



Clean and Healthy Living Behaviour Post-COVID-19: A Qualitative Study on FISIP USU Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the clean and healthy living behaviour (PHBS) among students post-Covid-19 pandemic. The study employs a qualitative method with in-depth interviews to explore behavioural changes in maintaining hygiene and health after Covid-19 is no longer considered a pandemic. The results indicate that awareness and practice of PHBS among students have declined following the end of the pandemic. Factors contributing to this decline include habits, personal reasons, and social environment. The study suggests the need for more intensive health campaigns to promote PHBS among the younger generation to prevent the spread of other infectious diseases in the future.

Keywords: Clean and Healthy Living Behaviour, Covid-19, Students, Behavioural Changes, Disease Prevention.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis perilaku hidup bersih dan sehat (PHBS) pada mahasiswa pasca pandemi Covid-19. Studi ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan wawancara mendalam untuk menggali perubahan perilaku dalam menjaga kebersihan dan kesehatan setelah Covid-19 tidak lagi dianggap sebagai pandemi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesadaran dan penerapan PHBS pada mahasiswa menurun setelah berakhirnya pandemi. Faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi penurunan ini meliputi kebiasaan, alasan pribadi, dan lingkungan sosial. Studi ini menyarankan perlunya kampanye kesehatan yang lebih intensif untuk mempromosikan PHBS di kalangan generasi muda, guna mencegah penularan penyakit menular lainnya di masa depan.

Kata Kunci: Perilaku Hidup Bersih dan Sehat, Covid-19, Mahasiswa, Perubahan Perilaku, Pencegahan Penyakit.



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has officially been declared over by World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023) during the meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR) Emergency Committee regarding the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in May 2023. This decision was followed by a Presidential Decree of Indonesia issued in June 2023 regarding the termination of the COVID-19 pandemic status in Indonesia. These global and Indonesian decisions have removed COVID-19 from being a public health emergency.

However, COVID-19 has caused at least 7 million deaths during the pandemic period since 2020. Nevertheless, deaths from this virus continue to occur. The global death toll from the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the last seven days reached 1,000 deaths (WHO, 2021). This means that COVID-19 is still a threat that can cause death.

Following the lifting of the pandemic status, there was a relaxation of health policies. The use of masks, social distancing, handwashing, and regulation of population mobility are no longer mandatory. The phenomenon observed is that society seems to have forgotten the pandemic. During that time, people were very compliant with recommendations for clean and healthy living behaviour to avoid contracting the COVID-19 virus. Not only did they use masks and wash hands, but they also limited interactions with others (Kalam et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Sunstein et al., 2020).

One group that should have a good understanding of the importance of clean and healthy living behaviour is university students. It is important for students to have good knowledge about clean and healthy living behaviour because, during the pandemic, this group was called the "active group and virus carriers" due to the low mortality rate in this group (Ludema et al., 2022). If this group has health awareness, they will be able to significantly prevent disease transmission, especially in the future. To date, research on the application of healthy living behaviour among students in Indonesia after the pandemic is still unavailable.

This article aims to delve into the decline in clean and healthy living behaviour among students after COVID-19. The results of this research can be a reference for public health stakeholders to understand the behaviour of the group most easily transmitting diseases to those at high risk.

2. Methods

This research uses a qualitative method with in-depth interviews using semi-structured questionnaires (Zaluchu, 2006). The interview method was chosen in this research because it allows for more in-depth exploration of clean and healthy living habits that are still practiced after COVID-19.

The research population consisted of students from Universitas Sumatera Utara, particularly those in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. Informants were randomly selected. The author approached target informants who were on campus grounds. The author obtained verbal consent from the informants.

A total of seven informants were obtained in this research, with two female and five male participants. Interviews were conducted in open spaces and recorded using a mobile phone with the informants' permission. The recordings were transcribed and analysed after coding using NVivo 12 software.

3. Result and Discussion

After analysing the interview data, the research results were divided into three major themes: 1. Clean and healthy living behaviour during COVID-19, 2. Clean and healthy living behaviour after COVID-19, and 3. Factors causing the decline in clean and healthy living habits in daily life.

3.1. Clean and healthy living behaviour during COVID-19

The basic recommendations issued by the Indonesian government regarding clean and healthy living behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as handwashing after every activity, using masks, maintaining social distancing, and self-isolation, received mixed responses. Some informants stated that they applied these recommendations during COVID-19.

