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Changsong, Wang; Ahmad, Jamilah

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Post-MH370 Incident: A Comparative Study of Social Media Users' Perception in China and Malaysia

WANG CHANGSONG¹ & JAMILAH HJ AHMAD²

¹Xiamen University Malaysia, Malaysia

²Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

The flow of information experienced complexity uncertainty and ambiguity in terms of information adequacy when Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 went missing. This incident demonstrated an unprecedented international humanitarian response from the technology sector. This study discovered that most respondents from Mainland China and Malaysia access information about Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 during and after the tragic incident through social media. This study revealed significant difference of active social media users' perceptions on this incident in these two countries. On one hand, social networking sites such as Facebook (in Malaysia), Weibo and Wechat (in China), become the public opinion field that illustrates sorts of openness and negotiation in Malaysia and China. This study, instead of conventional crisis communication approach, specifically examined active online users in both countries, as it aims to make a valuable contribution by synthesizing current research and identifying areas for investigation for each aspect of the survey process. Two hundred questionnaires had been collected from respondents in China and Malaysia respectively. The survey results contributed to mechanism of crisis communication for henceforth similar incident in the future. There is no doubt that the portrait of Malaysia Airlines on social media in these two countries affected its organizational reputation. However, the participants from Malaysia and China showed a very average level of confidence to empower themselves to enhance dialog capacity among various stakeholders for this incident.

Keywords: Social media, users' perception, Mainland China, Malaysia, Malaysia Airlines flight MH370

The incident of the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 in 2014 was considered as one of worst tragedies in this decade. The possible debris had been still caught worldwide attention. In July 2015, "the first concrete evidence that MH370 likely met a tragic end was when a two-metre-long (7ft) wing part known as a flaperon washed up in the French overseas territory of La Réunion" (The Guardian, 2016, para 11).

However, when many uncertainties of the incident could not be well explained in any publication, less and less attention is gathered. The flow of information experienced complexity uncertainty, and ambiguity in terms of information adequacy. Undoubtedly, the MH370 incident demonstrated an unprecedented international humanitarian response from the technology sector. Various theories were applied to explain the incident. However,

Correspondence to: Wang Changsong, Department of Journalism, Xiamen University Malaysia, Jalan Sunsuria, Bandar Sunsuria, Sepang, 43900, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

there is little research looking at audience's understanding on the incident and their perception towards affected brand and company. Apparently, for rebuilding trust, the efforts of deliberative procedures never would be enough to please existing and potential passengers of Malaysia Airlines. In these procedures, communication always acts its referential function "to pass on new information to other" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1992, p. 135). Tourism had become one of the most important economic connections between China and Malaysia. In their *China's One Belt One Road: Initiative, Challenges and Prospects*, Sharma and Kundu (2016) stressed that we should enhance cooperation in and expand the scale of tourism (p. 155). Meanwhile, both the expectation and actual experiences informed by all kind of communication "influence and shape the 'tourists gaze', especially in international tourism" (Arlt, 2007, p. 315). "The disappearance of Malaysia Airline flight MH370 and a spate of kidnappings in Sabah" still remain ruinous to "Malaysia's tourism industry" (Lean & Smyth, 2016, p. 44). Audiences' perception towards the incident always affects their consuming behavior in terms of choices of airline companies as well as travel destinations.

Post-MH370 incident may not gather as much attention now as the time when it happened, but it invites us to re-look at the ways audiences perceive post-incident information. The post-incident ... focuses on the return to a normal situation and the analysis of collected information in order to improve future planning (Jennex, 2013, p. 117). This incident mainly affected China and Malaysia. But audiences from these two countries demonstrated different ways to perceive post-incident information. According to Wang et al (2017), 80 per cent of Malaysian respondents choose social media as their main channel to receive information about MH370 incident; and in China, 68 per cent of respondents use social media to get information on this incident (p. 142). Social media currently changes people's perception with time. The vast majority of respondents in Malaysia and China are using social media sites to engage in the web and catch up news. This has prompted social media sites to become major news source with various news stories there. The large-scale air disasters such as the Malaysia Airline flight MH370 incident, have revealed the utility of Internet based social media tools such as Facebook, Wechat and Weibo for risk and crisis communication.

