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COVID-19 AND RACISM IN THE MALAYSIAN MEDIA¹

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ABSTRACT

Since its onset in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected Malaysia. The Malaysian population became acutely aware of the virus, leading to the implementation of a nationwide lockdown known as the Movement Control Order (MCO) from March to May 2020, aimed at mitigating the virus's spread. However, despite these efforts, as of February 2023, Malaysia continues to grapple with COVID-19, with reported cases ranking as the third highest in Southeast Asia. This paper delves into the multifaceted implications of the pandemic on Malaysia's financial and social stability. Specifically, it explores the impact of the crisis on interethnic relationships, examining instances of racism and prejudice that have emerged during this challenging period. Through an analysis of various news reports, this study aims to shed light on the dynamics that have affected the relationships among different ethnic groups within the Malaysian society. By uncovering and examining these instances of racism and prejudice, this research not only provides insights into the social repercussions of the pandemic in Malaysia but also contributes to the broader international scholarship on the social consequences of global crises. The findings of this study can inform policymakers, researchers, and practitioners worldwide in understanding the complexities of interethnic dynamics during times of crisis and in developing strategies to foster inclusivity, harmony, and social resilience within diverse societies. Ultimately, this research underscores the significance of cross-cultural understanding and cooperation in building a more inclusive and resilient global community in the face of future challenges.

Keywords: COVID-19, media, racism, unity, media discourse

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Introduction

According to statistics provided by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, The COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia as of 10 February 2023 ranked the third highest number of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia behind Vietnam and Indonesia, and fourth in the number of COVID-19 deaths in Southeast Asia behind Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The Health Ministry originally referred to this disease as the 2019 Novel Coronavirus' however, the Malaysia media named it "Wuhan Coronavirus" or "Wuhan Pneumonia", a translation of the Malay word "Radang paru-paru Wuhan" and later to be known as 'New Coronavirus pneumonia'. However, following a suggestion by World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 February 2020, The Malaysia ministry of health and Malaysia Media have referred to this disease as 'COVID-19'.

Although Malaysia's government has undergone political turbulence since 2020, led by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, followed by Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, continued with Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob and the current prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim cabinets. Director-General of Health Noor Hisham Abdullah, under the Health Ministry, has been responsible for medical response and preparedness for the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia since January 2020.

The first cases in Malaysia were confirmed among travellers from China in Johor via Singapore on 25 January 2020 (Sipalan & Holmes, 2020). The number of imported cases is until March 2020 with the surge of COVID-19 cases involving several local clusters such as the *Tablighi Jamaat* religious gathering in Sri Petaling, Kuala Lumpur. The nationwide lockdown, named Movement Control Order (MCO), was imposed by the previous prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin on 18 March 2020, and it was later extended to early May 2020. The gradual decline in the number of COVID-19 cases in early May 2020 has encouraged the Malaysia government to introduce the "Conditional Movement Control Order" (CMCO) on 4 May 2020 (Sukumaran, 2020).

Such an arrangement is an initiative of the Malaysian government to allow most business sectors in Malaysia to be reopened under strict standard operating procedures (SOPs). The number of the COVID-19 cases continues to stabilize, and the Malaysian government made a further adjustment by implementing the "Recovery Movement Control Order" (RMCO) on 10 June 2020. At that time, the Malaysian government had planned to end the RMCO on 31 August 2020.

However, the situation is not under control as planned, so it was to be extended till the year-end. This has caused several sectors to remain closed, and strict travel restrictions from several countries remain in place. In September 2020, Malaysia faced the third wave of COVID-19 due to the result of the Sabah state election. The situation worsened when several outbreaks at Top Glove facilities in late 2020 (Sukumaran, 2020). The Malaysian government reintroduced CMCO



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restrictions in most states in November 2020 to counter the outbreak. And it was extended to 4 March 2021.

The situation in Malaysia continues the rise and fall of the COVID-19 cases. A "total lockdown" from 1 June was extended indefinitely, as the severe and continued spread of the Delta variant. Following high vaccination rates in the adult population against COVID-19 (Anand, 2021) and a decrease in the number of severe cases of the disease since September 2021, Malaysia announced its intention to transition to treating COVID-19 as an endemic disease by the end of October 2021, with more generalized restrictions being eased. A fifth wave fuelled by the Omicron variant led to daily record cases in February and March 2022 but is marked by lower hospitalizations and deaths than during the spread of the Delta variant. As of March 2022, the BA.2 Omicron sub variant was projected to be the dominant strain in the country (Shahrin Aizat Noorshahrizam, 2022). As of 24 April 2022, over 80% of the population and 97% of adults have fully inoculated through the country's vaccination programme commenced in late February 2021 (COVID NOW, 2023).

This paper seeks to investigate incidences of racism during Covid-19 as reported in the media. A review of news coverage in major Malaysian media was conducted in order to find out how the pandemic and subsequent government measures affected racial harmony among the Malaysian public. It is hypothesized that the introduction of the MCO and other Covid-19 measures have had a big impact on racial harmony in Malaysia.

