

# Examining government leaders' COVID-19 pandemic management in the information age: A content analysis of netizens' reactions on Twitter

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**Abstract.** The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on governments worldwide, necessitating swift and effective responses to contain the virus. The widespread use of social media platforms, including Twitter, has provided a channel for netizens to both praise and criticise their government's pandemic management efforts. This study aimed to investigate netizens' reactions to the Malaysian government leaders' management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the information age. Qualitative methods were employed with 135 Twitter users selected as respondents using purposive sampling to gather their reactions to the government leaders' pandemic management. An observation approach and content analysis were used to analyse the tweets posted by netizens between March 2020 and October 2022. This study revealed that netizens portrayed diverse reactions to the government leaders' failure to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) and carry out law enforcement in Malaysia, as evidenced by the trending hashtag (#hashtag) on Twitter. Based on the findings, several strategies for reinventing pandemic management in the information age of social media were recommended to policymakers to address the challenges faced by government leaders.

**Keywords:** *Government Leadership, Social Media Analysis, COVID-19*

## 1 Introduction

Malaysia's success in battling COVID-19 at the beginning of March 2020 and July 2020 was due to political stability in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic disaster. There was no doubt that the leadership of Malaysia showed the credibility of leaders in dealing with a problem that arises. The leadership of these leaders were indeed important in a country again dealing

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with the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic which became a major crisis if not controlled effectively and efficiently. Malaysia was on the verge of victory in the fight against COVID-19 cases when it recorded zero local daily cases on July 1st, 2020, for the first time and July 8th, 2020, for the second time. A picture of an egg that was uploaded on the Malaysian MOH's social media page on Facebook and Twitter went viral because average Malaysians expressed their gratitude for the news, thus showing their appreciation to the frontline officers who were always trying to navigate the case graph of daily COVID-19 tirelessly.

## **2 Literature review**

Past studies examined the society's reactions and compliance with government command by measuring whether the society had the level of knowledge, attitude, and practices regarding the preventive measures that the government implemented while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. These researchers' findings showed that the society clearly had a high degree of knowledge, attitude, and practices thus, aware of the government command and yet some Malaysians were still violating the SOP and MCO.

Based on the researcher's research on the reactions of the people to the government administration during the control of the COVID-19 pandemic, it indicated a good reaction at the initial stage, which was from the beginning of 2020 until September 2020. However, the people showed a different reaction from the end of 2020 until July 2021 due to many factors of government failure such as the government's conditional moratorium, suicided cases increased due to the implementation of the government's MCO which was said to be a full lockdown but like a partial lockdown, the white flag aid movement of the people's initiative to the people due to the government's inability to meet the needed of the people during the COVID-19 pandemic and the closed of the Parliament session to curb the infection of COVID-19 but the cases of COVID-19 still showed a high increased as well as other factors. Following that, Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob replaced the administration under Tan Sri Mahiaddin Md Yassin. However, there were no previous studies conducted by other researchers regarding the community's negative reaction to the government because this issue was still new. Even so, even during the beginning of his administration, there were still many who doubted his authority in stabilising the country both in terms of economy, politics, and the health of the people, especially in the fight against COVID-19.

## **3 Methodology**

In line with the research conducted, the researcher used a qualitative method by using the content analysis approach and then coding in the content analysis by placing the links of their posts in the appendix so that the research conducted by this researcher was valid and reliable. Following that, a total of 135 Malaysians from Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak participated in this research. The researcher took their posts on the Twitter social media site regarding their reactions to the government administration in battling the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia from March 24th, 2020, until October 10, 2022. To determine the study respondents, the purposive sampling method was used in this study. This was because sampling aims to enable the researcher to determine the appropriate and specific respondents that were in line with the objectives of this study. The researcher used the observation method by looking at all their posts before choosing the posts that corresponded to the study objectives.