While economic connections between China and Malaysia have been highlighted on several important occasions (i.e., Belt and Road Summit 2017), less and less people talk about the MH370 incident. To measure audiences' perception towards post MH370 incident reveals the uniqueness of social media users in these two countries. This particular perspective would be helpful to contribute to the identification of guiding principles for crisis communication, and in particular as regards the uses of social media in emergency services. The nature of coverage of social media in these two countries extended beyond just reporting, becoming a medium for communication and clarification. Public expectations and roles are changing in terms of the desire for increased transparency of information, in the spirit of open government, and participation in information gathering, sharing and verification.

Literature Review

The MH370 incident triggered various popular research subject areas. Some of them (i.e., "*Flight MH370: The Mystery*" by Nigel Cawthorne; "*The Vanishing of Flight MH370: The True Story of the Hunt for the Missing Malaysian Plane*" by Richard Quest) went popular in mainstream bookstores and libraries. The conference paper "*From KL to Beijing: MH370, the Media and the Meaning of a Disaster*" presented by Rohizah was published seven

months after the MH370 incident, at the International Conference on Communication and Media (i-COME '14) held at Langkawi, Malaysia. Rohizah (2014) examined the relevant news copies of two local newspapers, and she concluded that the particulars of text media coverage on MH370 as a sociocultural event could be employed to understand how the media makes sense of a crisis/disaster/tragedy (p. 172). Her study explained the issues of uncertainty reporting. One year after this conference, in Kuala Lumpur, Taylor's University Lakeside Campus held the Fourth International SEARCH Conference with theme of crisis communication. The keynote speaker—Professor Ray Kemp from University of Wollongong—responded to a question about the MH370 incident in the question and answer session at the end of his speech. Kemp (2015) brought forward that “roles of social media is very interesting, that is where rumours grow and the mainstream media actually picked up as a source... the experts on social media are not used to taking up roles to advise on crisis communication.”¹

In China, earlier than Rohizah's presentation, Wang Wanxi and another six co-authors published a quantitative research study in May 2014. Wang et al (2014) explored the impact of public perception and psychological anticipation by information dissemination at different phases of the crisis (p. 1307). They found dramatic differences through time in perceptions of event clues and event characters. The same month, the American writer Nigel Cawthorne published his book *Flight MH370, The Mystery*. His book made a number of incredible allegations (e.g., the airline was shot down by US-Thai strike fighters as part of a training drill that went horribly wrong). It attempted a most compelling explanation for the whodunit gripping the world. In September 2014, the Journal of Tianjin Normal University published an article titled *Uncertain News and Unreliable Narration — A Journalism Study on the Missing Flight MH370*. Liu Chang (2014) argued that the news coverage on MH370 (in China) indicated the arrival of ‘uncertain news’ (p. 42). However, we understand that the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of news is governed by several factors, such as access to information sources, possible existence of vested interests in misrepresenting events, and access to multiple news channels. Some distortions may appear deliberate, while others may be inevitable.

The brand “Malaysia Airlines” became a victim. We can infer from the foregoing, still provisional considerations, that if efforts are to succeed, they should redress ‘uncertain news’ and distortions. These also presuppose tangible evidence of willingness and determination to search for the missing plane and its passengers. On the other hand, social media, especially social networking sites such as Facebook (in Malaysia), and Weibo and Wechat (in China), become the public opinion field that illustrates a “sort of openness and negotiation” (Herbst, 1998, p. 44). “Engagement in social media demands transparency” (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014, p. 84), however. Fictitious content still appeared to emanate from sources other than the actual point of origin in terms of causes of the crisis. For example, approximately fourteen thousand Wechat users clicked the posting titled *Startling Inside Stories of Malaysia Airlines Missing Flight*, although this specific post failed providing any reliable sources.