"It depends; usually, at home, I don't, but outside, I wear a mask, wash my hands, use hand sanitizer, and keep some distance." (Informant 2)

"As for that, definitely, even if it wasn't during COVID, I usually avoid using things that are not good for my hands, so yeah, I was used to it before COVID, and after COVID, I just became more consistent with it." (Informant 4)

"For me, before and after COVID, I rarely went out. Regarding physical distancing, I've maintained it even before COVID, not because of COVID, but because I rarely go out. The only difference is that I now wear a mask and use hand sanitizer; that's the main difference." (Informant 7)

The statements above indicate that students have been following the recommended measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. One informant even mentioned taking extra precautions to ensure they didn't bring the virus into their home by always cleaning themselves (taking a shower) after returning home.

"I only keep a distance from others when I'm doing activities outside the house, and when I get home during the day, I immediately take a shower... Yes, during the day. Because, you know, if I look at the situation outside, I meet many people, like when I'm in the city, so usually, when I get home, I take a shower. But if I'm just around the village, I just clean up a bit." (Informant 5)

3.2. Clean and healthy living behaviour that persisted after COVID-19

The clean and healthy living behaviour recommended during the COVID-19 pandemic did not all persist after COVID-19 became endemic. Some recommendations remained, such as using masks and handwashing, but their function was no longer due to the COVID-19 virus.

"If there's anything from the COVID era that I still use, it's probably just the mask. My nose is sensitive, even to dust, not just germs, so I'm still prone to colds. So, the healthy habits like washing hands all the time, I don't do that anymore. After COVID, the social changes have gone back to normal routines, like in the village when we have community gatherings, we're just back to enjoying them like before." (Informant 4)

"Only during long trips, like when going from here to the village, to avoid pollution on the road." (Informant 2)

The information above indicates that the informants are now practicing clean and healthy living habits selectively. They use the recommended practices only for certain purposes when needed and no longer specifically to combat COVID-19. As stated by Informant 4, they have "just gone back to normal routines." This shows that important health policies are no longer fully implemented.

3.3. Factors causing the decline in clean and healthy living habits

3.3.1. Habit

Daily life behaviour that does not adopt clean and healthy living habits is certainly interesting to explore. One informant mentioned in the following narrative:

"Mask-wearing is not something I do every day... The reason I don't do it is that I'm used to daily life before COVID-19 being like that." (Informant 1)

The above narrative shows that the habit of not wearing masks is the reason for no longer adopting good habits. Spontaneously, the informant stated that the strictness of living a healthy life during the pandemic ended with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3.2 Personal factors

Personal experiences felt during COVID-19 from the application of clean and healthy living habits were not strong enough to create consistent behaviour. Informants had personal reasons worth mentioning here.

"Yes, it's difficult because there is no visible impact on oneself... After all, at a young age, our immunity is strong, so we just think it's no big deal." (Informant 1)

"Why not use hand sanitizer anymore? Because I feel it's cleaner to wash with water... But the purpose is actually to prevent acne, not because of COVID." (Informant 6)

Another perspective is that the implementation of clean and healthy living behaviours in daily life is perceived as more burdensome and would increase daily expenses. Personal economic factors also hinder the sustainable practice of clean and healthy living.

"In my personal opinion, the fundamental thing is that it's not done anymore because it's 'complicated,' that's the key. Why should we feel like our whole life is full of germs, you know? Because that's something unseen, something invisible, so why bother if we're already healthy... Because, well, the behaviours or things that were established during COVID actually increased costs. Buying hand sanitizer, buying masks, especially when everything was expensive at that time, masks were sold commercially at high prices, it became a kind of blessing for businesspeople." (Informant 4)

The informant's views above reflect personal resistance, with various reasons that align with their individual circumstances.

