Article

Crisis Communication through Social Media Platforms by Malaysian Indian Agencies

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A B S T R A C T

Crisis communication must be prompt, accurate, and accessible to all. Government agencies often use multiple channels to disseminate critical information quickly. Social media has been helpful in informing all stakeholders about institutional short- and long-term interests as well as raising public health awareness. Mitigative strategies and crisis response are improved when crisis communication is tailored to the social, cultural, and economic context of minority communities. Identifying and directing communications that are unique to a group, however, presents difficulties when a crisis arises. Therefore, this research aims to investigate how the Malaysian Indian Agencies (MIAs), use social media to reach out to minority Malaysian Indians to disseminate information during the COVID-19 pandemic. 16 MIAs with active social media pages, Facebook and Twitter, registered with the Registrar of Societies (ROS) were shortlisted. Content analysis was performed on social media posts which were published from 18 March 2020 until 31 August 2020. The posts were categorized based on crisis communication strategies, outlined based on past studies. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was conducted among the urban middle class and urban poor Indian residents in the Klang Valley. Findings reveal a notable paucity in the proactive presence of these agencies on social media platforms, indicating limited engagement in disseminating essential information during a crisis. While Facebook and Twitter were used, diverse channels like WhatsApp contributed to reaching out to the non-urban Indians. The use of Tamil shows efforts to overcome language barriers, supporting government initiatives to control the pandemic while potentially boosting the agencies' political influence among Tamil-speaking communities. This study underscores the need for government agencies and community organizations to adapt their outreach methods to ensure all segments of the population, especially linguistic minorities, have access to timely and accurate information during a crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION

A crisis may be defined as a major, unpredictable event that has potentially negative results and has the risk of escalating in intensity, which threatens important organizational values, and creates pressure to seek remedial action. This crisis would also jeopardize the current image of an organization or a country, and responding in a timely, accurate and transparent manner is paramount (Bruns & Keller, 2020). Communication is an essential component of population resilience which enables effective management of people and crises, providing important information on how to respond to a crisis to reduce loss and enhance recovery (Collins et al., 2011). Besides mainstream media such as radio and television, social media plays an important role in disseminating information (Balakrishnan et al., 2023).

Since the onset of the pandemic in Wuhan in December 2019, Malaysia enforced the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020 in compliance with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Livelihoods of millions of Malaysians were threatened by the spread of COVID-19. The fatal disease led to the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO), which resulted in a total lockdown where people were required to self-quarantine and isolate themselves. The complete closure of economic activities during the MCO resulted in income loss. Limited mobility during the MCO also hindered individuals' accessibility to food supplies and other essentials. Prevalence of mental health issues: anxiety, depression and distress were rising among Malaysians due to the intensity of the crisis, uncertainties of future and struggles in sustaining a healthy routine (Balakrishnan et al., 2022). Despite these issues, the lockdown continued for several months, as a necessary measure to stop the spread of COVID-19.

At one point, the Malaysian public turn to social media to show how much more the Health-Director's information and more importantly his soothing, empathetic words were much appreciated, as compared to the Health Minister, who was more concerned about giving general health advice and statistics (Wai, 2020), appeared only through the scheduled mainstream media. This was a clear instance of the need to communicate effectively when dealing with a crisis that was escalating by the day and causing huge loss of lives, mounting depression and pressure to get food supplies, medical supplies, and a host of other essentials, all with the risk of being infected by the deadly virus.

As if that was not enough, it was a tumultuous year of political challenges in Malaysia. There was a political struggle for leadership and the civil lawsuits against the Prime Minister did not help in calming the already emotionally heightened spirits of the people. Hence, amid the political and health crises, Malaysians prioritized their health concerns, while political concerns took a backseat. People needed information that was accurate, valid and more importantly gave some assurance on the life-threatening disease. To some extent, it can be inferred that the public's reliance on social media to interact with the government increased during the health crisis and lockdown period.

Hence, social media became the main means of crisis management, and the Ministry of Health and National Security Council (Ramakrishnan et al., 2022) constantly updated the public with facts and figures.