Objective of the Study

The overall study objective is to compare social media users' perception on the Malaysia Airline flight MH370 incident in Mainland China and Malaysia respectively. Social media constitutes a central and powerful element of that omnipresent public perceptual process. When a crisis occurs, the public relies on media updates. Social media empowerment plays an integral part in this crisis communication. This research aims to contribute to the

identification of guiding principles for crisis communication, and in particular as regards the uses of social media in emergency services. Organizations are trending toward using new media in their responses to crises. However, the types of new media communication tactics which organizations are using to mediate crisis responses determine the legitimacy, or illegitimacy, of the organizations' actions/expressions. At the same time, public opinion practices are "based in community in ways that are difficult to fathom in mass democratic societies of today" (Berinsky, 2012, p. 65).

This research also aims to compare arenas of information exchange where dynamic and interactive flows of social-media data are in the hands of empowered individuals in Malaysia and China. It will be argued that, while social media has empowered informal partnerships that enhance dialog capacity among various stakeholders, major challenges can be identified.

Methodology

This study aims to make a valuable contribution by synthesizing current research and identifying areas for investigation for each aspect of the survey process. From 2015 to 2016 the authors of the study conducted a survey in China and Malaysia respectively. This method will be valuable in providing this research with an empirically-based understanding of the relationships between crisis communication and social media in China and Malaysia. Two hundred questionnaires had been collected from respondents in China and Malaysia respectively. The response rate was 100 per cent and 400 questionnaires were available. Survey methodology applied in this research investigates the behaviour of social media users, reading preference, preferable social networking sites and so on. The information that has been collected represents the key concept of the research. The section of finding and discussion will illustrate the variables and concepts throughout the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

After any aircraft accident/incident, the affected airlines suffer from unmeasured reputational and economic losses. In 2015, we witnessed that Malaysia Airlines practiced "plans for 'technically bankrupt' carrier include job cuts and fewer flight on some routes" (Al Jazeera, 2015, para. 1). Malaysia Airlines was in big financial trouble before the twin disasters of Flight 370 and Flight 17 claimed the lives of 537 people (2014, para 7). In January 2017, Peter Bellew became "Malaysia Airlines' third CEO in two years—a period that few need reminding has seen the aftermath of flights MH370 and MH17" (Toh, 2017, para 5). Malaysia Airlines showed some positive gestures to bring back Chinese passengers' trust in the past three years. In July 2017, a football match was made between Malaysia Airlines and Xiamen University Malaysia – "the first-ever overseas campus built by a Chinese university" (Ma & Li, 2017, para 1). The brand – Malaysia Airlines – undoubtedly attempts to gather more positive stories through which audiences' perception would be refreshed from time to time.

It is believed that "social media empowers people in digital production practices" (Mansell & Ang, 2015, p. 1015). However, social media sites have introduced new issues regarding the accuracy, originality and reproducibility of digital content that are particularly difficult to address, and they have blurred the lines from producer of information to audiences to a far greater extent than was the case for previous media forms. Simon Kemp's *2016 Digital Yearbook* particularly looked at the following four major populations—Internet users, active social media users, unique mobile users, and active

mobile social users (Kemp, 2016)—which represent significant indicators to measure different behaviour preferences of online users at present. His research revealed that 1,379 million digital online users in China, which indicated China's level of urbanisation had reached 57 per cent and 95 per cent of them own mobile connection. Among them there are 653 million active social media users. In Malaysia, there are 18 million active social media users, which take up 59 per cent of online user population.

