THE ROLE OF RELATIONAL TRUST DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

In response to the Corona Virus diseases 2019 (Covid-19) crisis, the university students became as one of the Malaysian concern especially when they are stranded while the MCO has been exposed by the government. To reduce the impact on psychological pressure, the university via health center and student accommodation center were instructed to function as social support units. Besides food and other necessaries, the information regarding to Covid-19 and crisis management needs to be disseminated. We sampled stranded university students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) using simple random sampling. With 275 responses, results of multiple mediation regression analysis indicated that the role of relational trust mediates the relationship between crisis responsibility and willingness to seek information. However, gender differences were not influence the behavior and willingness towards seeking the information. It is suggested that the relational trust among UiTM students were influenced by the service quality offered by the centers, thus inculcate them to discover more information with regards to Covid-19 outbreak.

Keywords: Relational trust, crisis responsibility, gender, willingness to seek information, Covid-19.

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) has affected educational system worldwide, leading to the near-total closures of schools, universities and colleges. The closure of education centers impacted not only students, teachers, and families, but have far-reaching economic and societal consequences. In Malaysia, the government recommends the use of distance learning programmes in response to the movement control order (MCO) enforced by the Prime Minister. MCO was implemented as a preventive measure to break the chain of Covid-19. All Malaysians were restricted to move from one place to another and taking the MCO seriously. The students

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who are currently staying in the university were also pose and restrict to the government order. Therefore, many students were stranded in the university since the March 18-31, 2020 during first phase of MCO. The extended of MCO were enforced for the second phase from April 1 until April 14, 2020, followed by the third phase of MCO dated from April 15 to April 28, 2020. To date, more specifically until August 2021, students are still undergoing a learning process through an online method known as open and distance learning (ODL). Students are in residential colleges and will always be provided with information related to regulations guided by government directives in order to ensure students' safety and in good condition. The relational trust between the university and students is highly important in ensuring the information is accurately delivered; thus help the university do various planning effectively. Certainly, the university health center and student accommodation office were responsible to devote resources to inform and assist students in response to the crisis. Here, trust between the centers and students is pivotal which plays an important role in delivering necessary information in handling the crisis, which may lead to students' willingness to seek definite information (Kim and Niederdeppe, 2013). Basing on this issues, this study seeks to investigate the relationship between crisis responsibility and willingness to seek information mediated by the relational trust.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic evolves across the world, universities find themselves in different and sometimes multiple stages of the crisis management. The universities are taking various actions in order to secure the well-being of their students and staffs, especially those who are living on their university campus. Students may feel stress and helpless thus they need to be given assistance to avoid any potential that could escalate in intensity and jeopardize the current image of the university including the university health center and student accommodation office services. Here, the crisis-response strategies between the university and students are important in handling the crisis situation. A model of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) proposed by Coombs and Holladay (2002) conceptualizes how stakeholders (students) interpret a crisis to manage university reputation. The main focus of SCCT is how to assess the crisis situation and select a crisis-response that suitable to the crisis situation (Barton, 2001; Fombrun, 1996).

According to Coombs and Holladay (2002), three variables proposed by the SCCT include crisis responsibility, organizational reputation, and behavioral intention. This study focused on three related variables: crisis responsibility, relational trust, and willingness to seek information from the university. Relational trust was chosen due to the element of trustworthiness which represents a major indicator for organizational reputation (Yang, 2007). Willingness to seek crisis-related information from the university health center and student accommodation office were chosen as the outcome measure because information seeking is an important health-related behavior amid circumstances of uncertainty (e.g., Niederdeppe et al., 2007).

Crisis responsibility. Crisis responsibility defined by Coombs (1998) as "the degree to which stakeholders blame the organization for a crisis event" (p. 180). Based on the premise that people need to assign responsibility for an event, attribution theory posits that people look for the causes of events, especially unexpected and negative events (Weiner, 1986). The four attribution of responsibility highlighted by Fiske and Taylor (1991) followed by Weiner (1996) often takes

place when there is (i) an identifiable source of an action, (ii) a belief that a source should have been able to control of foresee the outcome, (iii) the perception that the behaviors of the source are not justified by the situation, or (iv) the perception that the source operated under conditions of free choice. Even though not all attributions may not be considered as the function of the university while handling the crisis, it is likely that the center would play a role to identify a source of action with both free choice and ability to manage the consequences of a Covid-19 virus outbreak.

Perception of crisis responsibility are likely to influence the patterns of response to a crisis. Attributions of responsibility have affective and behavioral consequences for an organization (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; McDonald & Hartel, 2000) whereas they can directly related to threats to organizational reputation and relational trust posed by a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Therefore, this study believes that the role of crisis responsibility management is important in examining the willingness to seek information for exploring crisis related information.

Relational Trust. Trust is defined as an evaluation of whether another person or entity is competent in accomplishing what is expected to do (Huang, 2001). Another definition of trust by Lee (2005) defines as a relative certainty that some other person or entity will not act in ways that cause negative consequences. In the context of this study, trust in a university health center and student accommodation office can be conceptualized as students' interpretation of the degree to which they believe the center will fulfil its mission of supporting a healthy campus community and avoid acting in ways that lead to negative health outcomes. Here, the element of communication is taking place to ensure trust in organization especially when mitigating a crisis. Kim and Yang (2009) and Lyon and Cameron (2004) believe that trust in organization could increase an effectiveness of organizational communication during a crisis, as well as able to minimize the reputational and financial damage after a crisis (Lee, 2005). This realized the significant influence of trust towards the role of the university health center and student accommodation center, thus maintain trusting relationships with students who are likely to require and use its services in the future.

Adopted from Yang (2007) and Yang and Lim (2009), this study uses three dimensions of relational trust that includes (i) competence; (ii); dependability; and (iii) integrity. According to Huang (2001), competence means the capability of a party to perform its own obligations and includes the consideration of expertise and timeline. Dependability refers to the reliability of a party based on past performances whether the party showed consistent acts and words (Yang & Lim, 2009), while the integrity dimension refers as the willingness to keep ethical standards, rather than achieving organizational objectives (White, 2005; Yang & Lim, 2009). In supporting the above discussion, Griffin et al. (2008) found that beliefs and trust have been found to influence risk-related information seeking from the sources. Allen Catellier and Yang (2012) who investigated the relationship between trust and its influence towards risk information seeking suggested that by understanding the role of trust, it increase the individual's intention to seek information. In different context, Saparito et al. (2004) found that relational trust mediated the relationship between bank strategies and the likelihood of the firm to switch banks thus enhanced customers' orientation and reduced bank switching through relational trust indicator. Therefore, this study posits that relational trust will predict whether or not university students are

willing to seek crisis-related information from both student health center and student accommodation center.

Willingness to Seek Information. In the context of this study, willingness to seek information is conceptualized as whether or not students' would proactively search for more information about the crisis through a channel includes university's website and social media. Specifically, we examined whether stakeholders (i.e., students) were willing to communicate with the organization in a crisis (i.e., health center) despite the threat posed to the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. This is in line with the concept of active information seeking in risk communication literature that views the public as an active set of stakeholders (McGuire, 1974). Basing to this concept, the role of students in facing the crisis are not limited to passively receive information circulated by the university, but rather to actively search for important information and engage to various channels including social media. For instance, the group of young university students in Pakistan has been evaluated and the study found that this group being keener to critically seeking and analysing the information for their personal and community health. They believe that the absence of health literacy proficiency among the young people could increases stress level and anxiety (Zakar et al., 2021). Thus, active communication and information-seeking behavior is critical for the formation and quality of relationship between organizations and their stakeholders (e.g. students) as suggested by scholars in the field of public relations (Broom et al., 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Yang, 2007). In the context of an organizational crisis, public engagement in information seeking can result in increased (i) dissemination of relevant information, thereby reducing uncertainty caused by a crisis (Boyle et al., 2004) and (ii) support for an organizational initiative to minimize the impact of unfavorable events (Griffin et al., 1999). In agreement to these statements, Sutton et al. (2018) stressed that the source of crisis information also influenced by the information-seeking behaviours among individuals who needs the safety information in regards to diseases, treatments, etc. Despite its implications for improving the efficiency of crisis communication, less studies had examined the willingness to seek crisis-related information from the organization in previous research.

Due to a lack of empirical evidence that examines the possible mediating role of relational trust between crisis responsibility and willingness to seek information from the university, we ask the following research question:

> *Hypothesis 1: Relational trust will mediate the relationship between crisis responsibility*
> *and willingness to seek information from the university to engage with the*
> *Covid-19 pandemic.*

Gender. Examining the influence between gender differences with the behavior and willingness of seeking information is important due to their different personal needs and unique personality. Heinstrom (2000) has explored the relationship between personality and information seeking. The findings of the study indicate that information-seeking behavior was significantly influenced by the different personality within the context of gender differences. This explains that the willingness to seek information might connect to gender behavior due to their personality difference. In the other context, Hallyburton and Evarts (2014) indicate that females are more likely to seek health information online compared to males. But, in seeking information using internet technology, a gender difference is negatively connected. This may caused by the different personality and knowledge (Enochsson, 2005). To better understand this, Halder et al.

(2010) stated that gender differences and information seeking behavior may be useful for better understanding their cognitive and social background. In agreement with psychologist thought and counselling studies, they believe that different physical, mental and social differences between men and women influence the behavior. Hence, it is pertinent to investigate the gender differences and its influence towards their willingness to seek information of university students, so that the institutions could assist them in their information search processes. The discussions lead to the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Gender differences are significant towards willingness to seek information from the university to engage with the Covid-19 pandemic.

In accordance with the existing literature, the framework provides the path for this study focuses on the relational trust as the mediating variable, which could demonstrate the insight of the relationship between crisis responsibility and willingness to seek information.

Figure 1: Research Framework
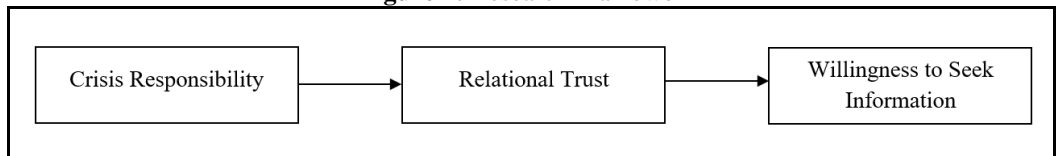
3. METHODOLOGY

The online survey administered questionnaire was distributed to collect the empirical data from the respondents. The questionnaire was adapted from Kim and Niederdeppe (2013) to develop the research instrument for this study. 5-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree were used. The samples were collected from the total of 3000 students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia comprises of 14 campuses nationwide. They were stranded in hostel during MCO since March 18, 2020. From the total number of students, 351 were selected as a sample following Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table. Out of that number, 275 completed questionnaires were returned after two follow up sessions has been made and were successfully analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22.0. The data obtained were subjected to reliability test, normality test, correlation analysis, descriptive analysis, and multiple mediator regression (MMR).

3.1. Measurement Instrument

Demographic Profiles - Participants were asked on their background includes gender, race, age, education level, campus, emotional response towards MCO and financial management while facing the crisis using ordinal and nominal scales.

Crisis Responsibility - On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree, crisis responsibility was measured with the following three items: (1) the university health center is referred to obtain health related issues, (2) the university

accommodation office is assisting to help students while staying at colleges during MCO, (3) the services provided in the university accommodation during MCO is satisfactory.

Willingness to Seek Information - To measure willingness to seek information from the university health center, three items were developed as follows: (1) I always refer to the responsible department at my university to seek correct information during MCO, (2) I always search for the information via the platform of official university social media while staying at the college during MCO, and lastly, (3) I always search for the information via the official university website while staying at the college during MCO.

Relational Trust - On a 5-point scale, three items were measured which include, (1) I believe the students opinion is taking into consideration for university's decision making, (2) I believe the university could provide best services for students' health during MCO, (3) I believe that the university health center able to provide clear guidance for self-care benefits during MCO.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1.   *Demographic Profile*

Female contributes 179 respondents from the total of respondents that involve in this study with 65.01 percent. While the male respondent was indicated 34.99 percent which the frequency of respondents were 96 respondents. The range of age involved in this study are 18-20 years old, 21 to 23 years old, 24-26 years old and lastly, 27 years old and above. The majority of respondents are between age 21-23 years old and 18-20 years old with 139 respondents or 50.55 percent and 118 respondents or 42.91 percent respectively. Only 16 respondents or 5.82 percent was from the age of 24-26 years old, and 2 respondents or 0.72 percent was 27 years old and above. In term of race, Malay indicates the highest number of respondents which are 234 or 85.09 percent. Next, followed by Malaysian Bumiputera which are 39 respondents with 14.18 percent and lastly, other race was only 2 respondents or 0.73 percent.

4.2.   *Reliability Test*

Reliability refers to the extent to which a scale produces consistent results and determined by obtaining the proportion of systematic variation in a scale. Internal consistency is used to measure the reliability of a summated scale where several items are summed to form a total score. Table 4.1 indicates the result of internal consistency for each variable

Table 1: Reliability Test

Constructs	Cronbach Alpha
Willingness to Seek Information	.851
Crisis Responsibility	.721
Relational Trust	.648

4.3. Normality Test

Normality test are used to determine if a data significantly deviate from a normal distribution. In order to get the result, the value of skewness and kurtosis were used. Table 4.2 indicates the values for normality test.

Table 2: Normality Test

Constructs	Skewness	Kurtosis
Willingness to Seek Information	-.352	.256
Crisis Responsibility	-.630	.510
Relational Trust	-.537	.170

Based on the above table, the result of normality test ranges from - 0.352 to -0.630 for skewness and 0.170 to 0.510 for kurtosis, considered that all value is normally distributed. According to George and Mallery (2016), the accepted skewness and kurtosis values are ranged between -3 to +3. It means that all variables that used in this study are normal. Hence, the researcher can proceed for further analysis.

4.4. Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson Correlation analysis is a statistic analysis that summarizing the strength of association between two metric variables (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The correlation is a technique on how strongly pairs of variables are correlated.

Table 3: Correlation Coefficient

Variables	Willingness to seek Information	Crisis Responsibility	Relational Trust
Willingness to seek Information	1		
Crisis Responsibility	0.480**	1	
Relational Trust	0.570**	0.742**	1

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 level (2 tailed).

The relationship between crisis responsibility and relational trust towards willingness to seek information has been tested. Crisis responsibility (*r value = 0.480, p-value = 0.00*), indicate that positive correlation between crisis responsibility with willingness to seek information and have a moderate strength of association (Pallant, 2005) with willingness to seek information about the Covid-19. While relational trust (*r value = 0.570, p-value = 0.00*) showed there is a positive and moderate strength of association between relational trust with willingness to seek information about the Covid-19.

4.5. Hypotheses Testing

The hypotheses were tested by using multiple regression analysis to find out the ediating role of relational trust between crisis responsibility and willingness to seek information, and the relationship between gender differences and willingness to seek information during Covid-19 pandemic

4.5.1. *The Mediating Role of Relational Trust Between Crisis Responsibility and Willingness to Seek Information*

The results indicate that the relational trust significantly mediates the relationship between crisis responsibility and willingness to seek information (t-value = 6.422, p-value = 0.000). The result found a strong positive direct path between relational trust and willingness to seek information from the students while facing the unfavorable events. This underscores that trust is a valuable indicator prior to the willingness to seek information during the outbreak of Covid-19. The role of University Health Centre and Students Accommodation Office has gained trustworthiness among stranded students who were living in Colleges. Basing on this fact, the study believes that relational trust is strongly engaged in order to seek factual information. Considering the strong path coefficient between relational trust and willingness to seek crisis-related information among students, we can conclude that people might believe that the element of trust is becoming a pushing factor with regard to their willingness to seek information.

Table 4: Result of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	t-value	Sig	Result
H1: CR ⟶ RT ⟶ WSI	6.422	0.000**	Supported

Notes: The dependent variable is the Willingness to Seek Information (WSI), while the independent variable is the Crisis Responsibility (CR), and the mediating variable is Relational Trust (RT)

4.5.2. *Independent T-Test of Gender Differences Towards Willingness to Seek Information*

The most common types of *t*-test are independent-samples tests (between-samples or unpaired-samples *t*-test) which test the mean for two different groups. Concerning the regression values of the independent variable (gender) indicated in Table 5, gender differences are found to be not significantly related with the willingness to seek information during the crisis (t-value = 0.730, p-value = 0.466). The mean value also shows there is no significance difference between male and female in seeking information. The insignificant relationship points out that gender differences would not influence the willingness to seek information for their own benefits. During this Covid-19 pandemic, both gender are willingly to seek for an information to a greater extent.

Table 5: Result of Hypotheses Testing

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T Value	Sig Value
Willingness To Seek Information	Male	96	3.7604	.76579	.07816	0.730	0.466**
	Female	179	3.8324	.78621	.05876		

Notes: The dependent variable is the Willingness to Seek Information (WSI), while the independent variable is the Gender. **Represent the significant level at 0.01 level (2 tailed)

5.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study investigated the role of relational trust during Covid-19 pandemic among UiTM students while the MCO execution is imposed by the government. We found that relational trust was a significant mediator between crisis responsibility and willingness to seek information. The findings from this study present considerable lessons for the university especially both the

university health center and student accommodation center not only in UiTM, but also in other universities and private colleges. The empirical findings from this study may aggravate concerns among Malaysians' higher learning institutions regarding the role they should play when facing the crisis like Covid-19 outbreak. Trust elements gained from the health support provided by the medical staffs from the university health center besides providing counselling session were significantly influence students' willingness in seeking information besides excellent internet facilities. The findings cloud also provides multiple possible prevention strategies to the university health center in assisting students who may have different degrees of stress and health problems. In short, our results also enrich the literature on managing the dissemination of accurate and reliable information, as well as managing stress and health to ensure students' safety and health under the context relational trust during COVID-19 epidemic.

Due to its limitations, the study could be extended in a variety of ways. Firstly, the scope of this study could be further extended to other universities including private institutions. Secondly, future research on the relational trust issues could consider the element of emotions along with the willingness to seek information and crisis responsibility. This should testify to the influence of emotions which mediated the relationship between crisis responsibility and relational trust before testify students' willingness to seek information.

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