CREATIVE PRODUCTION OF ‘COVID-19 SOCIAL DISTANCING’ NARRATIVES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Received: April 2020; accepted May 2020

ABSTRACT
This paper offers an insight into the role of young people in shifting risk perception of the current global pandemic, COVID-19, via social distancing narratives on social media. Young people are creatively and affectively supporting the social distancing initiatives in Brunei Darussalam through the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok. Using qualitative content analysis (QCA) data of social media content by Bruneian youth, this paper reveals the localised and contextualised creative production of five ‘social distancing’ narratives as a response to the national and global concerns in times of a global pandemic: narrative of fear; narrative of responsibility; narrative of annoyance; narrative of fun; and narrative of resistance. This paper reflects on three key socio-cultural reconfigurations that have broader implications beyond the COVID-19 crisis: new youth spatialities and social engagements; youth leadership in development; and consideration of social participation and reach in risk communication.

Key words: Social distancing; Brunei; qualitative content analysis; COVID-19; young people; social media

INTRODUCTION
This paper is motivated by the socio-cultural implications and reconfiguration of everyday life amidst and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in the period of intense social media use. The introduction of social media to the public in the mid-2000s and its development in recent years have created new youth spatialities and socio-spatial engagements that have significantly altered the way audiences consume information, participate in the content creation, and engage with the content circulated on the social media platforms. With a social mediascape that is characterised by participatory and networked culture and user-generated content (Jenkins et al. 2013), the creation, circulation, and consumption of information and contents are increasingly contextualised, and socio-culturally, and politically shaped. The ontological nature of our communication culture (the intense and expected users’ self-disclosure) and the current social media practices, in the context of risk communication, are not making it easier for relevant stakeholders, especially public health practitioners to disseminate health risk information and to understand the communicative health practices and risk perception of the population. Social media can be effectively utilised to communicate information on the COVID-19 for public health awareness and interventions, while at the same time poses risk due to the confusion and uncertainties among the public from the misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, apparent in the growing infodemic that accompanies a contemporary
epidemic or a pandemic (Cinelli et al. 2020; Zarocostas 2020). For instance, the upsurge of false information (or myths) circulated on social media related to COVID-19 (commonly seen myth – eating garlic help prevent infection with the new coronavirus). World Health Organisation (WHO) and relevant government agencies (Brunei’s Ministry of Health included) took action by posting on their official Instagram to highlight and debunk false information.

Equally important in this risk communication is risk perception of the population. Risk perception cannot be generalised to the whole population as it is known to be based on a ‘diverse array of information that (individuals) have processed on risk factors … and technologies, as well as on their benefits and contexts’ (WHO 2002). An individual assesses risk according to own knowledge, experience, and socio-cultural environment. Hence, the need to look into context and localities in this study. Unlike during the time of the SARS Outbreak in 2003 when social media was uncommon, digital technology and new social media are now ubiquitously used by WHO and government bodies to spread awareness of the health risk, to share latest information, and to influence risk perception of the public on the severity of this pandemic. The intense internet and social media penetration create digital landscapes where information is widely available; from information, data, advice on the one hand to misinformation, speculation and even conspiracy theories on the other. To add to this, the audience of a few of the recent social media sites such as Instagram, Snap Chat, and Tik Tok are predominantly younger people (Ortiz-Ospina 2019). This makes it imperative to study young people’s responses to the pandemic in today’s social media time. In Brunei, young people are observed to be using social media in playing their part as community members in their own locality and as global citizens. In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, considering that there is still not much knowledge on how risk is communicated, understood, and acted upon (Smith 2006) including risk communication on social media platforms (Kass-Hout & Alhinnawi 2013), this paper aims to reflect on how young people as active audience on social mediascapes are playing a key role in communicating risk to a fellow (young) audience and changing risk perception of a global pandemic, COVID-19, via social media. Of equal importance here are the potential socio-cultural transformations these young people’s social media engagements could create beyond this current crisis, which are revealed in this paper.