Survey Respondents in China and Malaysia

According to the survey conducted in China and Malaysia respectively, there remain some differences between the individual's self-defined category of online users and actual behavior. The survey had been discovered that 54.5 per cent of respondents from China saw themselves as active Internet users, and only 15 per cent of them believed they were active social media users. Nevertheless, the survey had identified that yet there was a contradiction between frequencies of social media usage and self-defining since 89 per cent of all respondents used social media more than three times a day. The survey conducted in Malaysia also revealed that only 25 per cent of Malaysian respondents considered themselves as active social media users, and 13.5 per cent of respondents categorized themselves into groups of mobile social media users; however, actually 85.5 per cent of them belonged to the active interval according to their frequencies of social media usage. Most of the time, individuals unconsciously access the content and they do not really calculate the frequency as social media apps empowers end users with instant access to resources and content through a single click. For example, Weibo provides news feed on the lock screen, which allows users to be aware of the news instantly. Obviously, we've been exposed to dissemination of the contents every second thanks to its "ontological qualities" (Eisenlauer, 2013, p. 101). The news feed appeared on the users' mobile screen encompasses important issues regarding social life, urban ecology, state news and so on.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multilingual society, and many ethnic groups in Malaysia maintain separate cultural identities. But the survey showed that the result is not affected by ethnic factors. There is no any obvious indication that frequency of social media site use is affected by ethnic factors. Some of the survey questions, however, illustrated different perception affected by ethnic factors. It will be further discussed in the next section. The largest age range of respondents in Malaysia accounted for 81.5 per cent is 18 to 30-years-old. The second largest age range is 31 to 40 years old, which make up 13 per cent. The rest 5.5 per cent respondents are 40 years and above. Interestingly, in China most respondents are from the age groups of 18-30 and 31-40 years old. They make up 42.5 per cent and 41.5 per cent respectively.

Perception Traits of Social Media Users in China and Malaysia

This research intended to compare arenas of information exchange where dynamic and interactive flows of social-media data are in the hands of empowered individuals in Malaysia and China, who seek a more evidence-based participatory form of crisis communication. The survey had discovered that social media in China is not the most used media for users to access information about MH370 incident. Online news portal is the most popular form. However, Malaysian respondents prefer using social media to online news portal and television while they seek updates of the MH370 incident. The charts (see Figure 1) below illustrate 80 per cent of Malaysian respondents choose social media while 68 per cent of Chinese respondents do so. Since 1990s, Chinese people frequently use news

portals sites as these sites have been distinguish in their news presentation. For example, as one of the biggest three news portal site in China, NetEase makes it news perspectives often different from those of mainstream traditional media. Wu (2013) pointed out that “portal websites in China have become one of the most influential media in China, particularly their influence over the youth population” (Wu et al., p. 158). Additionally, television is another popular media in China. In *China Turned On: Television, Reform and Resistance*, Lull (2013) mentioned, “television had become the preferred news medium of urban residents” (p. 86). Just like many societies all over the world, people in China rely on television for news.

However, respondents from Malaysia showed their different choice of media for news. Numbers of television broadcast stations in Malaysia are significantly less than the ones in China. There are only eight public television channels owned by three major stations, which are *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM), *Media Prima*, and *Al Hijrah* Media Corporation respectively. News programmes produced by these three companies embrace languages of Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil for the needs of different ethnic populations. 80 per cent of respondents in Malaysia rely on social media more than other media source for news about the MH370 incident. Although in China people more rely on online news portal sites and television, 68 per cent of respondents choose to use social media as the main media channel to receive updates of MH370 incident. The number of the respondents is just slightly lower the viewers of news portal sits and television. In a word, social media offer great potential for mobilising people for participation in this incident.

The other difference between respondents from China and Malaysia is their attention to different news content, although it is associated with greater factual knowledge of that content. Most of Malaysian respondents concern on current situation of MH370 incident through social media, but most of Chinese respondents pay attention to information on flight’s conspiracy theories. The charts (see Figure 2) show that respondents from both countries pay less attention to emotion of lost passengers’ family.

During the MH370 incident Malaysia has highest level of engaged social media users, but after the incident Malaysia has biggest number of users do not care what the incident goes on. The charts (see Figure 3) below show 17.5 per cent of Malaysian respondents never engaged on social media for any updates after the incident. The authors also noticed that 39 per cent of Chinese respondents follow the relevant content less than 1 time after the incident.