In fact, emergency services and emergency media organisations globally are already exploring ways to integrate social media into communication strategies (Turnbull & Cunningham, 2014). Interweaving mainstream media with social and online media is necessary especially in the context of natural disasters and other acute occurrences such as a pandemic. Social media platforms enabled the live streaming of important announcements, which had millions of followers glued to their devices in need of updates on the ongoing pandemic crisis. As people stayed quarantined at home, social media was their only source to the outside world, but as the media played an obvious informational and amplifying role in mitigating people's fears and desperation, the trust in the government was waning. Besides that, the government also sought the help of non-government agencies to disseminate information and highlight the emergent groups who play societal roles, and those who would coalesce in social media including providing emotional support for the individuals and families affected by the pandemic.

Meanwhile, scholars worldwide have observed that the burden of a national-level crisis is often heavier on ethnic minorities, due to existing racial discrimination, language barriers, and poverty (Lai et al., 2024). During a crisis-stricken period, providing culturally and ethnically competent messages improves crisis response and management by government agencies. However, recognizing and communicating community-specific risks and measures during a crisis is challenging (Quinn, 2008).

In Malaysia, ethnic Indians make up only 6.6% of the total population (Murugaiah, 2023). Therefore, this study investigates the role of Malaysian Indian Agencies (MIAs) in reaching out to those in need either virtually or through stringent physical meetings that maintained social distancing. MIAs' role in assisting the government to seek out ethnic minorities was crucial in managing a crisis that was affecting a large portion of the population. Before the emergence of social media, the main form of interaction between the MIAs and the Indian community was mainly through Tamil

newspapers such as *Tamil Malar*, *Makkal Osai* and *Nanban*. This is because, in the early days, the Tamil language was predominantly used as a mode of communication in Malaysia and represented the overall South Indian immigrants, who were largely transported during the reign of the British (Sinayah et al., 2023). Nowadays, MIAs have leveraged on the various social media platforms to disseminate messages immediately, with minimal language barriers and enhanced representation (Perumal et al., 2022).

Limited or lack of crisis communication planning impedes the effectiveness of government policies in ensuring the welfare and inclusivity of minority communities. Therefore, the research investigates how MIAs used social media to disseminate information about the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigative measures during the entire duration of the lockdown to their social media followers. Observing how MIAs execute crisis management virtually to reach out to minority communities is expected to provide insights to draft inclusive policies and devise collaborative strategies to resolve potential crises during a disaster or an outbreak in future. In addition, studying the social media rhetoric enables policy makers, health practitioners, and the general public to understand the discourse and communication processes that underpin the agenda of these agencies, political or otherwise.

Studies have also looked at crisis communication and public perception of COVID-19 risk in social media communication, particularly official directives that are either direct or indirect strategies when giving advice (Ow Yong et al., 2020). Studies of COVID-19 communication have also investigated the effective framing of messages (Gillman et al., 2023; Sinayah et al., 2021), the use of message appeals (Guttman, 2023) and the significance of considering emotion (Pollitt et al., 2023).

Fundamentally, crisis communication involves the engagement of relevant stakeholders to inform the risk of the crisis faced, intervention strategies as well as recovery. As part of crisis response, communication plays a key role in coordinating involved parties to minimize the impact of the crisis faced, and plan recovery strategies. Currently, there are two prominent theories in crisis communication, Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (1997) and Coombs Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2002). Both theories appear to focus on crises in corporate environments and how they can be resolved (Coombs & Laufer, 2018).

However, Coombs theory is the more relevant and generic of the two theories that addresses the current situational crisis. According to Coombs, (2007), crisis must be addressed through several factors: prevention, preparation, response and revision within the three-phase strategy for crisis communication, which are pre-crisis, during crisis and post-crisis. Therefore, this study utilizes the generic crisis communication model (see Figure 1), adapted from Coombs (2007) theory.

