

Determinants of Prosocial Behaviour in Malaysia During The COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Following the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people's social lives and psychological well-being were profoundly affected. Because of the enormous social and economic difficulties confronting society and the necessity for collaboration among people to overcome these concerns, prosocial behaviour is seen as one of the most important social components. There is evidence linking prosocial activity participation to personal and societal advantages, suggesting that this may be a key protective element during times of global crises. Given the gravity of the situation, this concept paper seeks to provide information on the factors that encourage helpful behaviour in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study suggested that the social-responsibility norm, emotional arousal, and reciprocity were the key elements affecting prosocial behaviour in Malaysia during COVID-19. It is critical to determine prosocial behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic because it may contribute to the positive development of a post-COVID society and provide practical solutions for handling crisis situations in the future.

Keywords: Prosocial behaviour, COVID-19, social-responsibility norm, emotional arousal, reciprocity

1. Introduction

Prosocial behaviours are defined as "voluntary actions taken to assist or benefit another individual or group of individuals" (Eisenberg, 2014). Putting on a mask, helping out in the community, giving money, and other similar actions are examples of such behaviours. Both altruism and prosocial behaviour share some similarities, but they are still considered to be separate concepts. The term "prosocial behaviour" refers to a more generic term that may also encompass elements of self-interest. A self-sacrificing altruistic person, on the other hand, is concerned and helpful even if no benefits are provided or expected in return (Myers & Twenge, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by an increase in prosocial behaviours such as obedience to authority figures, observation of others, participation in volunteer work, and providing direct assistance to those in need (Wider et al., 2022). According to Rodzi (2021), a number of people in Malaysia had a difficult time during the restricted lockdown, which resulted in the loss of jobs and a reduction in income. The number of food banks has risen dramatically, as evidenced by the list shared by Lim (2021), which includes available pump stations, mosques, public halls, schools, and selected grocery stores across the country. No matter their age, gender, race, or religious affiliation, those in need have received assistance in order to survive the effects of the pandemic and this crucial time.

In addition, it is concerning that the rate of suicide in Malaysia has significantly increased during the first half of the year 2021. According to information provided by the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), there were an average of four people who committed suicide each day during the first three months of 2021 (Xiang, 2021). The number of young people who have committed suicide or attempted suicide has increased during the Movement Control Order (MCO) (Menon, 2021). It was strongly recommended that counselling centres adhere strictly to standard operating procedures (SOP) in order to forestall an increase in the number of people who commit suicide and who suffer from mental illnesses (Malaysiakini, 2021). Both the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia and the MCO have the potential to have long-term effects on Malaysia's mental health, which is a significant cause for concern in

terms of public health (Kaur et al., 2022). The government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) took action on prosocial behaviours, which show some opportunity. Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Religious Affairs, made the announcement that the government would therefore collaborate with a number of other ministries and agencies in order to combat depression, which has been linked to suicidal tendencies in some individuals (Bernama, 2021). During the current COVID-19 pandemic, prosocial interventions are a practical approach to addressing the mental health needs of those who experience emotional difficulties on a regular basis, as well as those who are affected by the pandemic (Miles et al., 2022). Volunteers are needed in non-clinical settings by the Mental Illness Awareness and Support Association (MIASA), BefriendersKL, Mercy Malaysia, the Malaysian Mental Health Association (HATI), and the Malaysia Mental Health Innovation Network (MENTARI). These programmes have the potential to mould the public's perception of mental health and encourage healthy lifestyle choices (Dinić & Bodroža, 2021).

When our own interests and those of others are in conflict with one another, a significant part of morality in interpersonal relationships requires giving precedence to the interests of the other party (Evans, 2011). As the recent events in Malaysia have demonstrated, the common conception of morality holds that its origins can be traced back to acts of prosocial behaviour and kindness toward other people. Even though acts of kindness may frequently go unrecognised in Malaysia, it is arguable that they are essential to the development of a civilised society. According to research, those who engage in prosocial behaviour are healthier, happier, and live longer lives (Brown & Cialdini, 2015). Dinić and Bodroža (2021) discovered that the tendency to help others without being recognised has a beneficial effect on protective behaviours, whereas selfishness has a detrimental effect on these behaviours. According to Alvis et al. (2022), an individual will experience fewer signs of depression if they have received a greater degree of assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This, in turn, will lead to an increase in the individual's self-interest, social reliance, and sense of belonging. As a result, an important question arises: what is the most important factor encouraging prosocial behaviour during the pandemic? The answer to this question is extremely important due to the fact that fostering community resilience through prosocial behaviour is crucial. Community resilience refers to the long-term capacity of a community to withstand adversity, adapt, and quickly recover from it. As a consequence of this, gaining an understanding of how to develop and promote prosocial behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic is of the utmost importance.

