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**Malaysian Perception on the Utilisation of TikTok to Spread Awareness on the
Government's COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign**

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions, experiences, and engagement of Malaysian TikTok users with the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign. Applying phenomenological qualitative approach, six participants were interviewed. This study indicates that the government's PSA on vaccination was successful to create awareness and reassurance, while engagement remained passive. The findings highlight the effectiveness of the campaign depends on the right selection of media, creative content, and the presence of credibility cues- as these participants were engaged in fact-checking practices. The study underscores the critical role of TikTok and social media in general, as a platform to engage with younger audiences and emphasizes the need for strategic communication for a successful campaign and to counteract misinformation.

Keywords: TikTok, Public Service Announcements, COVID-19 Vaccination, Health Communication, Malaysia

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1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic presented governments around the world with unprecedented challenges in communicating health information, countering misinformation, and encouraging large-scale behavioural compliance. As the crisis unfolded, social media platforms emerged as primary channels for public communication, especially among younger demographics. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Health (MOH) and related agencies actively utilised digital channels to disseminate information related to the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme (PICK). Campaigns were amplified through *MySejahtera*, official websites, Instagram, Facebook, and increasingly, TikTok. TikTok experienced explosive growth during the pandemic, becoming a key site for the production and circulation of short-form videos related to public health, vaccination updates, and personal experiences.

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Existing studies highlight that mixed social media users respond to such content. While some research points to positive outcomes of campaigns in terms of awareness and message retention through creative, short-form videos, others question whether rapid, entertainment-driven formats, such as the For You Page (FYP) on TikTok, allow complex information, such as health information, to be fully understood or trusted. These conflicting findings underscore the need for deeper inquiry into how the younger generations perceive, experience, and engage with vaccination-related content on platforms such as TikTok.

Most studies have explored the role of Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms in disseminating health information during the pandemic. However, studies on TikTok, especially within the Malaysian context, remain limited. Not many studies have examined TikTok as a public health communication tool, nor have they looked at audience interpretation through the lens of lived experiences (phenomenological research). Most research focuses on content analysis or message strategies, leaving a gap in understanding how users internally negotiate meaning, evaluate credibility, and engage with government-issued vaccination messages. The unique affordances of TikTok, its algorithmic For You Page (FYP), participatory, co-create culture, and remixing practices necessitate a deeper phenomenological understanding of its users' encounter and engagement with formal health communication messages on the platform.

The aim of this study is to address these gaps by examining Malaysian TikTok users' perceptions, experiences, and engagement with the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign to provide insight into the interpretation and engagement of Malaysian TikTok users on the government vaccination campaign within the dynamics of short-form video culture and information overload.

Based on that aim, this study is guided by the following research objectives:

RO1: To understand users' perceptions of the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign on TikTok.

RO2: To explore users' experiences when encountering vaccination-related content on TikTok.

RO3: To examine users' engagement with vaccination campaign materials on TikTok.

The research addresses the following questions:

RQ1: How do Malaysian TikTok users perceive the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign?

RQ2: What are users' experiences with vaccination-related content on TikTok?

RQ3: How do users engage with the government's TikTok vaccination campaign?

Next, key literature focusing on four key topics for this study which are first, the social media, advertising and the digital shift during the pandemic, second the concept of perception, social media use and Public Service Announcements (PSAs), third on TikTok's role as a media platform for PSAs, of which in this study focusing on a type of health communication campaign by the Malaysian government-the vaccination campaign during the pandemic and then followed by an explanation on the theoretical and research framework.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media, Advertising, and the Digital Shift

The advent of social media has significantly transformed the media landscape, altering the dissemination of news, information, and advertising messages. This digital shift has freed these elements from the constraints of traditional print and broadcast systems. Advertising, once defined as commercial communication through mass media such as print and direct mail, has evolved (Al Bara, 2021). The rise of the World Wide Web expanded media's reach, enabling virtual communication to supplement older methods.