In the following section, a description of the qualitative content analysis (QCA) of social distancing initiatives on social media is offered. This followed by a section that demonstrates young people’s localised and contextualised creative responses to COVID-19 through the five social distancing narratives: the narrative of fear; the narrative of responsibility; the narrative of annoyance; the narrative of fun; and the narrative of resistance. One particular action worth highlighting is their effort in making social distancing contents accessible and readable by other users such as by translating official documents to everyday social media language. The penultimate section, reveals three key socio-cultural implications and configurations (new youth spatialities and social engagements, youth leadership in development, and consideration of social participation and reach in risk communication) that have broader implications beyond COVID-19.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS (QCA) OF SOCIAL DISTANCING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

This paper draws from the researcher’s preliminary study for an ongoing research project ‘Social media, risk perception, and risk communication of COVID-19 in Brunei Darussalam’, a research collaboration between Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Health Promotion Centre, Ministry of Health, Brunei Darussalam. As there is not much information known on audience’s social media consumption in risk communication and their individualised, as well as contextualised risk perception, a preliminary research on how the audience deliver and circulate COVID-19 related content on social media was conducted, leading to this preliminary
finding on the active involvement of young people in highlighting the significance of social distancing in flattening the curve in the country. According to Kemp (2020), social media penetration in Brunei was 94 per cent (410,000 population) by January 2020. The growth in the size of the digitally connected group consuming social media content in the nation justifies this interest in looking into social media use in risk communication in Brunei Darussalam.

Given the intensive digital transaction through the social media, this research examined the affective consumption and transaction of social media content on COVID-19 among public in Brunei Darussalam and the impact of their social media transaction on their risk perception of COVID-19. It seeks to investigate: one, the official social media content on COVID-19 circulated by health practitioners and health organisations; two, the social media content on COVID-19 consumed by the public in Brunei; three, their risk perception and understanding of the COVID-19 based on the social media contents transacted and consumed; four, their own appropriation, framing, and circulation of COVID-19 on their social media platforms; and five, their health and behavioural practices as a response to their risk perception of COVID-19.

This research using qualitative content analysis (QCA) on social media content between early March to the end of April 2020 is part of the fourth objective, which is to investigate audience appropriation, framing, and circulation of social distancing initiatives using the multimodal features of the sites, such as captions, images, videos, and hashtags. Prior to finalising the research objectives, the author conducted a pilot discussion with her undergraduate students to seek their views of COVID-19. At that time in point, the students were not really concerned about this crisis. The general consensus was that this new coronavirus is only risky for those with underlying health conditions and older people. One student said that ‘If I get COVID, I’m going to recover’, while another student claimed that the crisis was ‘sensationalised’ by the media. Interestingly, a number of the students pointed out that the COVID-19 memes (mostly humorous contents) circulated on social media help in changing the perception of COVID-19 from high risk to low risk. Their views, although not representative of the young people in the country, point to this group’s low risk perception. It is safe to say that, this could also be the reason for the lack of discussion among the social media users on COVID-19 in the country prior to the announcement of the first case on 9 March 2020. However, the social media landscape changed drastically right after, justifying the QCA conducted on Bruneians’ social media from March 2020 onwards.

To achieve the objective set and taking the above findings and observation into consideration, two data collection strategies were employed. One, the researcher followed COVID-19 latest cases and issues in the country via the daily Press Conferences hosted by the Ministry of Health since 9th March 2020. Social distancing related cases highlighted by the Minister of Health and invited Ministers, the issues the public brought to front via media personnel through the Question and Answer session at the Press Conference, and issues mentioned by the audience of the Press Conference via the Instagram Live (comment section) of the invited media personnel were used to guide the second data collection strategy. This first strategy was employed to obtain the key concerns and issues that are considered important to Bruneians in the context of COVID-19 and social distancing measures. Two, QCA was conducted on random and selected (young people in the author’s social media network who share social distancing contents on their social media) young Bruneians’ Instagram and Twitter contents based on the information obtained from the first data collection strategy. This step by step approach in the data collection allowed the author to follow the issues and the young people’s individual social media sharing on social distancing issues. In total, over 30 individual profiles from Instagram and Twitter combined were observed for social distancing contents. Specific social distancing contents observed include social distancing initiatives conducted by individuals, groups, and companies; key incidents happening in the country related to social distancing; the discussion on COVID-19 statistics on number of infected, recovered and death to obtain
the public’s thoughts on the effectiveness of social distancing initiatives in the country; the growing social distancing creative contents on Instagram for instance those that are accessible via #artcovidbn hashtag; and related viral cases in the country. Contents on other sites such as YouTube and Tik Tok are checked when they appear on the young people’s Instagram and Twitter posts. The cross-platform integration functionality of social media allows for the same media contents to be shared simultaneously (Bossetta 2018) and the spreadability of social media enables content on YouTube to be retweeted on Twitter via URL sharing.