## 4 Findings and discussion

This research revealed that the reactions of the Malaysian community towards the government administration were positive in the early phases of the management of COVID-19 in Malaysia. However, after almost a year of combating the COVID-19 pandemic, the community's reaction became unfavourable owing to several factors of government failure. This had made several hashtags (#hashtag) trend on the Twitter social media platform as people expressed their reactions. Even so, the researcher observed that this trend on Twitter was not a source of pride for the government administration for them to feel comfortable with their current position because based on the researcher's observation, most of the community had expressed disappointment and regretted the government administration indirectly, which gave the perceptions bad for the administration of the Malaysian government.

### 4.1 Trending #KerajaanGagal

The researcher began by looking at what was trending on Twitter with the failed government hashtag (#KerajaanGagal). The first time it trended was on April 16th, 2021, until 8.59 p.m., when it was still trended as number one on the Twitter platform, with 116 thousand tweets following the uncleared and often changed government SOP. Based on the researcher's observation, from April 16th, 2021, through the end of June 2021, #KerajaanGagal was still trended. #KerajaanGagal trending was due to the daily number of COVID-19 cases that showed no sign of decreasing even though the emergency and lockdown had been made. Researchers raised questions about the effectiveness of measures taken by the government to curb the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. This was because, the increase in new daily cases of COVID-19, estimated at 10,000 to 15,000 cases in July 2021 clearly showed that the measures taken by the government were no longer effective and relevant in flattening the curved of the spread of COVID-19.

In this regard, the researcher further showed that the majority reactions of the people were very dissatisfied with the government's actions, even though the daily number of new cases of COVID-19 in Malaysia continued to rise throughout the emergency and lockdown period. As a result, the researcher believed that the implementation of the government's SOP was ineffective and inefficient to curb the spread of the COVID-19 infection. This was because the researcher revealed that the increase in new daily cases of COVID-19 came from the industrial cluster (48.06%) and community spread (15.29%) where these two clusters were linked. If A (not his real name) became infected with COVID-19 at a workplace and was detected at home, this led to contagion in the community if the individual mingled with neighbours or went out to buy necessities. Based on the researcher's findings, most of the community instructed the government, especially the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), to close the factories that were at high risk of spreading the COVID-19 outbreak. This was because, on the MOH's Facebook social media page, most of the netizens had commented with the factory closed hashtag (#tutupkilang) which also showed the people's outraged voices due to the rose number of daily cases of COVID-19. In fact, this matter also got responses from some respondents regarding the "full lockdown" implemented by the government. On average, they argued, this was "full lockdown" or "fool lockdown".

Overall, the researcher noticed that there needed to be coordination between the Federal Government and the State Government in communication which made it difficult for the government to control the spread of infectious diseases. This was when the Chairman of the

Selangor Local Government and Transport Standing Committee, Ng Sze Han, stated that the PBT did not have the authority to close the factories linked to this infectious disease because Act 171 did not involve Act 342 [7]. In fact, the researcher saw that MITI denied the spread of this factory cluster as an action that showed the incompetence of a leader even though the researcher understood the government's action to do so was to protect the finances of the country's economy. It could be seen that the #KerajaanGagal trending was the outraged voiced of the people against the government administration which was seen as not very effective and efficient in terms of its implementation. In fact, the hashtag #KerajaanGagal was not only trended during the leadership of Tan Sri Mahiaddin Md Yassin but also in the early stages of the leadership of Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob. This followed because the cabinet formed under the administration of Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob had stayed the same as the government formed under the administration of Tan Sri Mahiaddin Md Yassin. In this regard, the researcher witnessed examples of results from several respondents after Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob was sworn in as the 9th Prime Minister of Malaysia on August 21st, 2021, following Article 40(2)(a) and Article 43(2)(a) of the Constitution Federation [8].

## 4.2 Trending #BenderaPutih

In addition, the researcher examined the second trend on Twitter social media platform with the white flag hashtag (#BenderaPutih) on June 29th, 2021, until 4.19 pm, where it was still trended on the Twitter platform and reached 20.2 thousand tweets. Despite the government's leadership crisis, the #BenderaPutih campaign between the people highlighted the people's concern for other people. This was the people's initiative in addition to the #RakyatJagaRakyat on social media Twitter. The researcher saw the #BenderaPutih was not signed or defeated, but it gave an idea of the last path that society had before it collapsed. This was because this #BenderaPutih campaign was a noble effort to assist the people who did not have food since they had lost their source of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic and MCO 3.0 implemented by the government.

