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Malaysian and Mainland Chinese Social Network Community Users' Perceptions on the Post-MH370 Incident

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Abstract

The advent of social media technologies has dramatically changed the scene in the information world. When Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 went missing, the flow of information experienced complexity uncertainty and ambiguity in terms of information adequacy. Social media plays a vital role in building on a framework of re-trust and friendly perception towards Malaysia Airlines. This paper aims to compare social media users' perception of the Malaysia Airlines missing flight MH370 incident in Mainland China and Malaysia respectively. It reveals a significant difference in user perception of active social media in these two countries. This paper argues that social networking sites, such as Facebook in Malaysia, Weibo and Wechat in Mainland China, become the public opinion field which illustrates sorts of openness and negotiation in Malaysia and Mainland China. In the law enforcement and emergency response community, the historical perception of social media was that it was an alternative option. In 2018, 200 questionnaires were collected from respondents in Mainland China and Malaysia respectively. The survey results contributed to the mechanism of crisis communication for henceforth similar incidents in the future. There is no doubt that the portrait of Malaysia Airlines on social media in these two countries affected its organizational reputation. Nevertheless, the participants from Malaysia and Mainland China showed a very average level of confidence to empower themselves to enhance dialog capacity among various stakeholders for this incident.

Keywords: social media, MH370 incident, audience studies, Malaysia, Mainland China

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the industrial revolution, air transport has gained popularity because it saves international travel time. However, according to ABC news (2018), there are a number of major air accidents since 2010 that each claimed more than 100 lives. It is common to witness there is a widespread fear after planes go down, even though the truth is that air travel is almost always boringly safe and uneventful. Numerous airlines have adapted their crisis response strategies to include robust monitoring and responding

via social media sites. Any aircraft accident may not only affect the carriers, but also aerospace manufacturers. According to Carl Surran (2019), 'Boeing's credit metrics likely will deteriorate over the next few quarters and could fall below the threshold of cash flow to debt that normally triggers a downgrade' (para 2), while Indonesian Lion Air flight 610 crashed into the sea minutes after takeoff from the capital Jakarta on 29th October 2018. The incident of the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 happened in 2014 was still 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). In 2019, a satellite air traffic surveillance system capable of tracking aircraft anywhere around the planet has been launched. It starts tracking planes over the north Atlantic, has been developed to fill the holes in radar coverage that is apparent in the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. British and Canadian air traffic control services will be the first to trial the system (Topham, 2019, para 3).

Nevertheless, when many uncertainties of the incident could be not 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, there is little research looking at audiences' understanding of 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 "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 Airlines 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 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 (2017a), 80 percent 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 Airlines flight MH370 incident have revealed the utility of Internet based social media tools such as Facebook, *Wechat* and *Weibo* for risk and crisis communication.

Thanks to the author – Wang Changsong's earlier study on social media users' perception on post-MH370 incident, he shared some research results upon invitation by a television talk show - MH370: Never Forgotten and the Mission Continues. The program was aired on Astro Awani, one of Malaysia's television news channels. This show also invited a public-relation practitioner to analyze the public relations initiative executed by Malaysia Airlines. The panel discussion of the talk show found that although the technical analysis of the public relations initiative turned positive, the company is still battling the uncertainty of the missing flight. The authors also noticed that while economic connections between China and Malaysia have been highlighted on several important occasions (i.e., Belt and Road Summit 2018), less and less people talk about the MH370 incident. 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. 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.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

There are numerous academic articles on the reporting of the MH370 incident. A couple of months after the MH370 incident, Wang Wanxi and another six co-authors published a quantitative research study in Mainland China. 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 entitled *"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 MH370 incident also triggered numerous 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) even 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 a question about the MH370 incident in the question and answer session at the end of his speech. Kemp (2015) believed that "roles of social media is very interesting, that is where rumors 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 his Post-MH370 Incident: A Comparative Study of Social Media Users' Perception in China and Malaysia, the author Wang Changsong had conducted a survey in both Mainland China and Malaysia, to identify how social media users in both countries perceive the disaster and their attitudes towards Malaysia Airlines (Wang & Jamilah, 2018, p. 317). Social media, especially social networking sites such as Facebook in Malaysia, and Weibo and Wechat in Mainland China, become the public opinion field that illustrates a "sort of openness and negotiation" (Herbst, 1998, p. 44). Corporates and organizations "start to see the benefits of using social media to enhance customer engagement" (Piscione, 2018, p. 208). They are always encouraged to effectively utilize certain characteristics of social media by connecting links of other stakeholders, paying more attention to citizen-generated content, adopting stakeholder-desired strategies, cultivating opinion leaders on social media. 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 entitled "Startling Inside Stories of Malaysia Airlines Missing Flight", although this specific post failed providing any reliable sources.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study compares social media users' perception of the Malaysia Airlines missing flight MH370 incident in Mainland China and Malaysia respectively. It examines the factors that constitute the perception of the disaster regionally with special emphasis on its consequence in these two countries. 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.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs convenience sampling to understand perceptions and responses among social network users. In 2018 the authors conducted a survey in Mainland China and Malaysia respectively. The members of the target population of the online questionnaire meet the following practical criteria: easy accessibility, geographical location (Mainland China and Malaysia), and availability at a given time. The purpose of the survey is to gather a broad understanding of how users perceive post-MH370 incident in two different contexts. 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 online questionnaires had been collected from respondents in China and Malaysia respectively. The response rate was 100 percent 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.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The MH370 incident remains the worst Malaysia Airlines has ever suffered, and the deadliest involving a Boeing 777. Malaysia Airlines in 2015 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 (Riley, 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. four months later after the incident of missing plane MH370, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down while flying over eastern Ukraine. The combined loss caused significant financial problems for Malaysia Airlines.