The young people randomly and selectively chosen are between the ages of 18 and 36. A number of them are known in the country as pro-active youth who are keen to support the country’s development. They are also currently volunteering as fun-liners to support the Ministry of Health. A few of these young people are not youth leaders and not directly involved in supporting the country’s effort in curbing the crisis. There is a mixture of students, employed, and currently unemployed young people in the group. These young people’s identity as Bruneians were cross-checked with the details provided on their biography, their mutual followers, and their contents that are specific to Brunei. The findings point to the role of young people in pushing the idea and practice of social distancing apparent via the social distancing narratives (narratives of fear, social responsibility, annoyance, and fun) affectively created, reproduced and circulated online. The findings did suggest that social distancing initiatives are supported more by the pro-active youth. The contents shared on the pro-active youth’s social media include their volunteering activities as fun-liners. There are only limited findings that point to the existence of resistance among the young people. These young people’s active engagements on social media sites in the context of social distancing initiatives reveal two interrelated factors that not only could lead us to reconsider how risk are contextually, spatially, and individually perceived, practised, and communicated by the audience, as both the producers and consumers of digital content. Equally significant and at a more macro-scale level, it reveals the issue of access and power to social media and digital contents in this era of connectivity and media spreadability.

LOCAL RESPONSES – CREATIVE PRODUCTION OF ‘COVID-19 SOCIAL DISTANCING’ NARRATIVES

When the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in the nation on 9 March 2020, Brunei government was quick to take actions. Social distancing initiatives were disseminated to the public a few days after the first case was announced at the nation’s first COVID-19 Press Conference. A school holiday that was previously set on 16 March 2020, started three days earlier. Within the two weeks since the first case, restaurants and gyms were closed, travel restrictions into and out of the country were imposed, a few supermarkets started to implement physical gap at counters and limiting number of customers entering their premises, places of worship are closed temporarily, working from home (WFH), and digital learning were quickly introduced. Physical mobilities have not been restricted due to the relatively small number of infected cases (139 cases as of 6 May 2020) and low rate of infection in the country, unlike our neighbouring countries with their lockdown measures, Singapore’s Circuit Breaker and Malaysia’s Movement Control Order. While physical movements are allowed, the public has been consistently advised to maintain social distancing, including the physical distancing of at least 1 metre.

Despite the nationwide social distancing initiatives, confining the public to their home and to maintain social distancing were not easy tasks, as experienced globally. Mass gathering were still seen in some parts of the country despite the government’s effort in halting the virus transmission suggesting a low risk perception among the members of the public. One critical incident that sparked the public outrage was the irresponsible act of a large group of locals visiting a night market in Temburong District on the day of the opening of the Temburong bridge, which connects Brunei-Muara with Temburong District after 130 years
of physical separation. The next day, Brunei government restricted the opening time of the bridge and closed the night market to prevent potential community transmission of COVID-19. Social media sites were swiftly flooded by users reprimanding the public for going to the market in mass, disregarding the government’s social distancing initiatives. Apart from the government’s circulation of social distancing reminders on their official channel (mass and new media) after this incident, social distancing efforts were affectively circulated, exchanged, and reproduced by the public on social media. From these localised and contextualised creatively and affectively produced and circulated content on COVID-19, a combination of five narratives of social distancing initiatives are apparent: narrative of fear, narrative of responsibility, narrative of annoyance, narrative of fun, and narrative of resistance.

The narrative of fear is visible in contents that stress danger and risk to older people and loved ones. Detachment from family members due to isolation and quarantine for undetermined duration feed into the narrative of fear. The narrative of responsibility is visible in contents that call for the community to play their role as responsible citizen and community members to flatten the curve. This responsibility includes stressing the unselfish act of medical health professionals in looking after public in the isolation and quarantine centres. General public singing the praises for other front liners including youth volunteers who dedicated their energy and time to support the Ministry of Health in handling the pandemic. This narrative of responsibility is further instilled via the circulation of a video created by the Ministry of Health, a video of a medical health professional captioned *Hargai pergorbanan mereka* (English translation – appreciate their sacrifices), warmly (with teary eyes) requesting members of the public to stay at home and together be responsible in preventing local transmission. Via a personal communication with a Public Health Officer from the Ministry of Health, she confirmed that the Ministry wanted the public to hear the voices of the health care workers; being apart from their family members while caring for the infected patients and their gratefulness towards the community for their support. The video emphasises the need for the community to be equally responsible and supporting the front liners in their effort to curb the spread of the disease and to treat infected individuals was reposted and affectively appropriated on sites such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter. Through this affective content, it was hoped that the audience would be able to empathise with the front liners and adjust their views, actions, and habits (Pedwell 2017). Living in a country with a small population (under 440,000 population as of May 2020) and in a collectivist society, Bruneians imagined themselves related to each other either by blood or marriage. Such an emotive video that emphasised communal responsibility would be more effective in evoking the emotion of the general public and to create and sustain the sense of shared responsibility, and sense of community and togetherness in time of a crisis and physical separation.