The model for Crisis Communication Strategy emphasizes the types of information disseminated during a crisis to the target audience. Based on past research (Coombs, 2010; LeGreco, 2012; Petit & Tedds, 2020; Zhang & Shay, 2019), five types of strategies are proposed to comprehensively address

Crisis Communication

Fig. 1: Model for Crisis Communication Strategy

a crisis and provide solutions. Pre-crisis timeframe is the pre-planning stage, where preparation and training in crisis communication are fundamental. Risk management planning is put in place to counter any future crisis. However, in the case of a global crisis that hits every nation, the preparation may be lacking particularly because a nation may only have encountered small-scaled crises that are contained within a community or a state.

During a crisis, the fundamental need to execute particular strategies, first involves the collection, analysis, reporting, and dissemination of information. This study is concerned with the communications that transpired during the pandemic situation. As the proposed crisis model is specific to the 'during' crisis phase, the pre-crisis and post-crisis time-frames are not discussed in this paper. The five strategies used within the 'during' crisis timeframe are: (a) preventive measures are communicated to include the stakeholders in minimizing the negative effects of the crisis (Coombs, 2010) , (b) intervention strategies are implemented to guide the audience when they are subjected to risk or an unintended situation, which also includes rescue, recovery, or rehabilitation options (Coombs, 2010) , (c) policy responses are to be observed and communicated at the organizational, national, and/or regional level, in order to collaborate and coordinate preparedness measures with multiple agencies (LeGreco, 2012), (d) social aspects of the crisis are to be addressed by providing financial, psychological, or physical support to the individuals impacted by the crisis (Petit & Tedds, 2020), to promote inclusivity and sustainability, and (e) an overview of post-crisis scenarios are to be discussed with the stakeholders to outline immediate rehabilitation strategies (Zhang & Shay, 2019).

While all five strategies are essential to wade through the crisis, ensuring inclusivity and reachability of every member of society through multilingual crisis communication is paramount and necessary to ensure the success of the strategies.

The main objective of the current study is therefore to investigate how the Malaysian Indian Agencies (MIAs), use social media to reach out to minority Malaysian Indians to disseminate information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three research questions were designed to achieve this objective:

1. What social media platforms were the mode of communication used by the MIAs?
2. What strategies were used in response to the crisis?
3. How effective was social media in communicating the crisis?

2. METHODS

Study Design

This study employs a qualitative approach in analysing the social media communication by MIAs. A content analysis was performed on the selected social media posts by MIAs, published over a 5-month period (18 March 2020 until 31 August 2020). This period covers the three phases of MCO implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, a semi-structured interview was conducted to understand the role of social media communication among urban Indians.

Source of Data

This study includes two sources of data: social media posts and interview responses of urban Indians. The social media platforms were Facebook and Twitter that were used by the MIAs during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Collection

A multi-level sampling procedure was used for this study, which started off with developing an initial list that was based on Indian clubs registered with the Registrar of Societies (ROS). Next, the scope was set to search for the two keywords "Malaysia" and "Indian" to narrow the search. The search showed 76 results for active clubs based on these criteria. The next controlling factor was to narrow the search to only clubs registered as representing Politics, Social and Welfare, for the purpose of the research. The short-listed clubs selected for this study, accounts for 6 political organizations, 8 welfare clubs and 20 social agencies. Among the 34, only 16 were further selected as they have a Facebook page in their registered names. Notably, only five were actively posting on their Facebook pages during the lockdown period and only one political party, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) has an active Twitter account.

Semi-structured Interview

In order to determine the effectiveness of the contents posted in the above social media platforms, a semi-structured interview was also conducted on

15 respondents residing in two states, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Through snowball sampling, a key informant, a teacher from a tailoring centre aged 53, and who is literate was contacted. She introduced a few of her neighbours, friends and their friends, as well as her students who became respondents for the interview.

The two states were chosen due to two primary reasons, firstly, Selangor is the state with the greatest number of Indians at 40% while Federal Territory has 9% of Indians from the total Indian population of 1.96 million in the country (Zulkifli & Salleh, 2023). The 15 respondents were sufficient to gauge the use of social media by MIAs.