The Public Service Announcement (PSA) shares basic advertising functions, which are to create awareness, to educate, and to induce intention or behavioural change. This can be done through various media platforms. The growth of technology and internet access has driven social media to become the most prevalent advertising tool, with TikTok emerging as one of the fastest-growing platforms, offering marketers a dynamic space to engage with consumers.

2.2 Perception, Social Media Use, and Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Social media transformed how PSAs were produced and consumed during COVID-19, with digital platforms serving as the primary source of urgent health communication. The pandemic has increased public reliance on digital media, specifically online updates, prompting many organisations, including health authorities, to use platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook to deliver real-time information (Manganello et al., 2020).

The pandemic saw TikTok play a key role in shaping public awareness and opinion. It launched in-app educational Public Service Announcements (PSAs) on COVID-19-related hashtags and introduced a new video reporting category to combat misinformation (Ismail Sualman & Salmiwati Othman, 2021). These health campaigns helped raise awareness among society. However, influencing long-term behavioural change remains difficult. This, however, does not stop social media advertising, in particular TikTok, from championing itself as the platform of choice among users as well as marketers in harnessing the opportunity to get closer to their target audience and consumers through video-based communication campaigns.

The Malaysian government's timely communication through various media platforms, including social media, helped reinforce trust and compliance among the society during the pandemic, especially during the vaccination rollout (Jerome et al., 2021). While PSAs provide crucial information, their effectiveness depends on audience perception and interpretation within today's fast-moving digital environments.

The perception of social media users in consuming various kinds of messages and content in multiple formats is shaping the way they evaluate the information they consume online, including PSAs. With various sources competing for attention, source credibility has a strong influence on trust, as messages from institutions such as the Ministry of Health and the WHO are perceived as more reliable

(Jerome et al., 2021). These perceptual processes directly support RO1 and RQ1, which examine how Malaysian TikTok users perceive government-issued vaccination messages, which are a form of PSA.

PSAs on social media benefit from interactivity—users can view, share, and discuss content, enhancing message reach and engagement (Malik et.al, 2021). The affordances of social media in presenting its messages also shape perception. Short videos, infographics, humour, and personal stories help capture attention and improve relatability (Manganello et.al, 2020; Malik et. al, 2021). TikTok's For You Page (FYP), driven by algorithmic curation, strengthens relevance with each user by delivering personalised content.

Digital literacy further affects interpretation. Users who verify information or cross-check sources tend to perceive official PSAs more positively (Hutchinson, 2021). Emotional and experiential elements, such as personal narratives and vaccination stories, are used a lot as part of the strategy for PSAs, also influencing how messages are understood. Both social media affordances and digital literacy impacted the user experience, which was addressed in RO2 and RQ2.

2.3 TikTok and Public Health Communication

TikTok became one of many significant public health communication channels during the pandemic, offering wide visibility through viral hashtags and algorithmic distribution. This helps shape public awareness and health behaviours (Dmour, H. et al., 2020). On TikTok, COVID-19-related hashtags garnered millions of views, making health updates easily accessible through users' FYP feeds.

Recognising this influence, TikTok collaborated with global partners during World Immunisation Week to promote accurate vaccine information, including a five-part live series addressing vaccine safety and misinformation (Hutchinson, 2021). Although TikTok facilitates rapid dissemination, its participatory culture unfortunately enables misinformation to circulate. Understanding the affordances, as well as the type of content and the kind of engagement users interact with, provided insight into the perception and engagement of TikTok content, which in turn offered a deeper understanding of the platform's effectiveness in health communication, such as PSAs, addressed by RO3 and RQ3.

2.4 Theoretical and Research Framework

This study applies three complementary frameworks, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), Reception Theory, and phenomenology, to analyse how users perceive, interpret, and experience vaccine-related TikTok content. UGT explains the motivation for individuals to actively consume content that fulfils needs such as information, reassurance, and entertainment. During the pandemic, TikTok provided quick, visually engaging updates that met users' informational and emotional needs.