A local hip hop duo, Guardian of Rhythm, created a video music titled ‘Don’t Push It’ dedicated to the front liners, a title they took from Minister of Health’s famous statement ‘Don’t Push It’ that reminds public to be vigilant and responsible and to not push the country’s limit in health provision during this pandemic (Figure 1). This music video uploaded on YouTube is one of the many creative contents appropriating Minister of Health’s advice at the daily Press Conference to put pressure on social distancing. Stickers, GIF, songs, and appropriated hashtags such as #dontpushit #teranahsajadirumah (English translation – stay at home) are produced and circulated. To reach certain pockets of the population that might not be familiar with English language, one user took an initiative to translate the social distancing poster circulated via social media and mass media into colloquial Malay language (Figure 2).

The narrative of annoyance is apparent in the deliberate sharing of one’s frustration towards members of the public who insisted on leaving home, travelling overseas and possibly contracting COVID-19 due to their international travel. There were also a few contents on social media highlighting cases of the public undergoing mandatory self-isolation and self-quarantine leaving home. The rising number of cases in the country was used
strategically by the audience to highlight the severity (and potential risk) of COVID-19. The creation and use of new terms such as ‘Covaval’ (derived from the word COVID and Babal, a local term for unrepentant individuals particularly those who went to Temburong and those insisted on travelling amid COVID-19) to stress their annoyance and to push public to be more responsible (Figure 3).

The narrative of fun by the young people were evident in the growing number of videos to show their coping strategies while on mandatory self-isolation and ‘stay at home’ are uploaded on Tik Tok and reshared on Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. One example is a Tik Tok video made by Bruneian International students who were isolated in their homes and a few hotels turned isolation centres for 14 days upon their return to the country as part of the country’s precautionary measures to avoid potential community transmission. These students created individual videos of themselves dancing from one end of their room to the other end. When combined, this video is creatively demonstrating ‘mobilities’ while in isolation. This is one of the isolation/quarantine videos such as Pass the Brush and Don’t Rush Challenge seen on Tik Tok globally during this period.
exemplifying the spreadability of social media content and the upsurge in the use of one particular social media site, Tik Tok, (EMarketer 2018; Crowley 2020; Johnston 2020; Leslie 2020) as a coping mechanism and a mode to socially and creatively connect with others.

Interestingly, the narrative of resistance is less prominent in Brunei’s context. As previously mentioned, pro-social distancing narratives are more apparent on the local social media contents than those demonstrating anti-social distancing, which could be due to the less restrictions imposed on physical mobilities in the country. Perhaps, there are contents demonstrating resistance to the social distancing initiatives in the country but have not surfaced or made known to the public for a number of possible reasons such

Figure 2. Social distancing poster translated into colloquial Malay language. Source: @haziq_hisyam, 2020. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
as the author’s limited access to contents of this group of social media users. To the best of the author’s knowledge, there are only two contents (in video format) known to the public that fit the narrative of annoyance and/or resistance to social distancing. One video directly addressed the ‘Stay at Home’ instruction and was created and uploaded by a 22-year-old male on his Instagram urging those who fear death to stay at home, while criticising the public for fearing the coronavirus, a human-made virus. He was charged for causing a breach of peace under the Section 19 of the Minor Offences Act, Chapter 30 (Faisal 2020). After this event, the public is consistently reminded that any act that involves the publishing, forwarding or creating fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 may be regarded as offences. Another video made and shared on social media by a male in his 30s did not directly address social distancing initiatives but the after effect of the ‘Stay at Home’ on parents with schoolkids. In his video, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the current e-learning arrangements where the role of educators is transferred to parents. His video was uploaded on local Reddit community page (r/Brunei) and received backlash from the r/Brunei community. Other narrative of annoyance demonstrated by the young people are not specifically on staying at home rather was focused on the slow internet connection in the country that affected their ability to continue their studies online and the impact social distancing brought to their livelihoods.

