiary institution students are fully aware of the regulations for MCO, EMCO, CMCO, and RMCO. As shown in the pie chart above, 56 out of 100 respondents answered yes as they are fully aware of the differences between different stages of lockdown in Malaysia. On the other hand, 36 out of them answered maybe

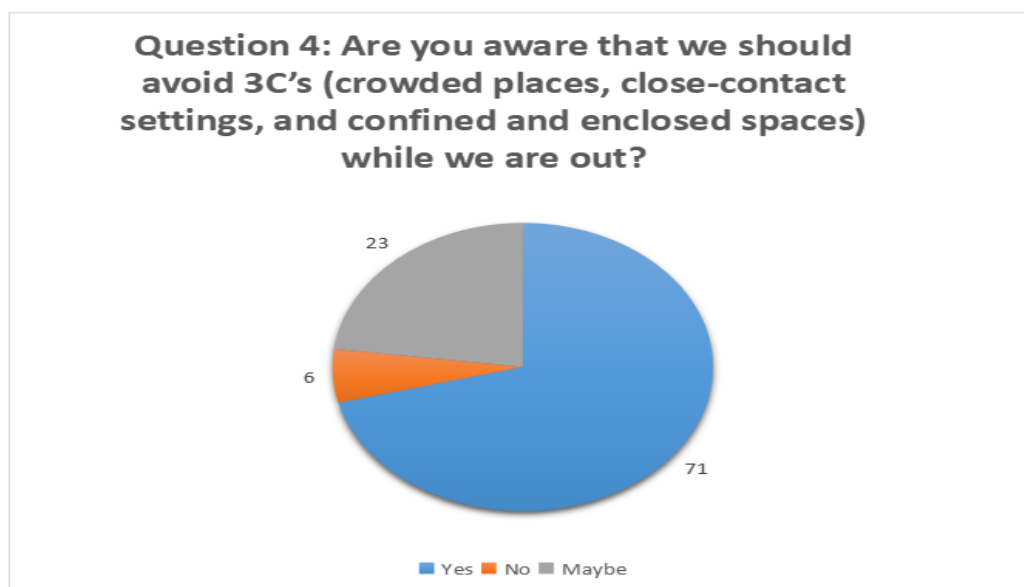


as they might be or might not be fully aware of the regulations. It indicates that most of them are aware of the SOPs in Malaysia.



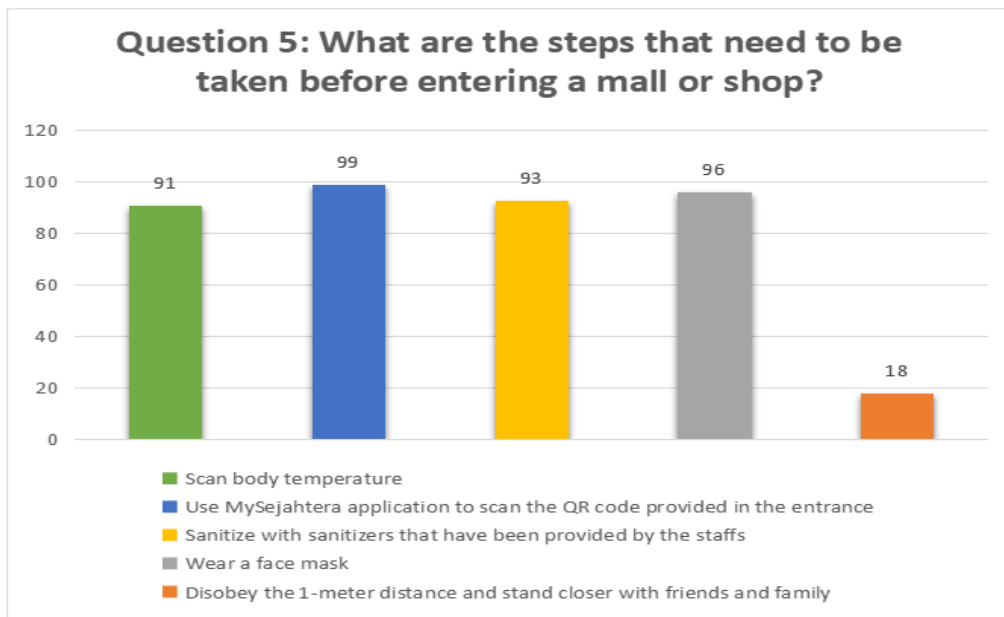
**Figure 3: The Adaptation Of Pandemic In Malaysia**

