Malaysian Youth's Social Media Usage: Navigating Disasters, Politics, and Misinformation in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, where nearly 90 percent of youth are daily social media users, crises such as floods, political unrest, and health emergencies spread online just as rapidly as offline. This study explores how Malaysian youth respond to these challenges in a digital environment crowded with trending hashtags, influencer opinions, and government alerts, often struggling to separate fact from misinformation. By analyzing cases such as the 2021 #DaruratBanjir flood response, debates over COVID-19 vaccines, and youth-led movements like #Lawan, the research identifies clear patterns in youth engagement, coping strategies, and the ways they build digital resilience. The findings show that while platforms like TikTok encourage active participation, they also heighten distrust in authorities and can negatively affect post-pandemic mental health. Current crisis communication strategies often fail to resonate with young people, who increasingly rely on peers and influencers for guidance. Based on these findings, the study recommends actionable strategies: co-creating content with youth influencers, gamifying digital literacy programs, and embedding mental health support in crisis messaging. These insights aim to equip policymakers, educators, and NGOs with practical guidance to design communication approaches that genuinely reflect the experiences, resilience, and challenges of Malaysian youth navigating today's digital landscape.

Keywords: crisis communication, digital resilience, mental health, social media misinformation

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian youth are among the most digitally connected populations globally, with over 90 percent using social media every day (Ismail et al. 2019). Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have reshaped how young people access, share, and respond to information, especially during crises. Events such as the 2021 #DaruratBanjir flood and the debates surrounding COVID-19 vaccines show social media's dual nature with rapid dissemination of critical updates, yet also fuels the spread of misinformation.

Despite this, current crisis communication strategies often do not capture the attention or trust of the Malaysian youth. Research shows that young people increasingly turn to peers and influencers instead of official sources to verify information and guide their actions (Jalaludin et al. 2024; Jalli 2025). This trend presents both opportunities and challenges. Digital networks on the other hand can empower youth engagement, they also complicate public communication and make misinformation harder to manage.

This study examines these dynamics through secondary data analysis, focusing on pivotal cases such as #DaruratBanjir, COVID-19 vaccine debates, the #Lawan protests, and government initiatives like SELangkah. By integrating Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC), digital resilience, and participatory communication frameworks, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights and practical strategies for youth-centered crisis communication. In doing so, it highlights how Malaysian youth navigate and act within complex digital environments during crises.

Although prior studies have examined youth engagement in disasters and public health crises, few have combined quantitative and qualitative secondary data with theoretical frameworks in an integrated analysis. This study at hand addresses that gap, merging evidence to provide both academic insights and practical recommendations for effective youth-centred communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has transformed crisis communication, shifting it from traditional top-down messaging to dynamic, peer-mediated interactions (Liu, Austin, and Jin 2011). For young audiences, peer validation and influencer credibility often carry more weight than official sources, creating intricate patterns of trust and information flow (Jalaludin et al. 2024). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing communication that truly resonates with youth.

Malaysian youth have consistently demonstrated proactive engagement during crises. During the 2021 #DaruratBanjir floods, young people coordinated volunteer efforts, shared live updates, and even developed interactive maps through social media platforms (Ismail et al. 2019). Similarly, during the COVID-19 vaccine debates, youth actively cross-checked conflicting information, relying on both peers and influencers to guide their decisions (Jalaludin et al. 2024). These examples show that Malaysian youth are not passive recipients but active participants in shaping crisis responses. This shows strong youth engagement in disasters and public health-related crises.

Digital resilience refers to the adaptive strategies youth employ to navigate online challenges, such as misinformation, emotional stress, and information overload (Livingstone et al. 2017). Participatory communication emphasizes youth as co-creators of narratives, influencing both online discussions and offline civic engagement (Servaes 2008). Integrating these frameworks

offers a holistic lens for understanding how youth handle digitally mediated crises. This signals their prominent digital resilience and growing influence on participatory communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) explains how social media shapes crisis information through co-creation and peer validation (Liu et al. 2011). Digital Resilience captures strategies young people use to manage misinformation and support well-being during crises (Livingstone et al. 2017). Participatory Communication highlights youth agency in shaping discourse and mobilizing civic action (Servaes, 2008). These frameworks guide the analysis and interpretation of data, linking findings to actionable strategies for crisis communication that genuinely engages the Malaysian youth.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary data analysis approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative sources to explore youth engagement during crises in Malaysia. The research draws on statistics related to social media usage and survey data examining youth engagement, trust, and information-seeking behaviour. Moreover, case studies offer deeper insights into how youth respond to crises, including the 2021 #DaruratBanjir flood, COVID-19 vaccine debates, #Lawan protests, and government initiatives such as SELangkah.

