

"ME after getting the Covid-19 vaccine..."

Like million others around the world, we all have seen one or two of these videos on TikTok and Instagram, highlighting the "real" side-effects of the Covid-19 vaccine.

The videos all make the same claims: the Covid-19 vaccine is causing them to move uncontrollably and lose control of their facial muscles as their bodies jerk violently and faces do strange expressions. Some even claim that they are turning into zombies or are being tracked by the government.

With their upbeat music and funny movements, the videos are clearly meant as a joke.

But there are many who take them seriously, especially the young, warns

#MoreViralThanTheVirus founder Ian Soh, and steps need to be taken to counter the misinformation they spread.

Initiated last year, the global movement represented by youth in over 100 countries aims to combat Covid-19 misinformation among the young, and has reached over 1.5 million people.

"While some may argue that the intention of such videos is as a joke, I strongly urge you to think twice," he says.

"Although the creation of such videos is simple, its consequential impact on the aspect of fear is detrimental, especially to those among us who are vulnerable and in desperate need of the vaccine."

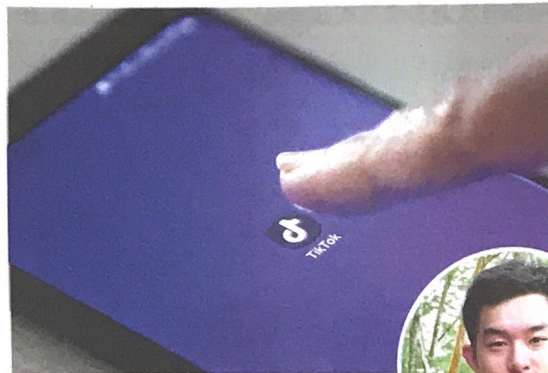
Pointing to how some videos have young people "appearing as experts" to share their "knowledge" of the Covid-19 vaccine, he says the "humour" can inadvertently drive fears surrounding vaccines further.

And with our National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme set to begin this Friday, addressing this has become more urgent.

According to Soh, these "vaccine scepticism" videos appeared as soon as the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines were announced and even before the vaccines started rolling-out in the first country to begin vaccination, the United Kingdom,

Spreading the right message

Building trust and knowledge in the Covid-19 vaccine among young people can empower them to help fight the infodemic.



Gone viral: The infodemic produced by social media has allowed the rapid global spread of unfounded claims about the Covid-19 vaccine. — Reuters (Inset) Soh: 'It has been difficult for young people to access information on the Covid-19 vaccine.'

last December.

While social media companies like Facebook have come up with new measures to combat vaccine misinformation, many of these vaccine scepticism postings and videos are still available and popular online.

Tech magazine *Wired* reported an example of how one video – showing a person, who had allegedly just been vaccinated, trembling violently, then writhing on bed with her tongue lolling out – had been watched by over 4.4 million people about a week after it was posted. On Twitter, the same video was shared 10,300 times, raking in more than 1.4 million views.

Said *Wired*, most of the comments left under such vaccine scepticism videos expressed the same

worries about the alleged effects of the vaccine while others shared "big pharma" conspiracy theories.

Noting that the infodemic produced by social media has allowed the rapid global spread of unfounded claims – with algorithms pushing more extreme content to people – Prof Heidi Larson, who runs the Vaccine Confidence Project at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said that these anti-vaccination messages must be challenged effectively before the scepticism becomes "outright refusal."

"Simply dismissing rumours can entrench them. When people's questions or concerns are batted away, and they feel they are being treated as stupid, doubts can grow and vaccine ambivalence turn to

scepticism and outright refusal," she had told *The Guardian*.

Soh agrees.

Malaysian authorities need to build trust in the national vaccination programme among young people, even though they are not the first on the vaccination schedule, he says.

Eventhough they are among the last batches, their numbers would help us reach the potential number of herd-immunity and most importantly help stop the spread of Covid-19, he adds.

There is a need to put more emphasis on the young in the public education programmes about the vaccines.

"This is essential to help young people be confident to make informed decisions to take the Covid-19 vaccine."

As Soh explains, many young people's scepticism of the Covid-19 vaccines is more driven by the fears about their extraordinary speed of production and the prolonged uncertainty of the pandemic, than the influence of the various anti-vaxer movements.

The lack of access to "trusted" information about vaccines is a big problem.

"It has been difficult for young people to access information on the Covid-19 vaccine, and now even when more information is made available, it is not widely accessible or publicised," he says.

This is exacerbated by the sustained "Covid-fatigue" experienced by a majority of the youth, who not only have to continuously keep up with the ever-changing developmental updates of Covid-19, but also deal with personal issues like the ongoing impact of the pandemic

on their education, job employment opportunities and mental health, he adds.

Ultimately, Soh believes strongly that young people have a critical role to play in helping to stem any Covid-19 vaccine misinformation.

"There is an important need to help our peers and older family members appreciate the fundamental principles of media and information literacy. This includes how to report such fake content and take extra steps to verify the source of the content while reducing the exposure to content that is potentially harmful.

"As many of us are more versatile with technology, we can play an important part in fighting misinformation, and helping to stop the spread of Covid-19."

This is something that Soh and his peers in the #MoreViralThanTheVirus movement have been doing in the past year.

"We have been actively translating and sharing key health messages from the WHO with other young people at local levels, to help combat Covid-19 misinformation."

"Since the announcement of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in late November, we have been actively focussing on the spread of fear surrounding taking the Covid-19 vaccine, including addressing the ongoing viral 'Covid-19 side effect' TikTok videos with our #MakeItStop campaign," he says.

"We are going to continue raising more awareness and attention, until such videos stop appearing, but we hope other young people can also help by sharing materials from trusted sources like the WHO and others."

"This will help complement the work being done by leaders and stakeholders to effectively support and prepare strategies to tackle vaccine literacy among the population." – Agencies