Reception Theory (Hall, 1980) explains how audiences interpret messages differently based on their cultural background, prior knowledge, emotions, and trust in institutions. Users may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional 'readings' of government vaccination messages depending on their personal context. At the same time, phenomenology focuses on lived experience, which allows this perception, experiences, and engagement, including emotional responses, fear, comfort, motivation, or uncertainty, to be captured in more depth while encountering TikTok vaccination content.

Thus, the integration of these three frameworks provides a holistic understanding of perception (RO1/RQ1), experience (RO2/RQ2), and engagement (RO3/RQ3). This framework positions users as active agents who selectively engage with, interpret, and internalise and react towards vaccination messages encountered on TikTok.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how Malaysian TikTok users perceived, experienced, and engaged with the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The phenomenology approach via semi-structured interviews allows advantages for both participants and researchers. It enables in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences with media content (Neubauer et al., 2019) while allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights (while allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Snowball sampling was used to recruit TikTok users aged 18–34 from Malaysia who used the platform daily and had encountered vaccination-related content. This approach allowed access to information-rich participants familiar with the campaign. Six participants (four females, two males) took part in the study, reflecting typical TikTok usage demographics in Malaysia.

Table 1. Participants Profile

| Codename | Age | Gender | Education Detail | Occupation | Time Use TikTok/Day |
|----------|-----|--------|------------------|------------|---------------------|
| M1 | 25 | Male | Degree | Student | 30 min – 1 hours |
| M2 | 24 | Male | Degree | Student | 30 min – 1 hours |
| F1 | 21 | Female | Degree | Student | 30 min – 1 hours |
| F2 | 23 | Female | Degree | Student | 30 min – 1 hours |

| | | | | | |
|----|----|--------|---------|----------------|------------------|
| F3 | 26 | Female | Diploma | Private Sector | 30 min – 1 hours |
| F4 | 26 | Female | Degree | Private Sector | 30 min – 1 hours |

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection in semi-structured interviews, data were obtained in one-to-one semi-structured interviews that were either conducted face-to-face or online. Interviews started with general questions about TikTok use before proceeding to 1-perceptions of vaccination videos created by governments, 2-experiences seeing such content, and 3-engagement behaviours, including emotional reactions and credibility evaluations. Each participant was further asked whether the content on TikTok impacted their attitudes to vaccination. To facilitate recall, some selected TikTok videos were presented during the interviews. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, was audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

3.4 Data Analysis

The Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis was used. First, a repeated reading of the transcripts was made to gain familiarity; then, the generation of initial codes related to research objectives was performed, which included perceptions, experiences, emotional responses, credibility, and engagement. The codes were organised into themes and their meaning refined iteratively against the data. Merging inductive patterns with deductively generated categories, since the latter were derived from the research objectives, informed the development of the themes. Credibility was enhanced through peer debriefing sessions and reflexive notes, which helped identify and minimise potential biases. Final themes have been organised in line with this study's three research objectives.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval consists of a briefing on the purpose of the study, ensuring the identity is anonymous through pseudonyms and confidential, and that written consent was obtained before the commencement of an interview session. They were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

4.0 Findings

This study explored how Malaysian TikTok users perceived, experienced, and engaged with the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The findings are organised in parallel to the three research objectives.

4.1 Perceptions of the Vaccination Campaign

4.1.1 Perceived Usefulness and Clarity of Information

Participants viewed TikTok as a helpful platform for receiving COVID-19 and vaccination-related information. They felt the content offered accessible explanations about symptoms, preventive measures, and vaccination procedures. One participant noted that "the information helps us understand how to take care of ourselves and what to do if we get infected... and how to get the vaccine" (F3, 26). Another participant described TikTok as an increasingly relevant source of updates, saying "TikTok has become a medium for us to find the latest information rather than relying on the news" (M2, 24).

These comments reflect a positive perception of TikTok's ability to simplify and disseminate crucial health information. Participants appreciated that the content was visually engaging and easy to consume, especially during a period when rapid updates were necessary.

4.1.2 Trust and Fact-Checking Practices

Despite positive perceptions, participants remained cautious about accepting information at face value. They acknowledged TikTok's usefulness but emphasised the need for verification. As one participant explained, "We can't jump to conclusions about any information on TikTok without first checking the facts and validity of that information" (F1, 21). Another participant expressed confidence in official government content, stating, "When we see videos from the government, we know the information has been carefully studied... I know the information is important and genuine" (F4, 26).

Overall, participants perceived the government's content as trustworthy but still relied on personal judgment and cross-referencing with other sources. This shows that while TikTok supports awareness, users remain actively engaged in validating information.

4.2 Experiences Encountering the Campaign

4.2.1 Emotional Reactions and Motivation

Participants described a range of emotional responses to the vaccination content on TikTok. Many felt encouraged after watching others share their vaccination experiences. One participant explained, "Back then, we heard about the vaccine and thought, 'Should I take it or not?' But when we watched videos where people shared their experiences, it gave me the courage to get vaccinated" (F2, 23). Another participant highlighted the broader significance of vaccination, noting, "People must understand the importance of vaccination... to prevent further illness that could bring the nation to its knees" (M1, 25).

The content often helped reduce uncertainty and motivated individuals to participate in the national vaccination effort. Seeing real-life narratives contributed to fostering a sense of reassurance and solidarity.

4.2.2 Exposure and Information-Seeking Behaviour

Participants reported encountering the vaccination campaign frequently during the height of the pandemic. TikTok's algorithm pushed relevant content onto the "For You Page," which increased visibility without requiring users to search for information. Younger users, especially Gen-Z and Millennials, reported high exposure due to their active use of the platform.

However, a small number of participants felt that TikTok did not always provide enough detailed information. These participants sought additional clarification from other platforms or official channels. This suggests that TikTok served as an initial point of exposure, supplemented by deeper information elsewhere.

4.3 Engagement with the Campaign Content

4.3.1 Accessibility and Ease of Understanding

Participants described TikTok's format as convenient for quickly consuming vaccination information. One participant stated, "Information about the vaccination campaign appears directly on my FYP, providing complete details in just 15 to 30 seconds" (F1, 21).

Another noted that the messages were accessible because "the vaccination campaign is easy to understand, with no language barriers or jargon" (F2, 23).

These comments illustrate how TikTok's short-form, multimodal content enhanced comprehension and lowered barriers to accessing health information.

4.3.2 Preferences for Creative and Engaging Content

Although participants acknowledged the usefulness of the campaign, they also expressed a desire for more engaging and visually appealing content. One participant emphasized that "young people are more attracted to engaging videos than to static ones like we used to watch on TV" (M2, 24).

Another added that "TikTok is more interesting... because of its interactive videos and users sharing their experiences" (F4, 26).

Participants felt that incorporating music, trends, and creative editing would further increase engagement. While they appreciated the campaign's clarity, they believed more dynamic content would better capture attention and encourage wider sharing.

5.0 Discussion

This section discusses the perception, experience, and engagement of Malaysian TikTok users on the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The discussion integrates the findings with Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), Reception Theory, phenomenology, and prior literature.

5.1 Perceptions of the Campaign and Theoretical Alignment

Participants viewed TikTok as a convenient and accessible source of vaccination information, reflecting UGT's assertion that audiences seek media that fulfill informational and reassurance needs. Like Kim (2023), younger users relied on social media for rapid civic and health updates. TikTok is a venue for users to share their personal experiences, both positive and negative, solicit advice, and garner confirmation for their already held beliefs. This collective sharing of experiences through social media has been identified in research to shape and harden attitudes by amplifying information that confirms existing views (Jacques et al,2025).

However, participants did not accept the content uncritically. They tend to verify information, which demonstrates an active, negotiated decoding process consistent with Hall's Reception Theory. Although they believe that government-produced content was trusted, users still cross-checked facts, consistent with Manganello (2020), who argues that social media audiences selectively evaluate crisis information.

These findings extend past research by showing that TikTok's concise, visually driven format aids comprehension but still prompts users to consult external sources for certainty.

5.2 Experiences Encountering Campaign Messages

Participants' emotional reactions shaped how they experienced the campaign. Personal vaccination stories, peer testimonials, and relatable narratives reduced uncertainty and encouraged vaccine acceptance, echoing Jayasundara et al. (2021), who found that relatable digital narratives improve persuasion during health crises. According to Massey et.al (2025), Narrative communication is a valuable strategy to communicate science to non-expert audiences, which may be especially pertinent to vaccine science and communication, where storytelling has the potential to address concerns more emotionally rooted than based on a lack of evidence.

While TikTok provided quick, easily digestible messages, some participants felt the platform lacked depth, prompting them to seek information elsewhere. This aligns with Akinwande et.al (2023), who observed that social media can raise awareness but does not always satisfy more detailed information needs. Thus, TikTok served primarily as an entry point into the broader vaccination discourse.

5.3 Engagement with Campaign Content

Engagement was mostly passive- users watched content but rarely liked, commented, or shared. This partially contrasts with Argyris et al. (2023), who reported higher participatory engagement in other health campaigns. The passive response may reflect cultural norms surrounding government messaging or a perception that PSAs are informational rather than interactive.

However, TikTok's algorithm's high exposure supports cognitive engagement even without active participation. Users appreciated short, clear videos but desired more creative and trend-aligned content. This is aligned with Hutchinson (2021), who emphasises TikTok's strength when information is delivered using platform-native styles such as trending audio, transitions, and storytelling.

5.4 Implications for Public Health Communication

The findings show that TikTok can be an effective health communication tool when used strategically. Public health organisations are increasingly using this strategy because the popularity of social media provides them with an opportunity to deliver easily accessible and opportunistic preventive and intervention activities, such as PHCs and PSAs (Draganidis et al., 2024).

First, public health agencies should pair authoritative information with engaging, trend-based content to match youth preferences. Second, the incorporation of credibility cues, such as verified accounts or links to official sources, can support users' fact-checking behaviour and enhance trust. Third, TikTok's algorithmic visibility can be leveraged through frequent, concise, and visually engaging posts, especially during crisis periods when rapid dissemination is crucial. Finally, campaigns that feature relatable narratives and user experiences can further strengthen emotional connection and public trust, supporting better health outcomes.

6.0 Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

This study explored how Malaysian TikTok users perceived, experienced, and engaged with the government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The findings show that TikTok functioned as an accessible platform for timely health information, especially for Gen-Z and Millennials who prefer short-form video content. Participants generally appreciated the clarity and convenience of the campaign and reported feeling more informed and reassured after viewing relatable vaccination narratives.

Although government-produced messages were viewed as credible, users still engaged in individual fact-checking, underscoring the importance of transparency and trust in digital health communication. Engagement with the campaign was mostly passive but cognitively meaningful, and participants expressed a desire for more creative, trend-aligned content that resonates with TikTok's native culture.

This study has several limitations. Its small sample of young Malaysian adults limits the generalisability of findings to other demographic groups. Reliance on self-reported accounts may introduce recall or interpretation bias, and focusing solely on TikTok excludes the influence of different platforms that users often consult for health information. While the qualitative design offers depth, it does not allow for statistical generalisation.

Future research should include more diverse age groups, rural populations, and multilingual users to capture a broader range of perspectives. Mixed-methods designs could provide stronger insights into behavioural outcomes. Comparative studies across platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and X could identify platform-specific strengths. Further investigation into message framing, misinformation resistance, and digital health literacy is essential to guide more effective public health communication strategies.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study contributes to digital public health communication by presenting the perceptions and engagement of Malaysian TikTok users with government vaccination messages, focusing on the importance of short-form video (such as TikTok) in shaping awareness, emotions, and behaviour. The integration of UGT, Reception Theory, and phenomenology demonstrates how users actively seek reassurance, selectively decode messages, and form meaning through their lived experiences. Practically, the study offers clear guidance for health agencies by emphasising the need for platform-native creativity, culturally resonant storytelling, and visible credibility cues to strengthen digital health literacy and improve the effectiveness of youth-oriented public health campaigns.

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