Factors associated with Prosocial Behaviour during COVID-19

Social-responsibility Norm

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people are generally provided with protection equipments such as face shields, face masks, and PPE suits to prevent the spread of viruses. However, some people are unwilling to wear their masks, which calls into question the relationship between prosocial behaviour and protective behaviour. It has been found that one's capacity for prosocial behaviour is linked to factors such as social distance and the use of protective masks; as a result, demonstrating compassion for those who are in need can encourage others to take precautions on their behalf (Dinić & Bodroža, 2021; Pfattheicher et al., 2020). The prosocial behaviour that has been demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic is political activity intended to advance constructive social change. During this pandemic, when many people are struggling with the stress of job loss, reduced income, and other related issues, the government has the ability to make the mental health and well-being of the general public a priority. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for instance, in the United States educates its citizens on stress management and provides public mental health lines. Helping other people is thought to have a multiplicative effect on one's own emotional state, which is explained by the social exchange theory (Myers & Twenge, 2019). Although Alvis et al. (2022) stated that the public is less likely to donate to charities and participate in volunteer programmes after seeing officials who are acting prosocially, this prosocial behaviour still helps to comfort people's hearts and reduces people's tendencies to commit suicide during the pandemic.

According to Lim (2021), as a response to the pandemic, the people of Malaysia have organised a campaign called #benderaputih (white flag), in which they are providing free food to those who are in need of it. As of the 9th of December, 2020, it is estimated that 100,000 people in Malaysia have lost their jobs, and the reduction in household income that this has caused has had a significant effect on many families (Tan et al., 2020). What can be made more clear by applying the social-responsibility norm in this scenario, which states that one should help

those who are in need without considering potential future exchanges? (Berkowitz, 1972; Schwartz, 1975). According to Skitka and Tetlock (1993), the principle appears to only support those who are deserving of assistance; such as those who have suffered losses due to natural disasters (Goetz et al., 2010; Zagefka et al., 2011). The social exchange theory asserts that people take into account both the possible benefits and the costs associated with taking part in a social interaction. When the cost of cooperating is high, people's motivation to cooperate typically decreases as a result (Deutsch, 1949; Seucan et al., 2022). Previous research has indicated that there is a correlation between age and the perceived cost of infection. When compared to younger generations, the elderly are at a greater risk of contracting infectious diseases and experiencing fatalities brought on by severe illnesses (Jin et al., 2021). Elderly people are strongly discouraged from venturing outside due to the increased likelihood of catching the COVID-19 virus. As a direct consequence of this, younger adults can be seen engaging in volunteer work more frequently than older adults, whose prosocial behaviour is showing signs of deterioration. In direct opposition to this finding, Sin et al. (2021) found that older adults participated in a greater quantity of organised volunteer work than younger or middle-aged adults. That is to say, an individual's perception of the costs involved may differ from that of another and cannot account for every instance of prosocial behaviour.

Emotional Arousal

According to Dinić and Bodroža (2021), empathy has a stronger correlation with anonymous prosociality than with altruism. An anonymous prosocial tendency is defined as helping under the circumstances without knowing who helped (Carlo & Randall, 2002); whereas, altruism is defined as "voluntary assistance that is primarily concerned with the needs and welfare of others" (Dinić & Bodroža, 2021). It is hypothesised that emotional arousal, as a reaction to other forms of suffering, is what prompts people to engage in charitable behaviours. People are moved to assist others as a result of an intense feeling of compassion and sympathy for those around them. When a person is able to empathise with another, they are more likely to pay attention to the pain that is being endured by another (Myers & Twenge, 2019). This can be explained by the fact that they have compassion for those who are having difficulty coping as a result of financial issues and donate money and food as a way to show their compassion for those individuals. When someone with empathy connects with the negative feelings that another person is experiencing, their natural response is to want to help that person feel better (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015).