Many airlines attempt to leverage the power of social media channels and understand why travellers are turning to their phone apps like *Weibo* and Facebook to get in touch with airlines about their travel problems. 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 2018 Digital Yearbook particularly looked at the following four major populations—Internet users, active social media users, mobile subscription, and active mobile social users (Kemp, 2018)—which represent significant indictors to measure different behaviour preferences of online users at present. His research revealed that 1,412 million digital online users in China, which indicated China's level of urbanisation had reached 58 per cent and 99 per cent of them own mobile connection. Among them there are 911 million active social media users. In Malaysia, there are 24 million active social media users, which take up 79 per cent of online user population.

Respondents in Mainland China and Malaysia

The respondents from both countries demonstrated a similar phenomenon: less respondents considered themselves as active social media users, however, in a daily practice they very much frequently use social media. 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 social media users 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. Fitton *et al.* (2015) found that "Twitter users tend to settle into a rhythm of tweeting frequency, often unconsciously, over time" (p. 110). Most social media applications provide 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.

This study attempts to test the association between ethnic identities and their perception on the post-MH370 incident, since Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and

multilingual society, and many ethnic groups in Malaysia maintain separate cultural identities. However, 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.

Table 1: Age Distribution of the Respondents in Malaysia and Mainland China

Tuble 1. Age distribution of the Respondents in Malaysia and Mainland China				
Malaysian respondents			Gender	
N	Age	Percentage (%)	Male (%)	Female
0.				(%)
1	18 to 30 years old	81.5	77.23	85.86
2	31to 40 years old	13	15.84	10.10
3	40 years and above	5.5	6.93	4.04
Mainland Chinese respondents			Gender	
N	Age	Percentage (%)	Male (%)	Female
0.				(%)
1	18 to 30 years old	42.5	37.5	47.12
2	31to 40 years old	41.5	45.83	37.5
3	40 years and above	16	16.67	15.38

Social Media Users' Perception Traits in Mainland China and Malaysia

Majority of respondents from these two countries seek a more evidence-based participatory form of crisis communication. This research has distinguished arenas of information exchange where dynamic and interactive flows of social-media data are in the hands of empowered individuals in Malaysia and Mainland China. The survey discovers 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 survey identified that 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 sites 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 Mainland China rely on television for news. 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.

Nevertheless, according to Malaysian respondents, they have a different choice of media for news. 80 per cent of respondents in Malaysia rely on social media more than other media source for news about the MH370 incident. 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. In Malaysia, social media platforms offer great potential for mobilising people for participation in this incident.

The respondents from both Mainland China and Malaysia demand greater factual knowledge of that content, but the themes on which the respondents from these two countries have more concern are different from each other. Most of the Malaysian respondents demonstrate their concerns on the current situation of post-MH370 incident through social media, but most of the Chinese respondents pay attention to information on flight's conspiracy theories. The survey also found that respondents from both countries pay less attention to the emotion of lost passengers' families. after the incident Malaysia has the biggest number of users do not care what the incident goes on. The survey result indicated that 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.

Facebook is blocked in Mainland China. Its censorship has primarily been driven by misuse of social media for fraudulent, corrupt, or anti-government practices. As such, China has substantial legal and administrative regulations for internet site availability and usage in China. That's why the respondents from Mainland China reply on different social media platforms from the Malaysian respondents. However, it is common to see that one social media site in each country attracts most of the users in Malaysia and Mainland China respectively. According to Wang et al (2017b), Chinese participants showed a 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 about the MH370 incident. 61.5 per cent of the respondents trust Sina

Weibo. Although Wechat has the biggest user 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 in popular social media sites in these two countries.

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 the reliability of the news on social media is low. The survey conducted by the authors discovered that 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 newspapers and television. People frequently use social media sites, but at the same time question the reliability of these sites. The relationship lies between the information providers and interpreters 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).

The respondents show positive support to the affected airlines

The survey discovered that 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. If we look at the proportion of respondents who show a 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 a monthly income of 4,000 Malaysia ringgit and above have flown with Malaysia Airlines. The second largest proportion is the group with a 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 a 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 a monthly income of 3,000 to 3,999 Malaysian ringgit express their willingness to take flights 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. Obviously, 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 platforms 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" (Free Malaysia Today, 2016, para. 2). The word 'passive' has been labelled in a number of publications when they investigate the incident from various perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Public perception and social media use became the most dominant area in recent research of crisis communication. This paper emphasized the public motivation for social media use, engagement, identification, and their perception on the corporate that had been heavily affected by the aviation incident. Both Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government appeared to be trying to manage the MH370 narrative primarily through traditional media, while using social media to push news in large part as they had existing official accounts and had to use them. Although social media became a powerful tool for handling crises efficiently and empathetically, it is hard to deny that social media also adds an overwhelming complexity to crisis communication. Safety-enhancing investment did not appear frequently in any related content.

This comparative study of social media users' perception on the MH370 incident in both Mainland China and Malaysia showed us different perception's effect in these two countries. The respondents from Mainland 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. The availability and reliability of information play an important role in reducing ambiguity for a variety of reasons. Social media users in Malaysia still complain Malaysia Airlines made no effort to ensure its communications were part of the online conversation streams when it happened for five years without any convincing clues. By considering social networks as human archives, the MH370 incident leaves so much pain in many different ways.

NOTE

¹Professor Dr Ray Kemp from University of Wollongong, Australia conducted his keynote speech at the 4th International SEARCH Conference held by Taylor's University, Malaysia, on the 28th May 2015.

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