The popular social networking sites in Malaysia and China are very different from each other. However, one social media site attracts most of users in Malaysia and China respectively. According to Wang *et al* (2017), Chinese participants showed higher level of social media engagement (2017, p. 3096) than Malaysian participants. The study discovered that Facebook is the leading social media site in Malaysia, and Wechat is the most popular site in China. 73 per cent Malaysian respondents use Facebook while 80.5 per cent of Chinese respondents use Wechat as ‘Facebook had been banned in China since 2009 (Damm, 2017, p. 160), so Wechat and Weibo are overwhelmingly popular over there. The survey discovered that Sina Weibo in China is the most trusted site where users get information of the MH370 incident. 61.5 per cent of respondents trust Sina Weibo, and 55.5 per cent of them think Wechat is effective in addressing crisis of MH370. Although Wechat has biggest use population, it is just the second most trusted social media site. In Malaysia, 75.5 per cent of the respondents believe Facebook is effective in addressing the MH370 incident, and Google+ is the second most trusted site. The Internet and online social networking sites have begun to merge the concepts of interactive communication

and mass media (Albarran, 2013, p. 172). These sites present unique gratification factors. The survey illustrates levels of trust of popular social media sites in these two countries. These would be helpful for crisis managers to consider proper channels to disclose information.

These social networking sites empower and connect individuals in ways that crisis incident is expected to be addressed intergovernmental relations during “the four phases of the disaster (i.e., mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery)” (Henderson, 2012, p. 210). It also reveals the weakness of social media sites while they deal with crisis incidents as the survey respondents from both countries highly agree that reliability of the news on social media is low. The charts (see Figure 4) below illustrate 62 per cent of Malaysian respondents and 44 per cent of Chinese respondents question its reliability. 39.5 per cent of Malaysian respondents and 38 per cent of Chinese respondents prefer receiving news from traditional news sources such as newspaper and television. People frequently use social media sites, but at the same time question the reliability of these sites. The relationship lies between information provider and interpreter on social media is considered an informal form. For instance, Facebook networks do not really describe the flow of information. Instead, they show paths of mutual awareness (Hansen et al., 2011, p. 174).

Perception's Effect

Very less proportion of Chinese respondents flew with Malaysia Airlines, and only 15 per cent of them did fly Malaysia Airlines flights before. Interestingly, after the incident, more respondents showed their interest to choose Malaysia Airlines services. Among them, there are 31.25 per cent male respondents, and 38.46 per cent female respondents. The same goes to Malaysian respondents. There are 71.29 per cent male respondents and 61.62 per cent female respondents are willing to fly with Malaysia Airlines flights after the incident, although 54.6 per cent male and 47.47 per cent female respondents take flights operated by Malaysia Airlines. This paper will not discuss the reason behind, but these figures provide crisis managers a good reference to plan their strategies of crisis communication after the incident/disaster.

If we look at the proportion of respondents who show willingness to take flights operated by Malaysia Airlines according to their income, we found that most people are in the category of comfortably-off (*Xiao Kang* in Chinese) individuals with the annual income of 80,000-300,000 Chinese Yuan. The largest proportion of respondents who fly with Malaysia Airlines is also in the same income category. It makes up 19.35 per cent of all Chinese respondents. 47.92 per cent of the respondents from this category showed high willingness to take flights operated by Malaysia Airlines for their future trips. In Malaysia, 90.32 per cent of the individuals with monthly income of 4,000 Malaysia ringgit and above have flown with Malaysia Airlines. The second largest proportion is the group with monthly income of 3,000 to 3999 Malaysian ringgit. It makes up 73.3 per cent of this group. However, 87.1 per cent of the respondents from the group with monthly income of 4,000 Malaysia ringgit and above are still willing to fly with Malaysia Airlines. 93.33 per cent of the respondents from the group with monthly income of 3,000 to 3,999 Malaysian ringgit express their willingness to take flights by Malaysia Airlines.