Socialization plays a big part in many religious and cultural practices in Malaysia. This can be seen in many celebrations such as Aidilfitri or Chinese New Year where emphasis is put in congregating with friends and family as part of the celebration. Many of these practices have been halted due to measures put in place during the pandemic such as prohibition of public assembly and social distancing practices. However, a fraction of the public still went against these measures and were reported in the media. Some of these incidences were insinuated to be driven by religious or cultural practices of certain groups, thus leading to generalizations and prejudiced remarks against these groups.

The Pandemic and Racism

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multicultural country and there have been many research done on how COVID-19 has affected the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. One of the most significant impacts has been on financial stability of many Malaysians. The World Bank conducted a high frequency household monitoring survey in 2021 and found that while there is an increase of 5% of adults working after the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic, one third of those who worked before the pandemic experienced work disruptions while 27% experienced reduced incomes. Furthermore, lower income earners and informal workers were more likely to have experienced income losses while remaining employed.

Surviving the pandemic thus requires sound financial management. However, Loke (2017) have found that those with low income have poorer financial management compared to high and middle come earner. More interestingly, there was also a difference in financial management



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between ethnicities especially between Chinese and Malays as it was found that “the Chinese reduces the probability of having poor financial management behaviour by 8.5% but increases the probability of having good financial management behaviour by 6.8%” (p. 44). These findings were similar to a study done by Mustapha and Jeyaram (2015) who found that Chinese students were shown to be significantly more financially literate than Malay and Indian students.

In addition, while the Malaysian government has provided aid, not all Malaysians were able to benefit from it equally. Osterrieder et al., (2020) have conducted a survey to understand the impact of the pandemic and public health measures on 5058 respondents from Thailand, Malaysia, the UK, Italy and Slovenia between May and June 2020. The findings showed that public health initiatives in these five different countries had disproportionate social and economic impacts on individuals in different countries and socioeconomic groups.

Studies have also shown that there is inequality in healthcare especially among minorities during COVID-19. Ibarra-Nava et al., (2021) have investigated the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous people in Mexico by looking at the data from the Mexican Ministry of Health from February to August 2020. They found that 16.5% of Indigenous people died from COVID-19 compared to 11.1% of non-Indigenous people. Furthermore, Indigenous people who were not hospitalized also showed a higher mortality rate compared to non-Indigenous people, with the former being 3.7% and the latter 1.7%. This suggested that non-Indigenous people have better access to healthcare compared to Indigenous people in Mexico.

According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, COVID-19 had a disproportionately negative impact on black populations in terms of hospitalizations and fatalities in the United States of America. According to Black Demographics, 35% of black Americans in Michigan tested positive and 40% of deaths were among black Americans despite only 15% of the state population being black. Meanwhile, 30% of black Americans in Illinois tested positive and 39% of deaths were among black Americans despite only 16% of the state population being black. Furthermore, a large percentage of black Americans work in a variety of lower-paying positions that state and municipal governments have deemed "essential," such as delivery, food preparation, and grocery store services.

Gawthrop (2023) reported that in a study by the APM Research Lab, COVID-19 death rates were much higher for Native, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Black Americans than for either white or Asian Americans. Latino Americans saw the biggest rise in mortality, with the exception of white Americans, who all have higher death rates nationally. In England, ethnic minorities also have disproportionately higher mortality rates compared to white people. Barr et al., (2020) reported that by April 2020, 19% of deaths from COVID-19 in hospitals were from the Black, Asian, and minority ethnic populations despite these groups only making up 15% of the population. These reports all show that health disparities exist among minority population in different countries as many of these groups are less socioeconomically advantaged, have worse healthcare experiences, and have lower health insurance coverage, all of which lead to insufficient healthcare use.



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Media Discourse on COVID-19 and Ethnicities

Access to or control over public speech and communication is viewed as having access to 'symbolic' key resources, according to Van Dijk (2011). Those with more control over or influence over more discourse are therefore more powerful. Additionally, according to Kress (1983), the media serves both ideological and political objectives. He contends that the media has the power to mould the intellectual framework of a society, whether it be through convincing readers to abandon their ideological allegiance or by strengthening it.

Despite having enjoyed independence for 65 years, tension still exists between different ethnicities in the country. There have been many racially-motivated incidents reported in the media during the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, many of them involving comments on cultural and religious practices, inciting prejudice against certain groups, or derogatory comments. The coverage of these incidents in the media, thus, will have a negative impact on racial harmony.

This is especially true when insensitive comments were made by people with a perceived authority as the views expressed by them have more influence over society. In 2020, the vice president of Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia (PUTRA) threatened to lodge a police report against a school in Puchong for their Chinese New Year decorations which he deemed to be against the Constitution (Menon, 2020). In the same year, the Ministry of Education also released a circular to declare the 'Ponggal' celebration as 'haram' (Ong, 2020) while the Kedah Menteri Besar banned Thaipusam celebrations in the next year (Imran Hilmy, 2021).