The third question was to identify whether tertiary students are aware that we have to adapt to this new norm for a very long time to survive the pandemic. As shown in the pie chart above, 62 out of 100 respondents answered yes as they are aware of the adaptation of the new norm to survive. On the other hand, 30 out of them answered maybe as they might be or might not be fully aware of adapting to the new norm. It indicates that most of them are aware of the adaptation towards the new norm in Malaysia.



**Figure 4: The Awareness Regarding 3C's In Malaysia**

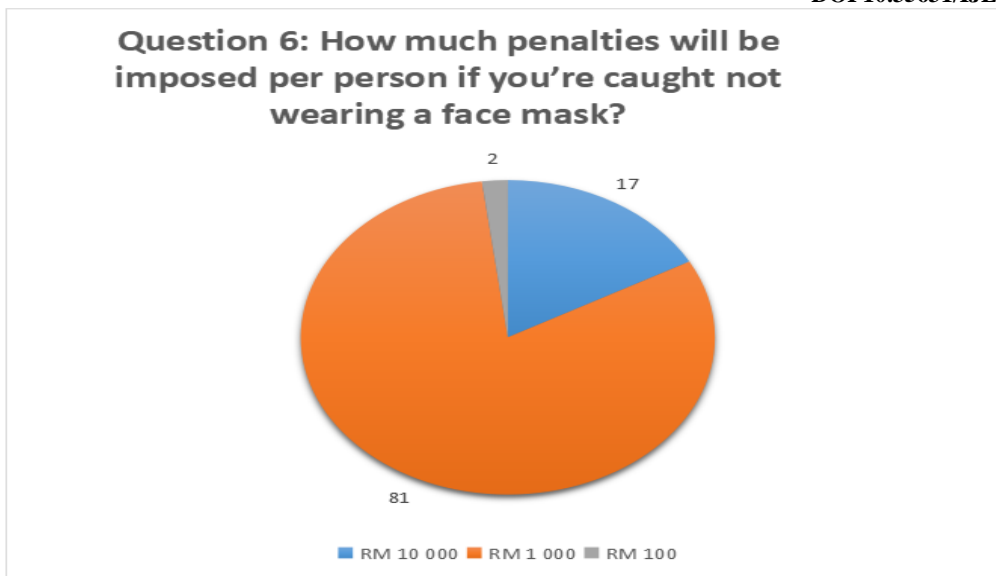
The fourth question was to identify whether tertiary students are aware that we should avoid 3C's, crowded places, close-contact settings and confined and enclosed spaces while we are out. As shown in the pie chart above, 71 out of 100 respondents answered yes as they are aware of the 3C's. On the other hand, 23 out of them answered maybe as they might be or might not be fully aware of the 3C's. It indicates that most of them are aware of the 3C's that the Malaysian government has implemented.