Empathy also has been shown to have a positive correlation with social distancing rules, and Pfattheicher et al. (2020) found that inducing empathy in individuals who were at a higher risk of contracting the virus increased their motivation to engage in protective behaviours. According to Dinić and Bodroža (2021), an increased capacity for empathy and an improved comprehension of social distancing significantly predicted a higher level of compliance with preventative measures. People who are empathic tend to be more other-focused and are more likely to engage in anonymous prosocial behaviour, both of which motivate them to obey protective measures. As a result, empathic people are less desirable. When people act irresponsibly out of selfishness, it gives the impression that they lack empathy. Some authors, on the other hand, argue that prosocial behaviour is motivated not only by sympathy, but also by a desire to alleviate our distress, either by escaping or reducing negative emotions (Myers & Twenge, 2019). Dinić and Bodroža (2021) added that individuals who take preventative measures report lower levels of fear and anxiety as a consequence of COVID-19 (Coelho et al., 2020). The sensation of freedom and release from anxiety was the factor that best predicted whether or not someone would wear a mask (Nakayachi et al., 2020). To put this another way, when people's empathy is piqued, they will typically offer assistance, but it is not clear whether they do so out of genuine sympathy or as a way to rid themselves of negative feelings.

Reciprocity

Research on reciprocity norms demonstrates how they encourage behaviours that are beneficial to the community. Reciprocity is the process of exchanging favours with others in order for both parties to benefit. It is a social norm in which people give something and expect something in return to balance out the exchange (Myers & Twenge, 2019). Zhang et al. (2017) investigate whether information sharing in the health Q&A community can be considered typical prosocial behaviour. The research inspires people of all backgrounds, including medical professionals, to provide assistance to those in need (i.e., knowledge, self-efficacy, or altruism). Social network

reciprocity emphasises social capital in the form of information flow, trust, and member collaboration. When members of the Q&A community keep an eye on each other's members, they are engaging in activities that contribute to the building of social capital. Chang and Chuang (2011) discovered a positive and significant relationship between individuals' sharing of information on social media and reciprocity rules. People are thought to provide more prosocial information in specific contexts and conditions when a reciprocity norm is in place (Pai & Tsai, 2016). Considering the situational factor (i.e., COVID-19), people approach the problem seriously and provide accurate information to help others (Chen et al., 2018). This means that if the person receives untrustworthy information, they are unlikely to share it. As a result, the individual is unable to reciprocate.

According to Abel and Brown (2022), when people observe positive public behaviour, they are more likely to make charitable contributions or participate in volunteer activities in their local communities. Furthermore, Reyniers and Bhalla (2013) proposed that individuals' donation patterns are strongly influenced after learning what others are donating. During the COVID-19 pandemic, direct assistance is a type of prosocial behaviour that can be discussed. Prosocial behaviour, such as helping friends, neighbours, and family members, is common among humans, and it may have evolutionary roots (Alvis et al., 2022). Kin selection, reciprocity, and group selection are the three categories that make up evolution psychology, which is concerned with how our genes maximise their chances of reproducing and surviving (Myers & Twenge, 2019). Kin selection is a bias of same-gene holders that causes us to be concerned about our close relatives (Myers, 2018). Reciprocity is described by Binham (1980) as "the act of helping others while also expecting something in return." In addition, Wilson (2015) provides an explanation for group selection by arguing that, since humans live in groups—much like ants or bees—individuals who care for one another have a better chance of survival than those who do not.

2. Conclusion

On the topic of prosocial behaviours such as helping, obeying, volunteering, and others, a great number of studies and discussions have been carried out. The vast majority of the newly discovered research centred on prosocial behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this study was to identify prosocial behaviours and the factors that contribute to prosociality during the COVID-19 pandemic. This field of research is important because it focuses on ways to make society resilient and more cooperative. A higher level of prosocial behaviour is associated with social-responsibility norm, emotional arousal, and as well as a greater degree of reciprocity. This review contributes to the process of identifying the specific factors that motivate prosocial behaviours in order to achieve higher levels of prosociality. Researchers have identified a number of factors that motivate prosocial behaviour, but a large portion of it stems from patterns of behaviour rather than any one specific factor. It will take more research in the future to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence prosocial behavior, particularly with regard to the variations that can be found across cultures and countries.

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