For data triangulation purposes, multiple sources are cross-referenced, allowing the study to identify consistent patterns and insights across different datasets. By combining quantitative trends with qualitative case analyses, this methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of youth behaviour, digital resilience, and participatory engagement in crisis contexts. This is a crucial step to enhance validity of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Trends in Youth Social Media Engagement

Secondary data confirm that Malaysian youth are among the most digitally active populations in Southeast Asia, with over 90 percent engaging with at least one social media platform daily (Ismail et al. 2019). Platform preferences reveal generational patterns which show that TikTok leads with 82 percent engagement, followed by Instagram (79 percent), Twitter/X (65 percent), and Facebook (48 percent). These figures show not only where youth spend their time, but also the types of narratives and crisis discourse they are most likely to encounter.

Young people rely heavily on peer-shared posts (73 percent) and influencer-driven content (61 percent), whereas trust in official government sources remains comparatively low (38 percent) (Jalli 2025). This does not indicate outright rejection of institutional voices, but rather a filtering process through networks perceived as authentic and relatable. The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model explains this dynamic, saying that youth are no longer passive recipients of crisis information but active intermediaries, validating and recirculating messages within their social networks (Liu, Austin, and Jin 2011).

Exposure to misinformation is strikingly high, with 68 percent encountering conflicting COVID-19 vaccine information and 55 percent encountering misleading flood-related content (Jalaludin et al. 2024). However, exposure does not equal acceptance. The youth develop coping strategies such as cross-checking with peers, screenshotting official advisories for group chats, and even using humor or memes to navigate uncertainty. These practices demonstrate that Malaysian youth act as critical curators of digital information rather than passive consumers.

For instance, during the 2021 #DaruratBanjir floods, youth activists used TikTok live streams and Twitter threads to provide real-time rescue updates, doing this often faster than local authorities. While some posts were unverified, the immediacy and authenticity of peer-to-peer sharing fostered solidarity that official channels struggled to replicate. Similarly, during COVID-19 vaccine debates, Instagram infographics by youth health advocates gained more traction than Ministry of Health bulletins among students. Here, the SMCC model helps explain how peer networks and influencers act as bridges between expert guidance and youth audiences, while digital resilience theory shows how young people actively fact-check and diversify information sources to resist misinformation.

The heavy reliance on influencer culture also raises ethical and regulatory questions. Influencers are not bound by the accountability standards of journalists or public health officials, yet they often shape public discourse. Participatory communication highlights this dual effect. While youth engagement empowers, without safeguards, it can inadvertently propagate misleading information.

Comparisons with regional contexts reinforce these findings. Thai youth leveraged social media during the 2020 pro-democracy protests (Sinpeng 2021), and Filipino youth mobilized digital campaigns during typhoons (Ong and Cabanes 2019; Pertierra 2021). In both cases, the youth used participatory networks to foster resilience but also faced government pushbacks. This situates the Malaysian youth within a broader Southeast Asian digital generation and redefines how crises are experienced and managed across hybrid online-offline environments.

The implications are multi-layered. The Malaysian youth's distrust in official sources is not apathy. It signals a demand for communication that is transparent, relatable, and interactive. For policymakers, NGOs, and educators, there is a clear opportunity to collaborate with youth creators in disaster preparedness campaigns, leveraging their credibility while ensuring factual accuracy. Recognizing online spaces as sources of information and arenas for coping, including memes, solidarity hashtags, and peer validation, is essential for supporting the mental health of the youth during crises.