The interview was conducted in early September (post-MCO period). The 10-minute interview was held via Google meet. The open-ended questions were mainly developed to gain insights into how the urban middle-class Indians and the urban poor dealt with the crisis, and whether the social media platforms were the mode of communication. The selection criteria was based on respondents who read and listen to Tamil news through any medium and are literate. A set of 6 questions were asked, basically (a) the type of media preferred by the respondents, (b) which channel gave the most COVID related news, (c) which channel was the most trusted and reliable (d) did the respondents seek help based on the information given, (e) was the information helpful, (f) was there any form of support given in the message.

Data Analysis

Content analysis is used to first ascertain codes that reflect the pandemic, such as 'COVID-19', 'நடமாட்ட கட்டுப்பாட்டு ஆணை MCO' (Movement Control Order), 'MOH' (Ministry of Health)'. Next, postings that shared similar templates to disseminate information on food, medical and all other types of aid were compiled, as these postings would be considered as a single type of posting. The aforementioned crisis communication strategies were adopted to categorize the posts. Posts from each category is then analysed in detail for the forms and functions, structure and stylistics.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The frequency of COVID-19-related posts during the lockdown was tabulated to answer the first research question, what social media platforms were the mode of communication used by the MIAs.

Results showed that Facebook (FB) posts from five identified pages, namely the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), All Malaysian Indian Progressive Front (IPF), Malaysian Indian Tour and Travel Association (MITTA), Malaysian Indian Space Intellectuals Association (MISIA), and the Malaysian Indian Graduate Society for Research, Innovation & Human Capital Development (MIGS) used social media platforms. The details are classified and shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Facebook posts of MIAs relevant to Covid-19 (18 March – 31 August 2020)

E	F	PM	I	PR	S	PO
MIC	16496	1	0	1	2	0
IPF	129	0	0	0	76	0
MITTA	524	0	2	5	0	2
MISIA	656	0	0	0	1	0
MIGS	436	0	0	8	0	2

Note: E = Entities, F = Followers, PM = Preventive Measures, I = Intervention, PR = Policy Response, S = Social Support, PO = Post-crisis outlook

The language of communication in mainstream and social media was in Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil as well as in select indigenous languages.

Meanwhile, studies have reported the prevalent use of hashtags, such as #StaySafe, #StayAtHome or # COVID-19 to disseminate pandemic-related information, and to establish connections with the followers and the general public during the pandemic (Shah & Tomer, 2020). Hashtags are perceived to be a social media innovation to make information more accessible to like-minded people and enhance audience interaction with certain discussion topics. It is observed that less COVID-19 related hashtags were used on these five identified Facebook pages. For example, IPF and MISIA used none of the COVID-19 related hashtags in their posts. Nevertheless, MIGS has attached #StayAtHome in each of their posts since 5 April 2020, even for unrelated contents. On the other hand, MIC's Twitter had only used #StayAtHome thrice, while hashtags #INFOMIC, #MICNews and #MIC_Cares have been used more frequently to publicize their party activities.

The following sections will discuss the three research questions in detail.

Social Media Platforms as Modes of Communication

Among the five identified social media pages, MIC and IPF are politically affiliated parties. IPF has 76 COVID-19 related posts, and all posts disseminate and inform the social support provided to the public. Meanwhile, MIC's Facebook page which has 16496 followers (higher than the followers of IPF Facebook at 212 followers) had only four COVID-19 related posts which were policy information (n=1), social support (n=2), and prevention measures (n=1). Meanwhile, MITTA and MIGS are social agencies which posted mostly policy-related information, accounting for 5 and 8 posts respectively. In contrast, MISIA only shared one post relevant to the lockdown, to promote graduate upskilling through a free course-membership provided by the Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC). From the interview conducted, all the respondents checked out MIC Facebook, while their children checked out Twitter. Only 5 checked out both MIC and IPF platforms to gain information. None of them were aware of any other agencies that provided information on the COVID pandemic.

