

Chapter 4

An Exploration of Digital Health Literacy in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines digital health literacy as the capacity to use electronic devices to acquire, seek, evaluate, and comprehend health information in order to improve health outcomes or to address a health concern. The recent technological advancement have made the globe more digital than ever before by allowing the populations to easily access the information on healthcare. In Malaysia, the rapid advancement in the digital information and communications technology (ICT) applications followed by the quick spread of the COVID-19 has similarly led to remarkable changes to the digital health literacy. In the wake of COVID-19, this chapter offers a timely analysis on the retrospective studies conducted in the area of digital health literacy. From this chapter, observations can be drawn on the supports given by the government to the people in their health-information seeking attempts so as to improve the overall digital health literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, access to timely and accurate information during any infectious disease outbreak becomes ever more essential as part of the strategy to curb the spread of the diseases among the population. According to Marzoet al. (2022), quality and up-to-date informa-

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tion from the digital platforms about the source of the pandemic, specific health threats, dissemination, mortality, can minimize the risk of infection and public anxiety. Although health information can easily be obtained and spread through various social media platforms available such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc., there are challenges of false information being shared which could escalate into social anxiety. Similarly, Kyaw et al. (2022) agreed that the availability of digital technologies such as the internet and social media platforms has led to a widespread COVID-19 infodemic which interferes with national public health containment strategies and public health communication. Meanwhile, Dadaczynski et al. (2021) reported a low level of health literacy was found from the population with many reported facing the difficulty to deal with reliable health-related information.

In order to curb the spread of false information shared and to allow the public to access accurate information on the COVID-19 situation, the Malaysian Ministry of Health has responded by disseminating information on the COVID-19 statistics through its official websites. Other communication strategies adopted included the development of public broadcasting organizations with web-based media campaigns, such as daily nationwide podcasts. This was to ensure that the public has access to the pertinent information about COVID-19 and an understanding of how it could affect health. On 20 April 2020, a health application known as MySejahtera was launched to curb COVID-19 infections. MySejahtera allows the members of the public to monitor their health status and enables the Ministry of Health (MOH) to keep track of the people's health status information for efficient and effective action (MCMC, 2020). The MySejahtera application was further improved to be a public health platform with a new feature as a health record application allowing the storage of health and immunization records. Recently, MySejahtera has been expanded to ease appointments at government health facilities (Hilmy, 2022).

According to Azlan et al. (2021), health literacy is progressively recognized as an indicator to describe a nation's health status. Health literacy has advantages that go beyond individual health care, such as effective illness prevention and improving health promotion in general. The concept of health literacy goes beyond health education as it tackles social and environmental determinants that could affect an individual's capability in engaging with health information, with the ability to reach well-informed decisions for their health benefit and others. Studies in the past have attributed low health literacy to poor health conditions (Jandorf et al., 2019; Anwar et al., 2020). Meanwhile, another study by Haun et al. (2015) has associated low health literacy with higher healthcare utilization and costs. Santos et al. (2017) inferred that higher levels of health literacy will allow better health decisions. Evidence from a much recent study by McCaffery et al. (2020) pointed out that people with inadequate health literacy tend to have a poorer understanding of the COVID-19 symptoms, having difficulty to identify behaviors to prevent infection and experienced challenges to obtain accurate information related to COVID-19.

The pandemic crisis of COVID-19 has seemingly revived the importance of health literacy and with the movement restriction in place, digital health literacy becomes ever more crucial to enable accurate information to be easily accessible to all. It would be noteworthy to provide a review of the digital health literacy progress in Malaysia that will help in gaining an in-depth understanding of the digital health literacy benefits to the community as a whole and provide some recommendations on how to improve the efforts to uplift the digital health literacy level. The remainder of this chapter will be structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the digitalization of the health care system in Malaysia. In the subsequent section, a literature review related to digital health literacy in Malaysia was included. Section 4 provides the trends of digital health. In the next section, support by the government related to digital health literacy will be discussed. The final Section 6 will briefly conclude the chapter.

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