The data mentioned above illustrate the support towards Malaysia Airlines, but there are a number of respondents believe that portrayal of MH370 incidents by social media affect their perceptions. 49.5 per cent of Chinese respondents agree it affects his/her decision-making of choosing Malaysia Airlines, and 42.5 per cent of them show their

neutral stand. Only 8 per cent of them disagree it does not affect his/her choice. In Malaysia, 34.5 per cent of respondents agree it affects his/her choice of flights operated by Malaysia Airlines. 37 per cent of them take the neutral stand, and 28.5 per cent of the respondents do not see it affects their choice of choosing Malaysia Airlines.

The number of global Internet users is expected to increase (Pride et al., 2015, p. 416). With the Internet connection, people are connected in some ways. We understand that “the primary objective of social media is to facilitate the communication and interaction between users and allowing them to edit and share content, social media platform are designed to facilitate the exchange of information” (Kamil & Derya, 2016, p. 51). Kirkham and Muthaly (2015) stated, “Both Malaysia Airlines and the government have used the social media extensively, though not always to the greatest effect” (p. 66). The Malaysian news agent—*Free Malaysia Today*, on the 9th September 2016, published a report which shows the appeal to have “... International Civil Aviation Organisation to step in and make Malaysia more accountable investigation” (FMT, 2016, para. 2). The word ‘passive’ has been labelled in a number of publications when they investigate the incident from various perspectives.

Conclusion

Safety-enhancing investment did not appear frequently in any related content. On the contrary, the disappearance of MH370 led endless wild and fanciful thoughts. The comparative study of social media users’ perception on the MH370 incident in Mainland China and Malaysia showed us different perception’s effect in these two countries. The information highly caught attention among social media users represents the arena to which crisis managers should pay more attention. Respondents from China and Malaysia demonstrated their different level of trust towards the airline company after the incident, different understanding of impact of the crisis on the company itself, and also different perspective to examine the content shared and discussed on social media. Generally, social media may be regarded as an umbrella term that covers many kinds of user-based platforms in these two countries. The availability and reliability of information play an important role in reducing ambiguity for a variety of reasons. But residents in these countries have their own preference in terms of social networking sites. Facebook, which is the most popular social media site in Malaysia, is still banned in China, but Wechat and Weibo provide them similar platform to dig up the fact.

Note

¹Professor Ray Kemp from University of Wollongong did his talk at the Fourth International SEARCH Conference held by Taylor’s University on the 28th May 2015.

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Appendix

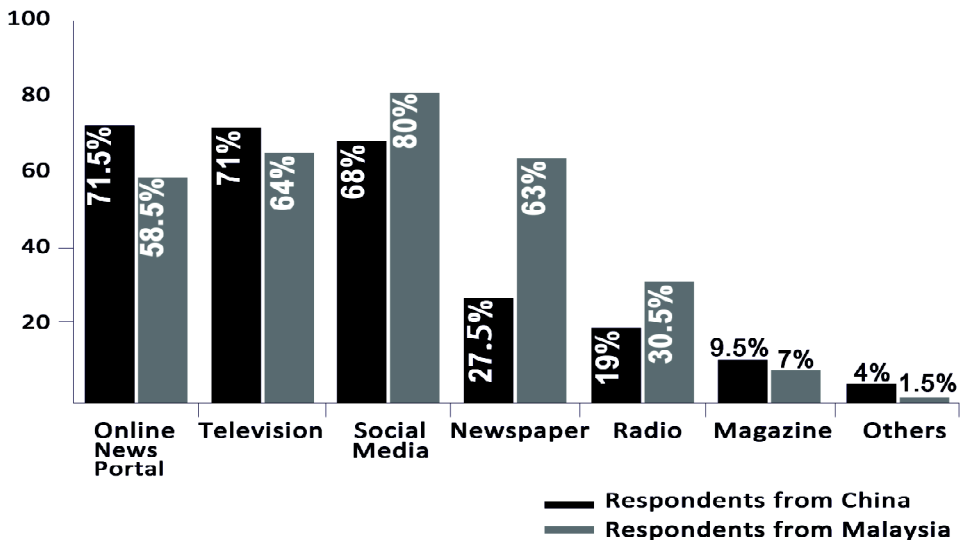


Figure 1. Respondents' choices of media channel to receive updates of MH370 incident in China and Malaysia.