Table 2: Classified Twitter posts from MIC's account

E	F	PM	I	PR	S	PO
MIC	1265	4	5	8	158	7

Note: E = Entities, F = Followers, PM = Preventive Measures, I = Intervention, PR = Policy Response, S = Social Support, PO = Post-crisis outlook

Compared to all the agencies above, MIC has been the only active MIA on the Twitter platform throughout the lockdown period. The distribution posts are plotted in Table 2.

MIC had a total of 182 COVID-19 related communication through Twitter. Although most of the posts did not use phrases like 'stay at home' or 'COVID-19', or 'Corona' posts that highlighted the agency's initiative to bring back stranded Malaysian citizens in India is accepted as COVID-19 related, as these are social impacts affecting the public due to the pandemic.

The second research question on what strategies were used in response to the crisis are discussed below.

Crisis response strategies

The following section describes the second research question on the use of each of the communication strategies in response to the COVID-19 crisis as illustrated in Figure 1. Identifying and describing the use of these strategies enable the public to comprehend a crisis and navigate effectively toward recovery.

Preventive measures

The WHO recommended several measures to curb transmission, thus, it is important to remind the public to be aware of transmission risks and reduce unnecessary travelling. None of the observed organizations posted explicitly regarding the preventive measures recommended by WHO or the Malaysian Ministry of Health (MMOH) during this specific period of study. This is because such information was already conveyed to the public through other mass media such as television, radio and newspapers.

However, through one of its FB posts, MIC assured the public that during official meetings, all committee members were subject to the same Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) stated by the MMOH to reduce the risk of transmission, particularly sanitizing one's hands and scanning the body temperature before attending the physical meeting. This post also implied that the MIC viewed the pandemic seriously and appropriate measures were taken to ensure everyone followed health procedures as shown in Example 1. This post is retained as is in its original form.

Example 1:

Our body has been checked and hands sanitised twice before and after the meeting with the compliance of MMOH. The meeting was very vital to highlight education issues that needs an urgent look that is affecting tens of thousands of students.

Source: (Malaysian Indian Congress, 2020c)

By complying with the MMOH's guidelines and the necessity to have checkpoints on premises to reduce disease transmission, the MIC points out that everyone was at risk of the disease and there are no exceptions to the government's health policy recommendations. This preventive method includes identifying risks, risk reduction measures, and initial crisis response, as stipulated in the first strategy (Seeger, 2006). This outbreak did not provide enough time to plan a response strategy to completely avoid disease transmission, but

transmission was somewhat contained through observing the SOPs as the best possible way to further mitigate the crisis.

Intervention Strategies

Intervention strategies aim to minimize the risk and impacts of a crisis faced (Coombs, 2010). Among the many industries in Malaysia, the tourism industry has suffered the most in terms of the economic impacts due to the lockdown and travel restrictions (Foo et al., 2021). On Facebook, MITTA communicated intervention strategies to minimize economic impacts in the tourism industry by providing guidance and explaining the *Penjana* Scheme, a government initiated short-term economic recovery plan. The intervention exercise was conducted in Tamil through webinars (Geran Khas Prihatin Application Tutorial). These webinars were organised for tour and travel agents to plan their business in wading through the pandemic, measures to sustain the business in the future, and how to apply for grants and loans through these schemes.

Meanwhile, the MIC provided contact information through Twitter to those who needed financial assistance to purchase food and necessities. However, several stipulations were put in place to prioritize those who would benefit from the financial assistance. The target recipients included single mothers, persons living with disabilities, senior citizens, as well as residents of welfare homes as identified by the Malaysian Welfare Department (JKM). Interestingly, eleven of the 15 interviewed, informed that they received the aid, after reading the message shared on social media, and were grateful that throughout the pandemic, there was constant help, as they knew where to seek help. A virtual link was also provided by the MIC through which applicants could seek monetary and social aid. This dissemination of information made the public more aware of the aid available and where to seek for help. The communicated information is accessible to everyone who browses the website, as shown in Example 2.

Example 2:

If you don't have money to buy food due to COVID-19 MCO, follow the instructions below to get help from the welfare department. If you are a single mother, OKU (disabled) or a senior citizen you will be prioritized by JKM. All you need is to directly contact 15999 and inform.

Source: (Malaysian Indian Congress, 2020a)

Policy Responses

As this pandemic has posed threats to the healthcare, economic and security systems of the nation, many policies have been altered and imposed to remediate the crisis. Financial aid was introduced through government initiatives such as the *Bantuan Prihatin Nasional* (Governmental Financial Aid) and *Penjana* schemes which played a role in buffering the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, policy communication is critical in helping citizens to stay vigilant and make informed decisions such as following the SOPs, applying for business grants and requesting for a loan moratorium. MIGS and MITTA posted specific information on education and tourism respectively, updates on the latest policies were made, and SOPs to be adhered to during the lockdown period.

MIGS is an NGO that has education as its core business and targets current and prospective undergraduate students. Although MIGS merely re-shares excerpts from news articles and screenshots of official documents, such sharing potentially reiterates the need to follow the policies set to mitigate the crisis as well as to ensure that students are aware and have accessibility to government policies. Meanwhile, MITTA gained recognition as a competent travel association in the industry. Their core business was then to present policy information through social discourses via webinars. All policy-related information was translated into the Tamil language as their target audience were Malaysian Indian entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, MIC through its Twitter posts indicated the latest policy changes with the #INFOMIC and #MICNews hashtags as an indicator. Some of the important posts were highlighted in the Tamil language, as Tamil is the lingua franca of most Malaysian Indians.

The post in Example 3, is the Tamil version which is truncated to provide only the important message extracted from the Malay version. As it is important to share accurate and timely crisis information to ease uncertainty, the post is much needed by the community to keep abreast with the updates. This is especially crucial as the MCO was extended for a fourth time and in each phase of the pandemic the public were required to adhere to lists of specific SOPs.

Measures such as hefty penalties and fines for the public who infringe such SOPs were introduced to curb a further spread of the disease. Hence, communicators are expected to provide assistance

and essential information during the crisis (Veil et al., 2011).

Example 3:

Source text	Translated version
4-ஆம் கட்ட நடமாட்ட கட்டுப்பாட்டு ஆணையின் போது அத்தியாவசிய தேவைகளுக்கு இருவர் செல்ல அனுமதி.	During phase 4 of the Movement Control Order, two persons are allowed to go out for essential needs.
Ketua keluarga yang keluar membeli makanan, ubat-ubatan atau barangan keperluan harian sepanjang tempoh Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP) Fasa 4 bermula hari ini, kini dibenarkan membawa seorang lagi ahli keluarga bersama. Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan Fasa Ke-4 29 April – 12 Mei	Heads of family can now be accompanied by a family member when going out to buy food, medicines or daily necessities during the Movement Control Order (PKP) phase 4 which begins today. Movement Control Order Phase 4 29 April – 12 May

Source: (Malaysian Indian Congress, 2020d)

Social Support

Social support can be informational, providing emotional advice and tangible assistance such as food and groceries during a crisis. Both IPF and MIC communicated their capacity to offer financial and food assistance through their pages by posting pictures of Indians receiving help from the party representatives. Both parties posted similar information on the type of help and support provided, the specific branch, sponsor's name, and location of the disbursement of food aid and donation. All the posts had similar formats which appeared to suggest that the same template was reused in the subsequent posts throughout the four MCO phases by all branch offices of the respective political parties across the country. An example of a typical post with a standard format used by the IPF on the distribution of food and monetary aid is shown in Example 4.

Example 4:

IPF _____ branch) Division presented donations of basic necessities to the Indian community around the ___(location)_____ on ___(date)_____ . We will continue to help the community who need it during these difficult times, hopefully to ease the burden of those affected by the COVID-19 Transmission. Donation for these necessities was provided by the _____(sponsor's name)_____ .

Source: (All Malaysian Indian Progressive Front, 2020)

The first topic sentence explains the main message of the entire post. In this case, the Indian community in a particular area received donations in the form of basic necessities. Demonstrating genuine concern and recognizing emotions are considered best practices in managing a crisis (Veil et al., 2011). The IPF used the exclusive pronoun 'we' to show that the party is there to do the needful for the Indian community. The phrase 'we will continue' indicates that IPF has extended help prior to the current post to those affected by the pandemic and would continue to provide service for those who still needed help. IPF was also practicing transparency in revealing the sponsors who donated money or gave in-kind for this project. This suggests that the IPF has a good network of philanthropists and sponsors, who entrusted IPF to extend help to the needy.

MIC has gone a step further by launching an online application named *utavi* (www.utavi.com.my) meaning 'help' on 18 May 2020 to reach out to the community. Through this post, the purpose and function of the online application are stated in Example 5.

Example 5:

We note that the vulnerable communities in the country who have been affected due to the lockdown are in dire need of help. We hope that through this initiative, we would be able to generate food and grocery which will provide some much-needed relief to families within various communities nationwide.

Source: (Malaysian Indian Congress, 2020b)

MIC starts the post by stating its observation, 'we note' and acknowledge that there are communities who need help. The exclusive pronoun 'we' in 'we note', 'we hope' and 'we would be able to' shows the concern and compassion of the party, as well as their ability and accessibility to reach out to the ones who are at a disadvantage. The phrases 'vulnerable communities' and 'much-needed relief' express compassion and empathy, which are considered best practices of communication during a crisis (Seeger, 2006). This help was extended nationwide. Through providing social support and publicizing them via social media, both MIC and IPF are affirming their presence and role in society. This publicity is expected to indirectly boost their ratings and provides an avenue for political mileage for the upcoming general elections.

Post-Crisis Scenarios

The term 'new norm' was introduced to facilitate the citizens to adopt and adjust to the

new routine practices as the pandemic had caused many policy shifts. As the pandemic continues, this last stage of crisis communication strategy was yet to be concluded. There were three agencies, MIC, MITTA and MIGS that continued to engage online with the community to deal with post-crisis scenarios. MIC Twitter promoted its party Deputy President's interview and his outlook on impacts and challenges in the employment sector. Meanwhile, MITTA and MIGS were the only agencies which posted outlooks after the pandemic related to tourism and tertiary education. This information, post-crisis, clearly shows that the agencies were predicting from its research and expert knowledge how the nation had to cope and pan through life after the devastating effects of the pandemic to every aspect of human life.

In summary, classifying the types of information shared during a crisis helped the public to be aware and understand what the pandemic was about, the effects as well as realising the role played by the MIAs in addressing challenges faced by the Malaysian Indians. The customized messages were interspersed with English and Malay languages, but the Tamil language was mainly used to convey the messages to the community. Among the identified MIAs, MIC utilized all five strategies (i) – (v) from the Crisis Communication Strategy model. The political parties, MIC and IPF, through their social support and communication gained mileage in terms of popularity and public trust during the pandemic, as discussed below. Hence, social media is not only for publicity but also to communicate important information and provide assurance to the beneficiary society.

Usually, the question of who the beneficiaries are in a crisis is easily ascertained if it is confined within a group or a particular community or in an organisation. However, in the case of a global crisis, the pandemic did not choose its victims as everyone was affected in many ways. While the magnitude of the effects varies from one individual or the family, to groups of other members of society, the core message of the crisis communication remains the same. The fundamental message during the lockdown or MCO was to stay home, and only the head of the family was allowed to get provisions or medical supplies.

MIAs Communication Effectiveness

It is noted that all five strategies have been attempted by MIAs during the pandemic crisis.

There were updates on collaborative initiatives rendered exclusively for the Indian people by several individuals and organizations, such as politically-affiliated agencies and organizations, personal contributions by philanthropist, and the initiatives by relevant ministries to resolve issues such as education, scholarship opportunities and university placement issues, and poverty during the lockdown period.