These narratives emerging from the creative production of social media contents demonstrate local youth responses to current situation by contextualising social distancing practice in the country. This is supported and made possible by the growing digital creative youth via their (digital) affective practices (Wetherell 2012) that went beyond the content sharing to transmitting and recreating a discourse – it was civic engagement. Both creatives and non-creatives take part in the social distancing initiatives as an active youth citizen who are involved in the community to strive for changes (Adler & Goggins 2005). There are also presence of annoyance and resistance to social distancing as demonstrated above. Social media sites act as new youth spatialities highlight the spreadability of digital content made possible affective production and consumption of the social distancing narratives (the narratives of fear and...
responsibility in particular) and abetted in initiating and sustaining the call for a change in social practices and mobilising youth’s actions. This initiative needs ‘mobile’ and active youth taking the helm in creating and pushing new subjectivities and taking collective actions to improve and change the society, albeit temporarily due to this pandemic.

REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 CRISIS

Three key socio-cultural implications and reconfigurations could be observed in the country and may become common practices after COVID-19 crisis: one, new youth spatialities and social engagements; two, youth leadership in development; and three, consideration of social participation and reach in risk communication.

These reconfigurations of everyday life due to the crisis could open up new avenues and research focus in geography intersecting between the geographies of young people and the geographies of digital media and communication and beyond geography, those relevant to risk communication strategies and public health.

New youth spatialities and social engagements

- As previously mentioned, the use of social media by young people is not new, this group of users has been known to dominate the online spaces, particularly social media sites. We could observe new online platforms offering youth with spaces for negotiating their current immobilities; stay at home/social distancing measures. New socio-technological adoptions in the country, possibly becoming the new normal in the community post crisis, are observed such as poetry club activities, open mic, and youth mentorship sessions conducted online by young people in the country pointing to the creation of creative spaces online and new ways for conducting social activities. Such technological adaptation and creation of new social spaces are not limited to the young demographics but have also been adopted by the older generation, for instance the group recital of the Al-Quran via Zoom exemplifying the rising digitalisation in the country. As a matter of fact, digital infrastructures (applications, websites, and Internet of Things to name a few) were already in place in the country prior to the crisis but was slow to be taken up by relevant agencies and individuals due to a number of reasons including lack of access due to financial constraints, low knowledge of technology, lack of motivation, and possibly fear of technology. The current pandemic that reconfigured our day to day operations and social practice, however, left these agencies and individuals with no option but to adopt new digital technologies.

Digital technologies and platforms have transformed the relationship between media and the geographies of everyday life (Ash 2019) and young people as the main users of social media play a key role in this transformation as illustrated in this paper via the young people’s creative contents creation on social media. These intense socio-spatial engagements of young people on social media amidst COVID-19 demonstrate the interplay between media and the young people in reconfiguring the micro-geographies of young people. Notwithstanding the growing literature on young people and social media use within the geography discipline (Haji Mohamad 2014, 2018; Arendt & Hordijk 2016; Blanch 2016; Mohamad 2019; Skelton & Aitken 2019), there is not enough geographical research that discusses the significance and implications of new youth spatialities in the context of online/mediated environments. A closer examination of youth new social realities would offer insights into the changing geographies of young people and the geographies of media focusing on the creation of new types of contents, generation of new micro cultures, and intensive affective attachments with media contents especially by the young people, which have not received adequate attention by geographers (Ash 2019). These new online spatialities connected with physical spatialities offer broader socio-cultural implications that could open new avenues for the progress of two geographies, geographies of young people and geographies of media and communication, separately or jointly, and are in line with the recent turn in the geography discipline towards digital geographies (Ash et al. 2019).
Youth leadership in development – In the context of Brunei, a young developing country, youth engagements with the country’s progress and development is relatively low. The country has only recently seen its young people’s active involvement in addressing key issues and concerns in the country. Government agencies in the country have been providing the young people with offline platforms for engagements, in particular, the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports (MCYS), the key supporter of young people’s progress. In this time of crisis, MCYS plays a huge role in expanding and intensifying youth communal engagement as can be seen in the establishment of COVID-19 youth volunteer group to support the Ministry of Health. Other youth involvement includes key youth leaders actively involved in creating and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) to the medical health workers. Moreover, the availability of social media platforms offers these young people with spaces to engage leading to the growing number of active and creative youth supporting and sustaining progress and development in the country. Social media sites as seen in the previous section are affectively used by the young people to promote and support social distancing initiatives. Such active engagement by the young people during this time of crisis signals the already existing youth leadership in the country. Online and offline spaces are effectively utilised in pushing forward their agenda and concerns and for personal development, the expansion of individual agencies on social media. Young people’s engagement with the media (contents) and through the media (platforms) has potential implications on development planning and execution and could help in creating better futures (Cupples 2015).

