

# Health Education Measures to Combat Covid-19 in Southeast Asia: Malaysia's Initiatives

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## Abstract

This article highlights the health education (HE) strategies implemented by Malaysia in responding to Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic health promotion. A combination of HE measures that represent different aims enables countries, especially those with limited resources, to educate people and fight infectious diseases effectively. Publication of information, education and communication (IEC) materials; dedicated portal, hotlines and various media channels; daily press conference and press statements; infodemic/fake news management; and multi-sector engagement should be incorporated in reducing the number of COVID-19-positive cases. The HE measures addressed in this article can provide a basis for countries in the Southeast Asia region and those with limited resources to develop HE strategies to reduce the severity of the outbreak.

**Keywords:** Health Education, Health Promotion, Communication Strategies, Social Media, COVID-19

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a significant threat to public health in Asia, and various health education strategies have been implemented to combat the spread of the virus. These strategies include public education regarding COVID-19, health precautionary steps recommended for the public, and solidarity in the fight against COVID-19 (Ong & Deanna, 2022). Health education has been found to be effective in increasing community perspectives related to COVID-19 (Ernawati et al., 2022), improving knowledge about COVID-19 prevention strategies in the elderly with comorbid diabetes mellitus (Adriani & Elmaghfuroh, 2023), and promoting correct information to dispel uncertainty, fear, and mental stress to unify global communities in collective combat against COVID-19 disease worldwide (Abbas et al., 2021).

The pandemic has also aroused the attention of Chinese residents to public health education (Xin Shen et al., 2021). Interactive education has been used to encourage behaviour change among people to help them adapt helpful behaviours in the long fight against COVID-19 (Sinaga et al., 2022). Education is one of the public health efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Priyoadi et al., 2021). Therefore, health education strategies are crucial in combating COVID-19 in Asia.

In Malaysia, various health education strategies were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government utilized risk communication strategies, such as daily press conferences and dissemination of information through national television and social media, to provide updates and educate the public on the pandemic (Azhar et al., 2020). Online health education was also utilized as a substitute for traditional classroom education (Sulistiyono et al., 2021). The use of arts to create awareness of COVID-19 was also encouraged (Ong & Deanna, 2022). Overall, various strategies were implemented to educate and create awareness of COVID-19 in Malaysia.

Malaysia has recorded its first imported COVID-19 case from Wuhan, China on January 25, 2020 (Abdullah, 2020a). Within 6 days after, 8 positive cases were reported where these cases were imported cases from Wuhan, China (Abdullah, 2020b). Malaysia has recorded its first COVID-19 positive local case on February 3, 2020, where the patient had a history of travel to the neighboring country for a business meeting which was attended by a delegation from China (Ahmad, 2020). There are three waves of positive COVID-19 were reported in Malaysia where it has recorded at least 5,032,433 cases with 36,908 deaths as per January 14, 2023 (Abdullah, 2023).

According to Li (2020), public health education plays a crucial role in the prevention and control of emerging infectious diseases. The effectiveness of HE will enhance the role of great health literacy so the involved crisis people knew what individual preventive measure they must take (Van den Broucke, 2020). In enhancing health literacy, health education programs are helpful to hold optimistic attitudes and maintain appropriate practices (Li, 2020).

Health education is used in positively influencing the behavior of individuals to help them to achieve optimal health by improving the quality of life. Health education can reduce the costs incurred by the government in treating various infectious diseases that can be prevented through the knowledge provided by health education. Health education conducted on various platforms may lead to accuracy and efficacy in disseminating COVID-19 information.

### **Study Design**

This article captures the HE measures implemented in Malaysia that can be practiced by other countries especially those with limited resources particularly in the context of the Southeast Asian region. The research on health education measures are needed to refine and develop current knowledge; there should be specific demographic focus on infectious diseases to enable framing the most ecologically valid interventions that would have the be most likely chance to be effective.

The researcher constructed this study by applying desk study and narrative review on published academic research studies, as well as current media sources available with regard to COVID-19, particularly in Malaysia.

The knowledge gained from the understanding of health education measures can be used as a benchmark and guideline for health education strategies and preparedness during health crisis for infectious diseases epidemic such as COVID-19. This study also contributes to the literature by elucidating the need for greater attention to the practical applications of health education measures in public health issues. The findings of the study will identify which health

education measures are important and relevant in the study of health education and health promotion.

#### *HE Measures to Combat COVID-19*

Publication of information, education and communication (IEC) materials; dedicated portal, hotlines and various media channels; daily press conference and press statements; infodemic/fake news management; and multi-sector engagement have been established by the government to combat the spreading of COVID-19 viruses in Malaysia. The measures have somewhat helped in increasing public health literacy on COVID-19 information. The level of health literacy on COVID-19 was reported to increasingly improved among the population (Li, 2020). Strategic public health education measures should be incorporated so that they may help to slow the spread of COVID-19 viruses among communities. This can become a lesson learned for other countries that developed HE strategies in disseminating COVID-19 health-related information effectively.

#### *Publication of information, education and communication (IEC) materials*

Social and behavior change communication includes health communication, community and social mobilizations are widely disseminated through information, education and communication (IEC) strategies. The use of strategic behavior change communication includes the formation of focused messages and appropriate approaches to promote healthy behavior and reduce risk.

Malaysia has published several forms of publication such as infographics, videos, posters, brochures, banners, health alert cards, slide shows, frequently asked question (FAQ) sheets, booklets (bluebook) and e-magazine in educating Malaysian on COVID-19 related information (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2020).

#### *Dedicated portal, hotlines and various media channels*

In providing accurate and fast response information on COVID-19, Malaysia has developed strategic use of media and communication channels including new media platform such as official website, Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube channel, WhatsApp and online shopping apps in reaching the communities and disseminating COVID-19 health-related information.

Conventional media also used in disseminating COVID-19 health-related information to the communities such as talk shows on televisions and radios, electronic display boards, billboards, Short Messaging Services (SMS), public announcements via mobile unit (vehicle) and printed materials such as posters, banners, buntings, flyers and booklets.

#### *Daily press conference and press statement*

Daily press statement and press conference has been conducting by Ministry of Health in delivering the current situation on COVID-19 effectively via forms of visual (television, Facebook Live, YouTube channel), audio (radios) and written (official website). The press conference or press statements are conducted to inform the Malaysian who living in different locations about the latest update and important announcement with HE messages repetitively. They are broadcasted on television and radio to ensure that important information is accessible to everyone especially those who live in rural areas with no Internet service (Radzi, 2020).

*Infodemic/Fake news management*

In managing infodemic or fake news dilemma, Malaysia has provided TV/radio slots and announcements; broadcasting of crawler messages; Short Messaging Service (SMS); new media/social media; daily press statements; notification in MySejahtera application; official website and media platform; and dedicated hotline (The Malaysian National Security Council/ Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre – CPRC, Ministry of Health Malaysia) in clarifying false information regarding COVID-19 (Yusof, 2020; Shah, 2020).

*Special HE activities*

Mental health is one of the problems that need to be tackled during the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Bavel, 2020). Therefore, the Malaysian government has developed few series of activities during Movement Control Order (MCO) such as the stress-free doodle challenge and curhat4hero (an abbreviation resembling the expression of feeling and gratitude of school students dedicated to the heroes for their sacrifices and stood on the frontliners to fight against COVID-19) (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2020). Besides that, the government also organized online-based HE activities in educating Malaysian on COVID-19 new norms (wash hand regularly) such as TikTok Challenge on hand wash, virtual health promotion and virtual physical activities via Facebook Live Coaching due to insufficient face-to-face meeting.

*Multi-sector engagement*

Malaysia has practiced inter-ministerial engagement, government-private engagement (shopping malls, telco, e-hailing/transportation companies), media organizations, community empowerment and international collaboration in combating COVID-19.

Several series of initiatives such as town halls, lectures, briefings, exhibitions, personal advice, demonstration and training are executed to educate Malaysian health-related information on COVID-19 as well as new norms among communities (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2020).

**Conclusion**

Health education and promotion have offered well-established tools to communicate and engage quickly and effectively with the public and prevent infections (Gray, 2020; Koenker, 2020; Van den Broucke, 2020). Through the research, the usage of new media (official website, Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube channel, WhatsApp and online shopping apps) were identified as the most effective health education measures to disseminate information with regard to COVID-19. These measures have been identified in helping the country to slow down the outbreak (Gray, 2020; Li, 2020; Shah, 2020 & Van den Broucke, 2020). Therefore, the researcher suggested that these measures can be emulated by other Southeast Asian countries especially those with limited resources.

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