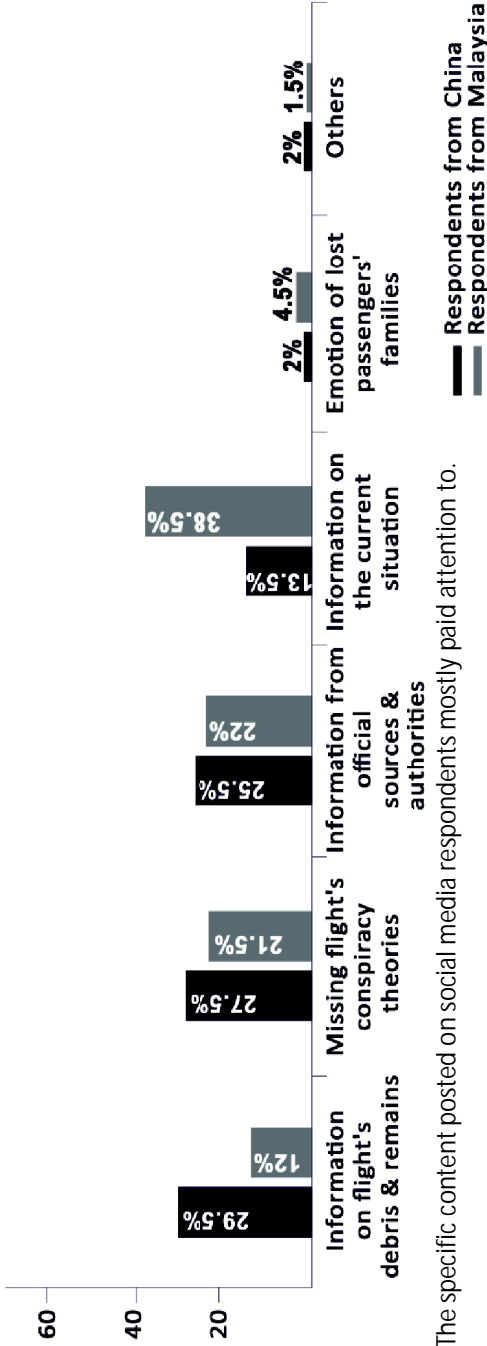


Figure 2. The specific content posted on social media respondents mostly paid attention to.