Social participation and reach in risk communication – The growing social media content on social distancing via the co-creation of narratives highlights community engagement and collaboration based on the collective concerns of young people and their interests in keeping the community safe and healthy. At this point, despite this active participation and the youth’s role in the context of social distancing initiatives, we need to question the reach and success of these narratives and its implication on risk perception of the population. The first question considers the issue of digital divide and access. Who are these young people reaching out to and what about those who are not part of this social media community? Despite high social media penetration in the country, public health information and risk communication on social media remain exclusive and are not reaching the socially ‘disconnected’ population. These narratives and initiatives by the young people only reach the social media users with access to their content. The asynchronicity of content delivery and consumption somewhat limit the access of the information. For example, Instagram story posts that are only visible for twenty-four hours are only reaching the audience who are able to access the story within the time allowed. Second, social distancing effort relies on the individual’s perception of the risk of COVID-19 to their individual health and family members. Connected to the first point, risk communication that does not reach the population could have led to low risk perception rendering the initiative impossible or difficult to achieve. Notwithstanding the efforts made by the young people on creating and adapting to this new social distancing practice, if information reach is limited, risk perception of the population will remain low. The audience (young people) and relevant government and non-government agencies have worked collectively and informally to create contents that are affective and impactful. However, such efforts would not reach majority of the population if access is limited.

Closely tied to this access to contents is the language use in communicating risk. Using words such as ‘social distancing’ and ‘social responsibility’ may not work well with some segments of the population. Those without access to social media where the social distancing term and practices are commonly demonstrated via caption, images, and videos, would not be able to fully understand what are meant by ‘social distancing’. Official information in the country is commonly disseminated in the official
language, Malay language, and in a second language, English. Evidently, there are people in the country who are not well-versed in these two languages and would need the information to be translated to their colloquial language or dialects. One noteworthy context appropriation action in ensuring the social distancing measures reaching other segments of the population is the translation of the official document to lay people’s everyday language in the forms of caption and hashtag (such as #teranahsajadirumah) by social media users. Perhaps, this is one of the best times for the country to rethink and restructure its risk communication strategy by learning from the current socio-spatial practices and the loopholes in our (risk) communication system and strategy. Beyond COVID-19 crisis, considering media convergence (media accessible through various platforms), spreadability of social media, differential access, and language preferences of the population in communication would improve not only public health communication but has broader developmental implications.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper offers preliminary findings on the localised and contextualised creative productions of social distancing narratives in Brunei and the role of young people in emphasising the importance of social distancing in this crisis via social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Using QCA on young people’s Instagram and Twitter contents, five narratives of local responses to social distancing practices were apparent: the narrative of fear, the narrative of responsibility, the narrative of annoyance, the narrative of fun, and the narrative of resistance. Fascinatingly, the research data demonstrated more pro-social distancing narratives than it did for the narrative around resistance. Technological affordances such as the participatory culture and spreadability of social media content supported the creative production of social distancing initiatives, which could bring community and civic impact. Through individuals’ collective actions on social media, they accentuate the role and social responsibility of each member of the public. This is not a single person’s task; everyone plays an equal role in keeping the community safe and healthy.

In times of a crisis, young people in the country played a huge role in supporting the social distancing measures through their everyday creative self-disclosure on social media and as such has brought three key socio-cultural reconfigurations to everyday life that have broader academic and developmental implications. The creation of new youth spatialities and intense social engagements were observed, which are of importance to geographers in understanding youth social realities and could open up academic discussions relevant to the geographies of young people and the geographies of media and communication. The expansion of already existing youth leadership in the country offers a reconsideration of the significance of youth’s active social media engagements in the context of development. Social participation and reach in risk communication brought our attention to the issue of access to information, differential use of communication platforms, and language preference for the betterment of public health communication. Specific to risk communication during this pandemic, what are shared in this paper offer a rethinking of risk communication strategy that includes consideration of socio-culturally and politically appropriate and relevant approaches, and a strategy that is inclusive to all segments of the population. As observed globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to alter our socio-cultural practices and adapt to our drastically reconfigured everyday life creating the new normal in our everyday practices. What is clear at this point in time is our dependencies on digital interconnectivity. With the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19, we foresee other significant socio-cultural implications of COVID-19, which could either favourably or unfavourably impact communities in their respective localities.

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