Through the social media Twitter platform, respondent Anisa Zuhazmi stated, "This #BenderaPutih campaign is truly heartwarming. We stand together as a nation. But in the meantime, it also shows how bad our government is". The researcher did not deny that the #BenderaPutih campaign implemented by the people for the people has left a bad impression on the government administration because it was not fulfilled its responsibilities to the people was needed. This #BenderaPutih campaign was launched by a Facebook user whose real name is Jah or Nik Faizah Nik Othman, Deputy Head of the Kelantan State Trust Women's Force on June 28th, 2021, through her post about the #BenderaPutih campaign which had been shared by 20,000 people. In an interview with Awani, she said the main motivation was to help the people because she saw the hardships of the people that had happened recently, and she selected of used white colour was because the white colour was easily found in the house, such as white school clothed and so on [9]. It was undeniable that this campaign had received attention from netizens who had the same goal of helping others affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that any individual who was faced with diffculted in terms of food, financially supported and any other problems just needed to wave or displayed a white flag at their home. This also alerted the people around to help the person. Not only did the hashtag #BenderaPutih trend on the Twitter platform but the hashtag #RakyatJagaRakyat also trended because social media users wanted this campaign to reach the people who needed it. This was because the people's financial resources had been drained due to the government's implemented MCO 1.0, MCO 2.0, and the last one was MCO 3.0.

Furthermore, today's technological sophistication had allowed social media users to build a website to make it easier for people to ask for help. This was because, apart from the #BenderaPutih campaign, to ensure that this campaign quickly reached the targeted people, a group (@TeratoTech), which was a premier digital product development company located at address 805A, Floor 1, Bangi Business Park, Off Persiaran Kemajuan, 43650 Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor Malaysia had developed a website called kitajaga.co for free. On this website, any individual who needed help could raise a virtual white flag where the red colour represented the request for help and the blue colour represented those who wanted to help. As a result, the researcher found that most of the community that used this website only requested help in terms of food, diapers and infant milk.

However, the researcher saw that some politicians tried to hijack this people's initiative. Mahiaddin Yassin's actions received severe reactions and criticism from netizens as he said "Everyone in the target group, whether B40, M40 or T20 who are also affected, will be given aid. There is no need to raise a white or black flag, raise a blue flag is fine" with a joking tone. Even Menteri Besar of Kedah, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor also said that this white flag campaign was considered political propaganda because the person who created the campaign wanted to give a negative perception of the PN government. Not only that, the researcher noticed that PAS party leaders also did not recognise the need for the white flag. This could be seen when PAS leader Nik Abdul Nik Aziz said, "Raise your hands in prayer to Him. That is the flag of strength and optimism in the test of life. Don't admit defeat when being tested by teaching the people to raise a white flag" [10]. This matter got a reaction among the respondent, namely Fakhri Fadzli responded to the statement through his social media page and said, "Prayer needs to go hand in hand with effort. Raise the white flag not as a sign of defeat but as a signal to others to help. Not everyone can ask for help because there is self-respect that prevents it. The optimistic version of @nikabduh is very toxic and un-Islamic".

### **4.3 Trending #Lawan and #BenderaHitam**

In line with that, the researcher also witnessed the trending on the Twitter social media platform with the hashtag (#Lawan) and the black flag hashtag (#BenderaHitam) from July 4th, 2021, until 9.07 am. Both of these hashtags still trended with numbers one and two respectively on the Twitter platform reaching 216 thousand tweets for #Lawan and 55.7 thousand tweets for #BenderaHitam. Following the statements made by a few politicians about the white flag campaign, two trended to express people's anger, frustration and resentment towards the government administration. The researcher saw that the trending #BenderaHitam was intended at demanded three demands from the government, namely, Tan Sri Mahiaddin Md Yassin resigned as Prime Minister, opened parliament and ended the state of emergency.

Although based on the researcher observed that most of the community and respondents expressed anger towards the government administration such as respondent Nur Atiqah Razak said, "#BenderaHitam shows that Malaysian is in grieves to see our beloved nation crumble due to incompetence government" while respondent Raja Nur Hanisah also said, "I always opt for diplomacy, negotiation, and peaceful ways in handling conflicts. After all the damage that has been done by this unchosen government, I no longer think that is the best way to raise my voice. The only choice for now, raise the #BenderaHitam and #Lawan" but it was undeniable that despite the government's weakness, there was also good which was in managing the country during the COVID-19 pandemic because our number of vaccinations was higher than in other countries. Even so, based on the researcher's point of view, among the three demands requested by the people in this #BenderaHitam and #Lawan campaign, only one was supported by the researcher which opened the parliament. This was because

parliament was open to discussing people-related problems. However, the demanded resigned as Prime Minister and the declaration of emergency was not easy because of many pros and cons. This was because, even though the resignation was made, the procedure remained the same as this appointment would be approved by the YDPA after receiving several lists of names from cabinet members, which they had to agree first, and this was not through the 15th GE as expected by most of the community. This was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was still spread in the community, and we shall take a lesson from the PRN Sabah, which had triggered the third wave.

In fact, if the PN government loses the majority needed to form a government, all ministry portfolios will be changed, causing some jobs to be disrupted. For example, if Khairy Jamaluddin, Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation Malaysia has managed the vaccination process, and there will be a new cabinet member taking over the position, then it will delay the vaccination process because the Minister will have to examine his ministry portfolio. For the last demand, which is the demand to end this state of emergency, we need to know the importance of implementing this state of emergency to prevent elections from happening during the pandemic period because as a democratic country, the election of this government is important through the election system and to prevent those elections, the declaration of emergency is last resort. However, the researcher did not deny the actions of the ministers who had pointed out stripes during the pandemic period such as lack of empathy towards the people, violation of SOP and so on which had given the public a bad perception of the government administration.

Overall, the researcher did not take any side, whether it was the government or the opposition, or even the community that reacted to the government's administration. This was because the researcher tried to place herself between these two sides. The researcher thought it was fair to determine the failure of the government itself because the question of passed or failed was a subjective matter as a measured stuck (benchmarked) in labelled something. This meant, in determining passed or failed, it needed a yardstick. For us, measuring the government or labelling them as a failure in terms of economy or health in the context of this pandemic was irrelevant as this pandemic was a situation that could not be expected or had ever happened during this government's rule. As a matter of fact, the PN government was the first to manage this unprecedented pandemic compared to other parties such as PKR, BN, PH, PAS or any coalition of political parties that had never previously governed the country during a pandemic. It was undeniable that this PN government was weak in coordination and planned to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, which showed their failure to manage the daily cases of COVID-19. Even so, the researcher did not deny that the reactions of these people were because they felt frustrated and stressed by the COVID-19 pandemic which affected their emotions, mental health, and physical health.

#### **4.4 Trending #hartaldoktorkontrak**

Finally, the researcher examined the trends on the Twitter social media platform of the doctor contracts' strike hashtag (#hartaldoktorkontrak) from July 25th, 2021, until 7.06 am. This still captured the trend on the Twitter platform which reached 5,474 thousand tweets. The first time it trended on the Twitter platform was on June 28th, 2021, which reached 6,946 thousand tweets. This trend received attention from netizens due to the increased number of new cases of COVID-19 that reached 10,000 to 15,000 thousand cases a day and even some issues such as hospitals being full, unable to take any patients and most of the contract doctors were already burnout and resigned. In this regard, through a Twitter social media platform, HartalDoktorKontrak (@HKontrak) invited contract doctors to participate in a parade out of

the hospital area on July 26th, 2021, where the location was at health centres under the supervision of the MOH throughout the country.

The researcher did not see that the action of contract doctors holding protests across the country was a problem because there were doctors from other countries such as South Korea, Tunisian (North Africa), Madhya Pradesh (India) and England, who were also protesting against the government. In fact, researchers saw this contract doctors protested not meant an apposed between doctors with doctors and were not even an opposed between doctors with patients but a protest between doctors with governments. If there was no protest like this, the government would not be aware of the demand and would continue to make faked promised against these contract doctors. This protest action was also one of the processes to urge the government to enact the policies and employed permanent positions to contract doctors. Accordingly, on July 24th, 2021, the Contract Doctors Strike Movement estimated that between 4,000 to 5,000 contract doctors across the country had participated on July 26th, 2021 [11].

Overall, the researcher concluded that the protest of contract doctors in Malaysia for a day with a time allocation of 30 minutes was not an extreme action compared to the protest of medical doctors in some other countries. Researchers say that the government shall provide additional allowances or salary increases followed by the increased number of new daily cases of COVID-19 in Malaysia because most doctors were already burned out and despaired and some had resigned within 24 hours. So far, Malaysia had 23,000 contract officers and it was hoped that the government would review all the laws regarding these contract doctors. This was because the government's actions that ignored the frontline workers, especially contract doctors, would have impacted the Malaysian health system because we lose experienced doctors who could change the health system for the better.

The researcher concluded from this analysis that it was undeniable the COVID-19 pandemic had tested the leadership ability of political leaders around the world including the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the other cabinet positions involved, such as Tan Sri Mahiaddin Md Yassin and Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob. The leadership of these leaders would be evident because these people would be judged by the community on their ability to respond to a sudden or unexpected crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. That was the reason why the people gave bad perceptions towards the government in combating the pandemic COVID-19. Thus, the researcher suggests some practical recommendations that the government can use based on the perceptions of the people as follows:

1. Improving communication and transparency: Governments can use social media platforms to communicate transparently with the public about pandemic management strategies, provide regular updates, and address concerns.
2. Using data and analytics: Social media data can be analysed to gain insights into public sentiment, identify hotspots, and track the spread of the virus.
3. Encouraging public participation: Governments can encourage public participation in pandemic management efforts through social media by promoting health measures, sharing educational content, and engaging with the public.
4. Collaborating with tech companies: Governments can collaborate with technology companies to develop innovative solutions to pandemic management challenges, such as contact tracing apps, remote health monitoring tools, and online consultation services.

5. Strengthening international cooperation: Pandemics are global challenges, and governments can leverage social media to collaborate with international partners to share best practices, coordinate responses, and ensure global access to vaccines and treatments.

## 5 Conclusion

As an overall conclusion, several points had been concluded that coincided with the objective of the researcher's study. The discussion of the objective, which got various responses from the community to the government administration in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, included the reactions of many factors such as the failure of MCO policy implementation and law enforcement. These reactions, the researcher had commented furthered in the part of findings and discussion. The researcher did not deny that although there were many measures taken by the government faced the COVID-19 pandemic, the lacked of those measures would be the point that determined the government's failure. In the last part of the analyse of the researcher's discussion, the researcher commented on the reactions of the community until it became trending on the Twitter social media platform regarding the government's administration in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was very crucial in an efforted to strengthen the leadership of leaders in Malaysia. At the same time, it was also one of the efforted to create a close relationship between the researcher and the drafters and policymakers of the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. It could be hoped that this study provided a database that could be used by future researchers.

As for limitations of the study, the researcher did not deny that this study also has its flaws or shortcomings even though until the end of the study, the researcher had overcome to provide the research value in the eyes of the readers. Since this issue is still new, so this study lack of previous research studies on the topic. Meaning that, in this study, the researcher mostly provided their assumption and point of view supported by some arguments by the experts in the newspapers due to the very little or no prior research on this topic. Apart from that, the study is based on self-reported data so it might hold biased views due to their cultural backgrounds or perspectives in giving their perceptions towards the government, and this can affect a study's legitimacy. While collecting data, the researcher might bias in selecting the respondent. It is hard to determine if the statements given by the respondents are accurate or influenced by the government's actions due to the perceptions given based on their own experience towards the government in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

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