**Figure 5: The Steps That Need To Be Taken Before Entering A Shop Or Mall**

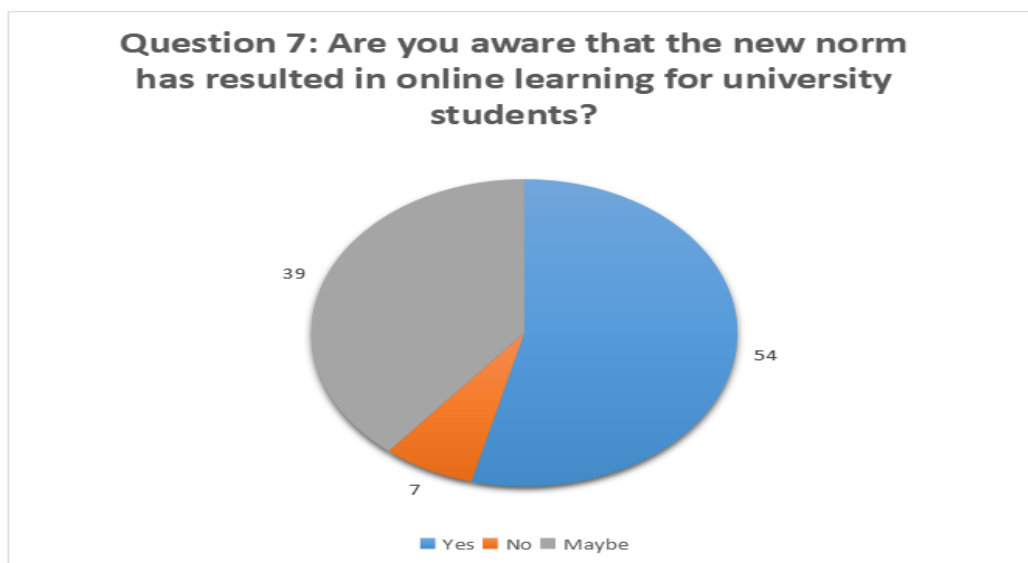
The fifth question was to identify the steps that need to be taken before entering a mall or shop. As shown in the bar graph above, 99 out of 100 respondents are aware that we need to use the MySejahtera application (a government-imposed app to monitor movement and pandemic spread) and scan the QR code that has been provided. 96% of them are aware of wearing a face mask. Therefore, it indicates that most of the respondents are aware of the steps that need to be followed before entering a shop or mall. However, only 18 out of 100 respondents choose the option that says disobey the 1-meter distance and stand closer with friends and family.





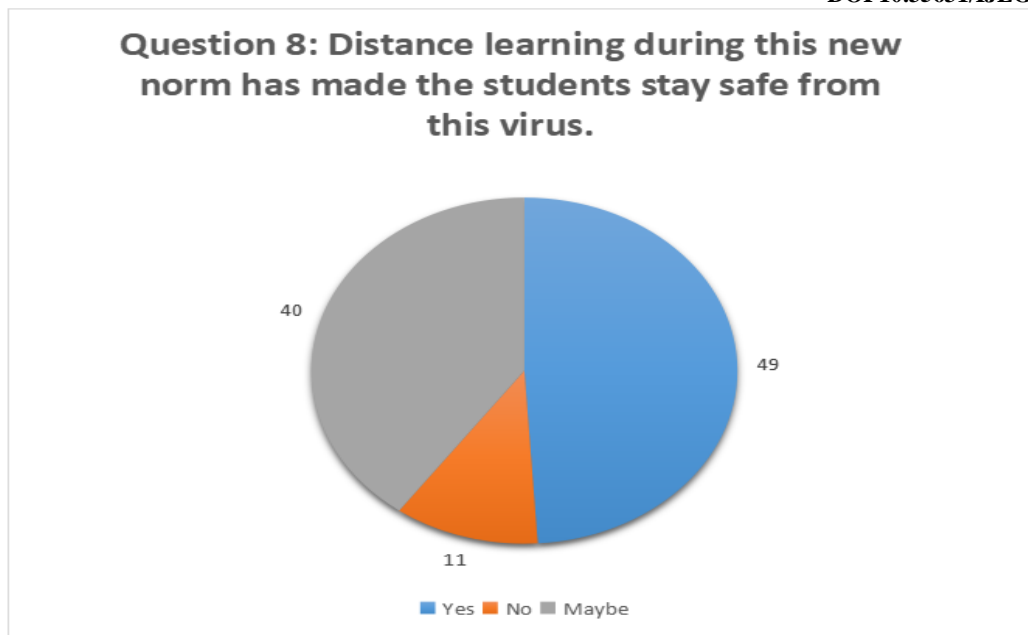
**Figure 6: The Awareness Regarding Penalties Imposed For Not Wearing A Face Mask**

The sixth question was to identify whether tertiary students are aware of the penalties imposed for not wearing a face mask. As shown in the pie chart above, 81 out of 100 respondents answered RM 1 000. On the other hand, 17 out of them answered RM 10 000. This pie chart indicates that most of them are aware of the penalty imposed for not wearing a face mask.