During the spread of COVID-19, a think tank in Malaysia found that anti-Malay or anti-Islam sentiments rose after news reports in the 'tabligh cluster' surfaced in May while anti-Chinese sentiments spread after a Chinese cardiologist was found to have defied the Movement Control Order (Tham & Omar, 2020). Furthermore, there were also claims that there was racial discrimination in administering the vaccines where the Pfizer vaccine was given to Muslims and the Sinovac vaccine was given to non-Muslims. However, Khairy Jamaluddin, who is the Coordinating Minister for the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme has completely denied these claims, citing that "No segregation is made based on religion or race in the NIP" (Arumugam, 2021).

There was also an alarming emerging trend of resident associations and condominium managements requiring the disclosure of confidential medical information related to the COVID-19 status of people living in their neighbourhood. There were demands for test results, copies of passports and pictures of those who tested positive. Most were aimed at foreigners. Residents were encouraged to inform on their neighbours (Azrul Mohd Khalib, 2021). All this was being done supposedly in the name of collective protection, safety, and security. However, the effect was that there was increased suspicion against foreign residents instead.

On Twitter, a video portraying a Chinese woman accusing Hospital Melaka on 25th March 2020 of not treating patients went viral. Her tweet was later followed by a string of online attacks against the woman based on her ethnicity including sentences such as 'leaving her brain in Wuhan' (@thisisstjau, 2020 & @fatfitfot, 2020) and comments such as: "*Dia lah yang panic buying, dia lah*



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yang berebut roti gardenia macam zombi, dia lah jogging time perintah berkurung, dia lah yang komplek hospital lambat. Erghhh. Kang cakap banyak, kata racist pulekss. Tapi tu lah. Aduhhh". Translation: They are the ones panic buying, they are the ones fighting over bread like zombies, they are the ones jogging during the movement control order, they are the ones complaining about hospitals being slow. If I say too much, I'll be called racist. But that's how it is. The original tweet had been suspended after this incident. Most of the time, Malaysian uses profanities together with mentions of any ethnicities to vilify groups in social media platform (Tham & Omar, 2020).

Outside of Malaysia, COVID-19 also led to a rise of anti-Asian sentiment. Donald Trump, then President of the United States in 2020 called the virus the 'Chinese Virus' instead of its medical name due to it originating from Wuhan, China in late 2019 (Walker, 2022). The Pew Research Centre conducted survey and found that there is a rise in racism against Black and Asian Americans since the virus outbreak. According to the survey, 31% of Asian adults' report having experienced racial or ethnic slurs or jokes since the outbreak started, compared to 21% of Black adults, 15% of Hispanic adults, and 8% of white adults (Ruiz, Horowitz & Tamir, 2020).

Hate crimes against Asian Americans has also risen during the pandemic, as shown in an analysis by the Centre for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University. It was found that while generally, hate crimes fell by 7% in 2020, offences against Asians increased by over 150% (Yam, 2020). Furthermore, anti-Asian hate crimes was not isolated to only certain regions but occurred in all 50 states in the country (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). Anti-Asian hate incidents also rose in healthcare, as reported by Jan (2020). A Chinese American doctor was followed by a man who kept saying racist, profane things such as 'Why are you Chinese people killing everyone?' while other Asian American healthcare workers have also been told to 'go back to your country'.

The rise in these incidents can be connected to influential figures who perpetuate racist language in the media. By singling out certain groups of people in the country, politicians such as Trump create an 'us vs them' mentality to create social cohesion within one group and turning that into political capital. Kurilla (2021) have stated that creating boundaries between self and others strengthens social cohesion because it distances one from the 'othered' group and causing them to turn inwards to the community that they identify with.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is a pandemic that affected people of various ethnicities and cultures. However, as the literature have shown, there are groups and communities who are more vulnerable to its impact than others. People in lower income groups, minorities, and certain ethnic groups have been shown to suffer more consequences compared to other groups. The incidents of racism especially against ethnic Chinese have risen due to the virus originating from China. Furthermore, racist discourse perpetuated by people with influence over the news media has also exacerbated the situation. By singling out certain groups or using racist language such as 'Chinese Virus' or 'K*ling', it implies a certain permission for others to target these groups since their prejudices have been validated by these influential figures. Nevertheless, the reports of the incidence have also



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encouraged people to speak out against such prejudices. Coverage of racism is still considered minor compared to many other positive reports of Malaysians lending assistance to fellow Malaysians regardless of their backgrounds. Netizens have helped to spread positive messages about the lockdowns in their social media (Golingai, 2020), and many citizens have come together to help the more vulnerable population such as the B40, homeless population, and those living in abject poverty (Afiq Aziz, 2020). Without a doubt, the news media plays a big role in propagating racial tension by shining a spotlight on these remarks. Thus, media professionals must always be neutral when reporting and avoid inciting tension between the ethnic groups in Malaysia. Most especially, these reports can be catalysts for citizens to start conversations on racial inequality and racism which in turn will lead to unity.

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