3.3.3. Environmental factors

The surrounding environment, which no longer adheres to clean and healthy living behaviours after COVID-19, has also contributed to the declining interest in maintaining these good habits. Individuals who observe that others are not practicing these behaviours may come to believe that such practices are no longer relevant for protecting themselves from disease. This was expressed by several informants:

"But after they stopped enforcing social distancing, I still kept it up for a while. But over time, the threat seemed to disappear. People around me also stopped wearing masks, so it seemed safe. And there weren't any more cases, at least not around here, so I felt safe, and I stopped wearing a mask." (Informant 5)

"Yeah, honestly, it's like... it's not that I want to take it lightly, but the reality around me seems fine, so from a subconscious level, it feels 'safe,' so I became bolder. But I'm still scared, it's just that the reality made me a bit more daring." (Informant 7)

"For me personally, during COVID, clean and healthy living behaviour (PHBS) was more prevalent in the village. So, the recommendations and regulations from the government were minimally implemented because, in the village, it wasn't too strict; the neighbourhood leaders, the village heads, didn't enforce it much. But the health protocols recommended by the government, from the central or district level, were still provided. In practice, if you go shopping, you wear a mask, and social distancing was still done in the village." (Informant 4)

The statements from the informants above show that collective behaviour in society often becomes a reference. In other words, the informants do not view themselves individually but instead look to their environment as a reference for practicing healthy living.

This research shows that clean and healthy living behaviour has declined after COVID-19 is no longer categorized as a pandemic. Although millions of people have become victims of this disease during the pandemic, it cannot be denied that the application of clean and healthy living habits has indeed significantly prevented the spread of this disease (Noland, 2021; Salvamani et al., 2020). Tightened mobility and the implementation of health policies have proven to control disease transmission during the pandemic (Ikhsan & Zaluchu, 2023). The discovery of vaccines and mass vaccination efforts have also had a positive impact on stopping the spread of the virus (Kaplan & Milstein, 2021; Laine et al., 2021).

However, adherence to clean and healthy living behaviour is still crucial, considering that the virus causing COVID-19 still exists. Although efforts to develop vaccines continue, this virus's mutation continues (AAMC, 2024). The increase in COVID-19 cases in several regions shows that this virus is still trying to improve its capabilities (Rastogi et al., 2024).

The decline in clean and healthy living behaviour indicates a phenomenon of confidence because of vaccination (Chaudhary et al., 2024). Chaudhary et al. (2024) found that among professionals, including future professionals such as students, confidence causes a decrease in the desire to apply healthy behaviour. Various personal reasons, as conveyed by the informants above, parallel other findings. The increasing expenses during the pandemic led students to try to save more, reducing spending on their health prevention needs (Clobes & Alonge, 2023). Students certainly do not want to increase expenses and complications in their implementation, as conveyed by the informants. Especially because the surrounding environment is not a positive reference.

The habit of applying clean and healthy living behaviour during COVID-19, such as wearing masks and washing hands, was indeed no longer practiced during the COVID-19 pandemic itself due to the lifting of these restrictions. But continuing this habit is not prohibited. However, the habit of living clean and healthy no longer receives support from the surrounding environment. People in rural areas, as mentioned by informants, usually do not strictly enforce clean and healthy living behaviour. This environmental factor affects individuals in their efforts to apply clean and healthy living behaviour. Individuals who see others and the surrounding environment are already fine and do not apply clean and healthy living behaviour tend to mimic that behaviour.

This research also shows that even in the most educated environment, namely students, the recommended clean and healthy living behaviour is no longer adopted after COVID-19. The awareness of self-health that increased during the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer maintained. The health recommendations given during the COVID-19 period were not exclusive recommendations only to prevent the transmission of the COVID-19 virus. These clean and healthy living behaviour recommendations relate to efforts to prevent other infectious diseases that are still high in Indonesia, such as tuberculosis (Fuady et al., 2020; Kant & Tyagi, 2021; Reid et al., 2019). However, the understanding of health prevention in the context of COVID-19 reflects the complexity of preventing other infectious diseases.

Students who should already understand the importance of applying clean and healthy living behaviour are not yet aware of its importance and even tend to ignore it. This research could be a foundation for the government and healthcare workers to be more aggressive in their efforts to promote clean and healthy living behaviour in society, especially among the younger generation. This young generation usually has high self-confidence and feels physically strong.

Further research seems to be possible with a different population of informants to gain a broader perspective on the application of clean and healthy living behaviour after COVID-19 in Indonesia.

4. Conclusion

The results of this research show that awareness of clean and healthy living behaviour after COVID-19 has declined. Specific groups, particularly students, now seem negligent about their health for various reasons. The key findings of this research are that habit, personal factors, and environmental factors all negatively influence the application of clean and healthy living behaviour in society. Through the results of this research, it is necessary to formulate new health messages to prevent infectious diseases

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