**Figure 7: The Awareness Regarding New Norms And Online Learning**

The seventh question was to identify whether tertiary students are aware of the new norm that resulted in online learning. As shown in the pie chart above, 54 out of 100 respondents answered yes. On the other hand, 39 out of all respondents choose the option maybe.



**Figure 8: The Awareness Regarding Distance Learning**

The eighth question aims to identify respondents' views on whether distance learning during this new norm has made the students stay safe from the virus. As shown in the pie chart above, 49 respondents agree that distance learning made students stay safe from the virus. Meanwhile, 40 respondents answered maybe while 11 answered no, respectively.

### Discussion

Findings on the awareness of SOPs imposed by the Malaysian government suggest most respondents are aware of its implementation. The government takes efforts in educating Malaysian citizens regarding the SOPs from time to time. There are many infographic and information regarding the Malaysian SOPs available on various social media platforms. Additionally, respondents are exposed to advertisements and reminders on televisions, radios, billboards, and newspapers.

Further, respondents are aware of penalties imposed for not wearing a face mask. Initially, the penalties imposed were RM 1 000; however, the penalty for those who breach the rules and regulations will be determined by the court and according to offences under Act 342 Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases (Bernama 2021). Fines under this Act such as failure to wear masks for first-time offenders, failure to record personal details before entering premises, and failure to maintain physical distance are set at RM1 500. The government has also made rules and regulations pertaining to steps needed prior to entering a shop or a mall. Findings from this study suggests that most are aware on the need to follow the 1-meter distance. For example, respondents are aware of the need to obey the social distance imposed when they are out of their homes.

In regard to the awareness on new norms and online learning, findings suggest more than half of respondents are aware of the new norm implemented. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education made sure that students learn online with exceptions made to some critical courses which require practical work at institutions. Students are aware that institutions took careful approach to limit disruption to students studying process in pandemic times. Finally, students

are aware that implementation of distance learning in times of the pandemic was made to prioritize students' safety above other matters in a health crisis faced by the nation.

### Conclusion

Information in times of crisis is vital. This situation is even more crucial in times of health crisis. With COVID-19 being an unprecedented and complex crisis that the world is witnessing, governments need to be proactive to find solutions to curb the spread of the pandemic. It is important for government to utilise all communication platforms to disseminate any new developments pertaining to the pandemic.

Social media platforms have been used by news organizations in breaking news events (Vis 2013) and thus becomes a popular tool among social media users to obtain up-to-date information. This study has shown the use of social media is ever more crucial in times of pandemic. As much as conventional media is seen as being the more credible platform, information relayed from social media is highly relied upon particularly among the younger generation. This is partly due to the fact that the young are brought up with social media and the world wide web embedded into their lives and where instant gratification is the key. The need for quick access to information is a common habit for the younger generation. Thus, social media is seen as the primary, if not the main platform for information consumption.

Students of tertiary institutions in Malaysia have shown high level of awareness to the norms created from the pandemic in which information pertaining to the SOPs, rules and regulations were obtained via social media. This suggests for any government to get their message across, it needs to pay attention to not only conventional platforms but the multitude of social media platforms available because in times of a health crisis where information is highly sought upon, the role of social media as this study has shown, is heightened.

Previous study on the pandemic suggests social media has emerged as a powerful tool in shaping public understanding and behavior (Li et al. 2020). This study has shown that students and the young generation are more likely to be aware of any new development such as on a health crisis like COVID-19 through their use of social media. Thus, the role of social media as disseminator of information particularly in times of health crisis should not be sidelined.

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