Meanwhile, in the current study the focus on Indians is in the urban area but there is a divide between the urban rich and middle-class families, with that of the urban poor. The first group is educated, able to access information in all major languages and does not rely on only the Tamil language to get information. According to one respondent, who is a retired officer, the posts by the MIAs are delayed as compared to those that appear in Malay and English in mainstream and social media posts. The above comment may be attributed to posts being slightly delayed due to the need for a translation from the original content into the Tamil language, by either the social administrator or the political representative.

In another interview with T3, a respondent from Pandamaran, an area where many urban poor live responded to a question on the mode of communication that she and her family relied on during the pandemic. According to T3, she and her immediate neighbours in the residential area preferred to receive news and updates from their *Whatsapp* chat groups and mainstream media, particularly the radio, citing the promptness of the news and information, as the reason for their choice.

This line of discussion was also evident among the minority indigenous communities in Malaysia, who were not left behind in the chaotic pandemic situation, as translated versions of the health advisory was also conducted by university professors in at least 10 indigenous languages. The content of the message was constructed in simple sentences that reflected the indigenous way of life. The choice of words such as farming, planting, gathering vegetables, and local slang were found in the messages to the community. However, the community only relied on their Head of village or *Batin* to get updates on the pandemic, as he was the one who relays all government-related news to the community (Shanmuganathan et al., 2022).

Similarly, to a question whether the

community sought information from the political parties' Twitter or Facebook pages, respondents from the urban poor community echoed that they received news via *WhatsApp* messages. These *WhatsApp* messages were shared from social media sources and were then made viral to reach a wider range of Indians. Based on these findings, the MIAs had to vary the way they reached out to the communities, some of whom were literally cut off from their townships. Those who needed help were able to get the provisions required, and clearly the targeted beneficiaries were only the urban poor. In contrast, the urban middle and upper-class Indians did not check out the political parties' websites as they were able to manage on their own and wade through the crisis independently.

Noteworthy, the respondents generally trusted the politically linked MIC and IPF platforms as they were both addressing a global health concern, and so the information was apolitical and reliable. The political parties, MIC and IPF have always been in the forefront and shown to be prominent community representatives for the government to channel essential resources to the Indian community. Thus, it has become a part of their political routine to offer such help to the public, even before the appearance and spread of the pandemic. As expected, IPF's Facebook page and MIC's Twitter had an upsurge of posts on such assistance at the height of the first wave of the pandemic between April and mid-May 2020. By showing visible support through online media, these MIAs appear to be the place where citizens can find solace, able to respond or query, as well as pave the way for more communication opportunities (Veil et al., 2011). While social media presence enhance citizen's engagements with MIAs, their existing political and social reputation have contributed to its reliability and reach for crisis communication.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that MIAs primarily functioned as information redistributors of government policies and healthcare measures through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. They also played a crucial role in supporting vulnerable Indian communities and helping spread pandemic awareness. However, the study was limited by its focus on only two main social media platforms and faced language barrier challenges for non-English/non-national language speakers. There was also a notable dependence on government information re-sharing rather than original content creation. Overall, the implications of this study emphasize the critical need for crisis communicators to maintain a balanced approach between transparency and empathy during emergencies. Additionally, it highlights the importance of utilizing multiple communication channels and native language usage for effective crisis communication. For future research directions, the study suggests exploring more diverse platforms like WhatsApp for personalized messaging, examining the effectiveness of multilingual communication strategies, and investigating methods to enhance direct community engagement.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The social media posts analysed in this study were obtained from publicly accessible accounts, and as such, consent was not required for their use in research. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from all 15 respondents prior to their participation in the online interviews, and they were fully debriefed about the purpose and nature of the research.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Sinayah: study design, data analysis, translation, drafted the manuscript, **Perumal**: Data analysis, translation, drafted the manuscript, **Govaichelvan**: study design, data extraction, literature review, visualization, **Shanmuganathan**: data analysis, conducted interview, drafted the manuscript, **Gan**: literature review, visualization, review and editing.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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