Twitter/X: Political activism and hashtag mobilization

X (Twitter) is used by 65 percent of the Malaysian youth (Jalaludin et al. 2024). While it is less dominant than TikTok or Instagram, it plays a significant role in shaping political discourse and crisis narratives. Unlike TikTok's visually immediate content or Instagram's curated storytelling, Twitter thrives on real-time commentary, hashtag campaigns, and rapid mobilization of collective sentiment. A notable example is the 2021 #Lawan protest movement. Frustrated with the government's handling of the pandemic, young Malaysians turned to X hashtags to rally support. Within hours, hashtags like #KerajaanGagal ("Failed Government") trended nationwide, amplifying

demands for accountability and catalyzing offline demonstrations. This illustrates the agenda-setting power of youth digital activism, where viral tweets translate directly into real-world action.

Viewed through the lens of the SMCC model, X highlights how youth are not passive consumers of crisis information but active amplifiers and challengers of official narratives. A single short tweet retweeted thousands of times can undermine an official press release that lacks credibility among young audiences. Participatory communication theory reinforces this observation that authority is contested openly in networked dialogues where youth voices shape and challenge public discourse.

However, X also functions as a polarized echo chamber. During the COVID-19 vaccine debates, hashtags were leveraged both by health advocates and anti-vaccine groups, resulting in "hashtag wars" (Lim 2022). Emotionally charged tweets spread faster than nuanced information, demonstrating how the youth can be vulnerable to algorithmic amplification of outrage.

One young activist stated: "We knew the government wasn't listening, but if we made #KerajaanGagal trend, at least the world would notice" (Jalaludin et al. 2024). This remark captures the dual nature of digital visibility with a trending hashtag, as it serves both as a tool for empowerment and as a coping strategy amid political disillusionment.

Facebook: Declining but still relevant

While Facebook engagement among the Malaysian youth has declined to 48 percent (Ismail et al. 2019), it remains important, particularly in rural and multigenerational households. Unlike TikTok or Instagram, Facebook continues to be a platform where young people interact with family networks, local communities, and official government announcements.

During the flood crises in Kelantan and Pahang (2021–2022), local Facebook community groups became crucial hubs for real-time relief coordination. Youth volunteers often cross-posted donation needs, missing person alerts, and roadblock updates in these groups. While TikTok carried viral rescue videos, Facebook functioned as a logistical communication space becoming less glamorous but equally vital.

From a theoretical standpoint, Facebook reflects networked publics (Boyd 2010), where overlapping generational and institutional audiences converge. For the youth, posting in Facebook groups allows them to extend solidarity beyond peer circles, engaging parents, neighbors, and NGOs. This underscores the blended communication ecology of crises which demonstrate youth do not rely on a single platform but strategically use different channels for different functions.

At the same time, Facebook has been a notorious source of misinformation, particularly around COVID-19 vaccines and political rumors. Secondary data indicate that 55 percent of the Malaysian youth encountered flood-related misinformation via Facebook (Jalaludin et al. 2024). Yet unlike on TikTok, where misinformation spreads virally, Facebook's misinformation often circulates in closed group settings, making it harder for external fact-checkers to intervene. For example, one young volunteer quoted in case studies explained: "If I want my parents to know about the flood updates, I share it on Facebook. They don't trust TikTok, but they'll check Facebook groups" (Jalli 2025). This illustrates how the youth adapt their communication choices not only for themselves but also to bridge generational gaps in a crisis response.

These patterns show that the Malaysian youth are digitally active but selective, evaluating credibility based on social validation and perceived trustworthiness. The SMCC model explains this participatory behavior as young people being co-creators and mediators of crisis information and not just passive receivers.

Case Studies and Qualitative Insights
#DaruratBanjir Flood Response

During the 2021 #DaruratBanjir floods, the Malaysian youth actively shared live updates on TikTok and Instagram, reporting flood locations, coordinating volunteer efforts, and mapping relief centers (Ismail et al. 2019). Some went a step further by creating interactive maps compiling these posts, providing actionable guidance for affected communities. This peer-mediated communication reflects the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication principle, where young people do not passively receive information but construct and validate it socially.