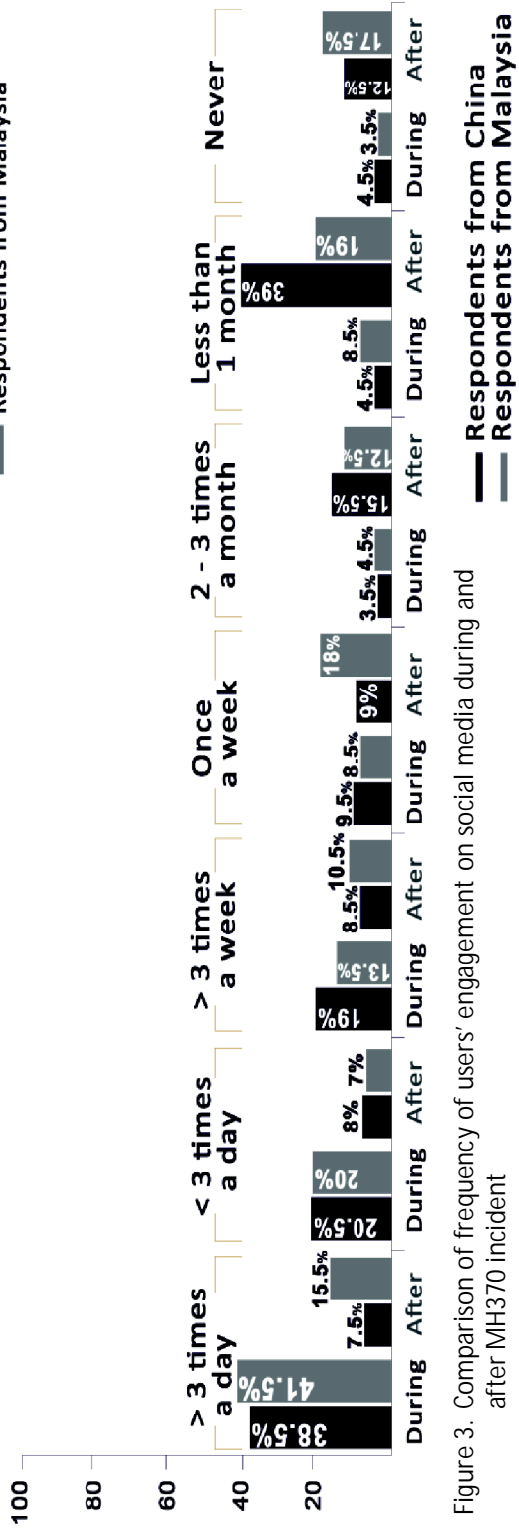


Figure 3. Comparison of frequency of users' engagement on social media during and after MH370 incident

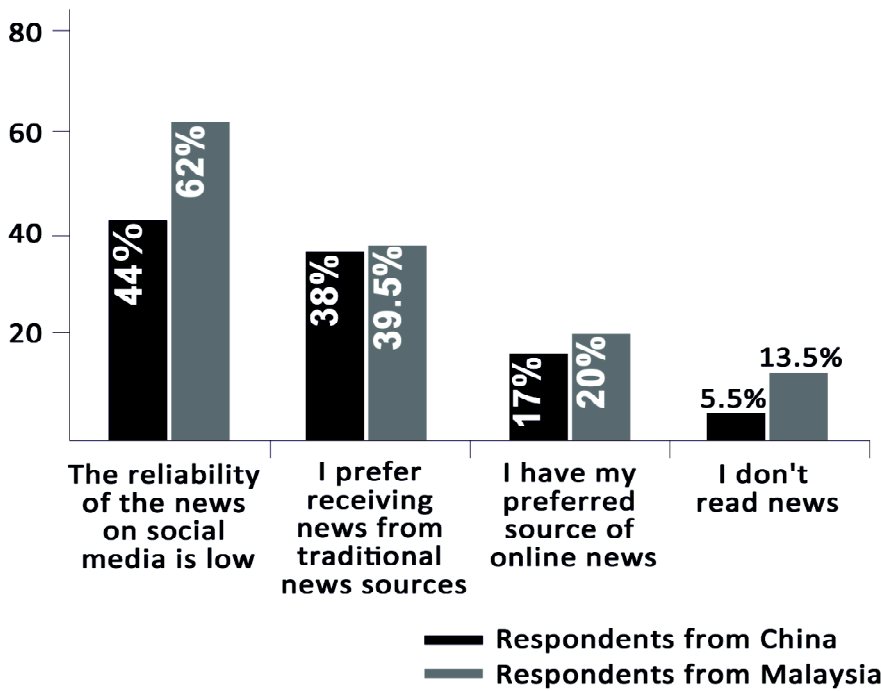


Figure 4. The reasons preventing respondents from using social media for updates of MH370.

Dr. Wang Changsong is an assistant professor of Xiamen University Malaysia. Currently he is the research fellow of Asia and Chinese Language Cinema Research Center of Beijing Normal University; research fellow of the College of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, China; Coordinator of Journalism programme and the founding director of Center for ASEAN and Chinese Screen Studies at Xiamen University Malaysia.

Dr. Jamilah Hj Ahmad is a professor of the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She was the Dean of the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia.