

Article

Stigma-Marking of COVID-19 Patients in Facebook and Twitter of Youth in Malaysia in 2020–2021

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Abstract: At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the public were still unaware of the disease and its transmission, and information on susceptibility and severity was not well understood. During this time, stigma of COVID-19 patients had led to some people dying in their homes because they did not want to be seen seeking treatment and getting stigmatized in the process. The study examined stigma-marking of COVID-19 patients in Facebook and Twitter messages written by youth in Malaysia. A total of 100 messages were collected from the posts of young people in Twitter (n = 66) and Facebook (n = 34) from March 2020 to April 2021 during the early phase of the pandemic. The social media postings, mostly written in Malay, were analyzed for stigma-markers. The results showed that COVID-19 stigma words were mostly related to health (57%), ethnicity (29%), social class (13%), and work (1%). The frequencies of the types of stigma-marker in Facebook comments and tweets are similar. COVID-19 patients were referred to as stupid, irresponsible, and criminals. Racist remarks were also evident in the social media messages. The findings indicate that people who are already victims of the disease are victimized further due to the stigmatization by strangers and people in their social and work circles.

Keywords: COVID-19; stigma; social media; susceptibility; severity; sentiments



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1. Introduction

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the public were still unaware of the disease and its transmission, and information on susceptibility and severity was not well understood. During this time, stigma of COVID-19 patients had led to some people dying in their homes because they did not want to be seen seeking treatment and getting stigmatized in the process. A portion of the brought-in-dead cases were due to COVID-19 infected persons refusing to seek treatment, and stigma has been identified as a contributing factor in Zambia [1,2].

Stigma involves “the process of stereotyping in which the labelled person is linked to undesirable characteristics” [3]. Fear of being stigmatized may cause people to hide their disease, avoid voluntary testing, and refuse to seek for treatment. About a year after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Malaysia, there were 4856 COVID-19-related deaths in the first half of 2021, and in 13.8% of the cases, the patients were brought in dead to the hospital [4]. To mitigate the stigma, the health director-general maintained non-disclosure of the places where the COVID-19 patients were living or working despite pressure from the public because of patient confidentiality; he stated that “the resulting stigma could also be long-lasting” [5]. As an example, a COVID-19 patient who was discharged from Sungai Buloh Hospital said that she was stigmatized by her colleagues, who refused to meet her in person [6]. In India, Sahoo and Patel’s (2021) study shows that social stigma spread due to fake news, lack of awareness and fear of corona infection [7].

As stigma is linked to lack of awareness, the literature was searched to find out the knowledge level of Malaysians towards COVID-19. The scenario presented in academic