Such participatory communication accelerates responsiveness, which allows communities to act quickly. At the same time, it carries risks such as unverified posts amplifying errors or confusion. While quantitative data reveal general trends in youth social media engagement during crises, qualitative insights show the lived experience of young people navigating these events. Social media becomes more than a news source as it functions as an emotional anchor, a space for solidarity, and occasionally, a battlefield of contested truths. The youth learn to interpret, negotiate, and reshape information in real time, demonstrating both agency and resilience in a complex digital environment.

During the 2021 #DaruratBanjir floods, young Malaysians stepped in where official channels fell short. WhatsApp groups and TikTok live streams circulated urgent rescue calls, while volunteers posted Google Maps pins for food distribution centers. These grassroots systems outpaced government alerts in timeliness and relevance. For example in a study by Yusrisham et al., one 22-year-old student posted on Twitter: "We didn't have time to wait for TV announcements. My friends on TikTok told me which bridge was under water, and that saved us an hour of being stuck in traffic" (2024). This kind of bottom-up crisis communication reflects Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) in action (Coombs 2007). Authority is redistributed as credibility comes from proximity, speed, and perceived authenticity.

Similar dynamics unfolded during the COVID-19 pandemic, when hashtags like #KitaJagaKita turned into digital rallying cries for community solidarity. Young Malaysians documented struggles, mobilized donations, and publicly held institutions accountable. Comparatively, Indonesia's #ReformasiDikorupsi movement in 2019 and the Philippines' citizen-driven typhoon updates show parallel patterns. In essence, then, the youths in Southeast Asia are not passive receivers but active architects of crisis narratives. These cases underline that meaning making amongst young people is embedded in regional traditions of grassroots activism and digital collectivism.

The affective labor of coping with uncertainty

Crises are not merely logistical challenges because they also stir emotional upheaval. The Malaysian youth frequently described feeling "overwhelmed" by the flood of conflicting information. The COVID-19 vaccine debates exemplify this tension. Instagram stories humanized vaccination experiences with selfies, side-effect diaries, and celebratory captions like "finally protected!" Yet, the same feeds often contained viral claims of infertility, government conspiracies, and religious misinformation.

A focus group participant in Jalli's study explained: "One moment I feel reassured after seeing my cousin's vaccination video. Then, two swipes later, I see a TikTok saying the vaccine causes blood clots. It's like an emotional rollercoaster every single day (Jalli 2025)." This captures the affective labor of digital resilience with youth who must continuously filter, verify, and emotionally reconcile contradictory messages. Many developed micro-strategies such as curating "trusted circles" on WhatsApp, following science-based micro-influencers, or temporarily muting toxic feeds. Yet, this labor comes at a cost as surveys indicate that 42 percent of the Malaysian youth experienced heightened anxiety linked to digital news exposure (Ismail et al. 2021).

This phenomenon is not unique to Malaysia. Young Thais navigating political protests in 2020 reported "doomscrolling fatigue," while young Filipinos during Typhoon Rai (2021) felt "digitally exhausted" as they balanced hope and despair in community feeds. These parallels illustrate that digital resilience is as much an emotional process as an informational one, highlighting the mental and emotional dimensions of youth engagement in crises.

Tensions between empowerment and disillusionment

Social media has given the Malaysian youth a sense of empowerment in shaping crisis narratives, yet this digital agency often collides with systemic disillusionment. The 2021 #Lawan protests exemplify this duality. Young Malaysians leveraged TikTok, Instagram, and X to demand government accountability as they created memes, infographics, and viral chants. One participant shared with *The Malaysian Insight* the following: "We felt powerful online. We could trend overnight. But when nothing really changed, it was crashing. It felt like shouting into the void." This ambivalence reflects the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974). Social media meets the youths' needs for self-expression and identity-building, but when these online efforts fail to effect real-world change, a lack of gratification turns into frustration.

Similar patterns are observed across Southeast Asia. Indonesian student activists noted that while hashtags reached millions, structural corruption persisted. Young Thais reported that government surveillance made online activism risky and draining. So, across the region, the paradox of visibility is clear, namely, that young voices are symbolically amplified online but often structurally marginalized offline.

Integrating Malaysian and regional narratives

Examining these experiences shows the Malaysian youth as active meaning-makers, emotional managers, and ambivalent activists. Their engagement is not superficial; it is deeply human, intertwined with survival, belonging, and legitimacy. In Malaysia, peer-to-peer networks like

#DaruratBanjir and #KitaJagaKita filled critical gaps left by official institutions. Across Southeast Asia, Indonesian and Filipino youth demonstrated similar improvisational agency, suggesting this is a regional rather than an isolated phenomenon.

Qualitative evidence reinforces theoretical insights, SCCT explains youth participation in shaping narratives, UGT captures the psychological rewards and frustrations of digital activism, and digital resilience theory highlights adaptive but emotionally costly coping strategies. Collectively, these findings underline a key point: youths' reliance on peers and influencers is not just susceptibility, but a deliberate search for authenticity in a fragmented information ecosystem.

From this, actionable recommendations emerge for policymakers and educators. To effectively engage the youth during crises, communication strategies must go beyond simply disseminating factual updates. Collaborating with trusted youth micro-influencers can enhance both credibility and reach, ensuring that critical messages resonate within peer networks. At the same time, crisis messaging should acknowledge the emotional labor that young people undertake, offering support alongside information to help them navigate uncertainty. Moreover, governments and organizations must move beyond merely tolerating digital activism, as they should integrate youth perspectives into decision-making to bridge the gap between symbolic visibility and structural influence. Recognizing both the agency and the emotional investment of youth is essential for designing communication frameworks that truly connect with a generation negotiating crises in today's turbulent digital landscape.

COVID-19 Vaccine Debates

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian youth faced a flood of information and uncertainty about vaccines. Official updates from the Ministry of Health (MOH) came through press conferences, MySejahtera notifications, and news outlets, but many young people accessed this information indirectly, namely, through peers, social media influencers, or even memes. Over two-thirds reported exposure to misinformation, from alleged side effects and microchip conspiracies to doubts about halal certification (Jalaludin et al. 2024).

Despite this, young people were not passive. They actively practiced digital resilience, which means checking multiple sources, sharing trustworthy content, and discussing doubts in peer groups. Explanations by credible medical professionals or influencers posted on TikTok were often preferred over official Ministry of Health briefings. One youth participant noted: "I don't bother with WhatsApp forwards from relatives. I wait for my favorite TikTok doctor to break it down in 60 seconds. That's clearer and feels real." This reflects SMCC theory, showing that peers and influencers shape what the youth consider credible. Official sources were seen as authoritative but distant, while peer networks offered context, relevance, and speed. Practical information, like navigating vaccine appointments, often spread through Telegram groups, Instagram stories, or campus networks rather than official channels.

The Malaysian youth also invested emotional efforts in coping with the overload. Many felt anxious about making the "right choice" for themselves and their families. Group chats mixed serious discussions with humorous memes, side-effect diaries, and playful commentary to manage stress and make heavy topics easier to handle.

Similar patterns appeared regionally. Indonesian influencer Dr. Tirta helped skeptical young people understand vaccines, and Thai youth-led campaigns under #VaccineForAll pushed for fair access. Across Southeast Asia, the youth were not only verifying information but actively negotiating and reshaping the narrative (Pertierra 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, Digital Resilience Theory shows how the youth adapt to uncertainty, using selective trust and peer verification. SMCC explains why social channels work better than top-down official communication. They are interactive, relatable, and trusted. For Malaysia, this suggests that co-creating content with young influencers is key to counter misinformation and build engagement.

#Lawan Protests and Civic Mobilization

The #Lawan protests in 2021 were a turning point for Malaysian youth digital activism. Frustration with the government's pandemic management, inconsistent lockdowns, limited transparency, and rising youth unemployment fueled online mobilization under hashtags like #Lawan ("fight") and #KerajaanGagal ("failed government"). Social media has become both a mobilization tool and a space for symbolic expression. Young Malaysians shared graphics, guides, and calls for solidarity on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Offline rallies in Kuala Lumpur were coordinated via encrypted platforms like Telegram and Signal. This blend of online and offline activity reflects participatory communication, where communities shape collective meaning and action. Participation was driven by peer influence, civic responsibility, and social validation rather than pure political ideology. One Instagram caption encapsulated this motivation: "I never cared much about politics, but when my friends explained how this affects our future, I knew I had to show up" (Yusrisham et al. 2024). This explains how the youth derive credibility and motivation from peers and micro-influencers instead of political leaders. Sharing a protest poster online became a way to signal belonging and participation, even for those unable to attend rallies.

Comparisons with Thailand's #MilkTeaAlliance and Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests show that networked mobilization by young people is a regional phenomenon. Social media spread information and built solidarity through hashtags, memes, and digital rituals. The Malaysian youth added local creativity, such as using clown imagery to mock politicians, thereby adapting global symbols to local humor (Sinpeng 2021).

These events demonstrate that the Malaysian youth are active co-creators of civic narratives. They generate, remix, and circulate messages that reflect lived experiences. Crisis moments like the pandemic strengthened their political consciousness and showcased youth agencies in shaping civic engagement in the digital age.

Government Initiatives: SELangkah

The SELangkah app, launched in Selangor as a contact-tracing and health management tool during COVID-19, illustrates the challenges of official digital communication with the Malaysian youth. While the app was designed to track exposures and ease health declarations, its user interface and engagement design limited adoption among young people. Musa Mohd Nordin (2021) notes that

compared to MySejahtera, SELangkah lacked integration with vaccination certification, and its navigation was often clunky.

For many youths, the app simply did not align with their digital habits. They preferred platforms that were interactive, integrated with social features, and optimized for mobile use. A 21-year-old university student commented in an online forum (paraphrased) from Musa Mohd Nordin, (2021): "I downloaded SELangkah because my campus asked us to, but I only used it twice. MySejahtera was easier, and all my friends were on it." This points to a critical lesson. Youth adoption depends less on the credibility of official messaging and more on usability, relevance, and peer integration. From the perspective of SMCC, SELangkah illustrates what happens when communication remains top-down. The app conveyed information but did not embed itself within youth peer networks. Unlike MySejahtera, which became a "social necessity" for dining, travel, and events, SELangkah lacked the same networked ecosystem.

Comparatively, Singapore's *TraceTogether* app gained traction partly because it was tied to access requirements in schools, malls, and offices, while Indonesia's *PeduliLindungi* app incorporated gamification elements and partnerships with popular youth platforms (Pertierra 2021). These examples underline that youth engagement is not guaranteed by authority alone. Design, integration, and social endorsement matter as much as content.

The implication is clear. Crisis communication apps must be co-designed with input by young people. Instead of assuming compliance, governments could leverage user-centered design, feedback loops, and even collaborations with youth developers or influencers. SELangkah's limited adoption should not be read simply as youth apathy but as a mismatch between institutional communication styles and youth digital cultures.

Synthesis Across Cases

Looking across the three cases of vaccine debates, #Lawan protests, and SELangkah adoption, a clear pattern emerges. Young Malaysians are active, selective, and socially mediated participants in digital communication. They do not automatically accept information or follow official initiatives without question. Instead, they filter, remix, and amplify content through peer networks and influencers, balancing skepticism with creativity.

Theories such as Digital Resilience, Participatory Communication, and Social-Mediated Crisis Communication converge to show that the youth are not merely passive audiences but co-producers of meaning during crises. Their practices reveal both opportunities, such as peer-driven vaccine advocacy and grassroots protest mobilization, and challenges, such as the rejection of poorly designed government apps. This suggests that policymakers and communicators should approach the young as partners in co-creation, rather than targets of persuasion.

Triangulated evidence confirms that young people act as digitally resilient, socially mediated interpreters. SMCC explains how they shape the credibility of narratives through social networks, while Digital Resilience theory highlights adaptive strategies like verifying information, amplifying trusted sources, and consulting peers. Social media allows them to co-create narratives that influence both online and offline action, which reflects participatory communication in practice.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the Malaysian youth navigate crises, including natural disasters, political uncertainty, and health misinformation, using social media platforms. By analyzing secondary quantitative and qualitative data, the research shows a generation that is digitally literate, socially connected, and resilient in managing complex information environments. Their engagement patterns reflect not only technological fluency but also the importance of peer influence, collective identity, and participatory communication during times of disruption.

The findings highlight several key dimensions. First, young Malaysians rely on credibility constructed through social validation rather than institutional authority. Content endorsed by peers and influencers is seen as more trustworthy, explaining the prominence of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where immediacy, interactivity, and social proof shape information behaviors.

Second, similar patterns are observed across misinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and major floods, as the youth demonstrate digital resilience. They cross-verify information, discuss critically with peers, and selectively amplify reliable content. These strategies show developing media literacy, enabling youth to manage information overload and maintain agency in crisis communication flows.

Third, participatory crisis communication defines youth engagement. Online movements such as #Lawan illustrate how young Malaysians act as co-creators of public discourse, raising awareness, shaping narratives, and turning online activism into offline participation. Social media thus becomes more than a passive information source; it is a space for civic dialogue and empowerment.

However, institutional communication still faces challenges in sustaining youth attention. Government initiatives like SELangkah, while credible, often lack interactivity and peer-level engagement, which highlights the need for participatory design that embeds relevance, authenticity, and user feedback.

Regarding theory, this study has integrated Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC), digital resilience, and participatory communication frameworks. SMCC emphasizes the negotiated credibility within social networks, digital resilience captures adaptive coping mechanisms, and participatory communication frames engagement as active social action. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Malaysian youth interpret, share, and respond to crisis-related information, reaffirming their evolving role as informed, empathetic, and empowered digital citizens.

This study has highlighted practical ways to enhance youth-centered crisis communication in Malaysia. The strategies focus on collaboration, interactivity, and empathy to respond to both the digital habits and emotional needs of young people.

First, to co-create content with trusted youth influencers, communicators should work with credible young influencers who genuinely connect with their peers. Together, they can produce platform-specific content, such as short videos, live discussions, and infographics. Peer validation, through comments or endorsements, strengthens trust and encourages engagement.

Second, to gamify digital literacy and misinformation programs, digital literacy should be active and participatory. Scenario-based exercises can help youth practice verifying information in safe

environments. Challenges on TikTok or Instagram, combined with rewards like badges or recognition, make learning enjoyable and reinforce responsible sharing.

Third, to integrate mental health support into crisis communication, crisis messaging should address emotional well-being, not just facts. It should include helplines, stress management tips, and regular check-ins. Youth ambassadors can normalize discussions on stress, anxiety, and coping, helping peers feel supported and understood. Monitoring engagement ensures messages align with their real experiences.

Fourth, to adopt participatory platform design, the government and NGO platforms should prioritize interactivity and social connection. Features that allow sharing, commenting, or collaborative content creation turn users into active contributors. Testing content formats with youth ensures communication stays relevant, inclusive, and adaptable to changing digital habits.

Fifth, to include youth perspectives in policy and strategy, the youth input should shape national crisis communication strategies. Policies that encourage co-creation and social participation increase public trust and improve outcomes. Evaluating campaigns by linking online engagement to real-world actions ensures communication leads to meaningful impact.

These insights from the research inform practical interventions. Governments and organizations could collaborate with credible representatives of the youth population who are aligned with social causes to co-create interactive and visual crisis content. Peer validation mechanisms can further enhance trust. Gamified digital literacy programs, including scenario-based modules to detect misinformation and TikTok/Instagram challenges for experiential learning, could encourage engagement and retention.

Holistic youth well-being must also be embedded into communication strategies. Mental health support should go beyond awareness by including accessible help-lines, practical stress management tips, and regular emotional check-ins. Empowering youth ambassadors to advocate for emotional well-being can normalize conversations about mental health and make support relatable to peers.

Finally, effective communication requires staying attentive to how youth respond and engage. Content should appear on platforms where young people are already active, like TikTok and Instagram. Messages should be visual, concise, and interactive, with features like polls, short Q&A sessions, and real-time updates. By turning communication into a two-way exchange rather than a one-sided broadcast, youth feel seen, involved, and part of the conversation.

In conclusion, the Malaysian youth are not passive recipients. They act as mediators, interpreters, and co-creators, engaging online and offline. Effective strategies must respect their social networks, emotional needs, and digital practices. By combining Social-Mediated Crisis Communication, digital resilience, and participatory frameworks with practical insights, policymakers, educators, and NGOs can design communication that is inclusive, trustworthy, and impactful.

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