

The Linkages between Social Media and Political Participation among Malaysian Youth

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Abstract

In the globalisation era, social media has played a significant role in spreading information about all human activities, including business, social, economic, and political issues. Also, it provides new avenues for political engagement. Numerous studies have reported that there is declining political participation, especially among Malaysian youth. Thus, it has led many research studies to concern social media and its effect on Malaysian youth's political participation. This study aims to analyse the linkages between social media (time spent on the internet and online activity) use for political participation among youth in East Coast Malaysia. The design of this study is a quantitative approach through cross-sectional data. A total 348 university students in East Coast of Malaysia have participated in this study and collected through a self-administered questionnaire using purposive sampling. The data analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, involved frequency, mean and standard deviation and correlation test by assisting SPSS-25. This study found that time spent on the internet has no significant correlation on Malaysian youth's political participation. Also, online activity has significant correlation on online and offline politics. However, online activity's correlation coefficient is categorised as a moderate positive correlation on Malaysian youth's political participation. In conclusion, the trend was discouraging as majority youths were not interested in participating in politics. They do not interest due to majority of them worried about government punishment. Even the government amended the country's law to allow greater freedom, and youths' reception was lukewarm. It seems that the amendment still fails to attract the attention of most youths, especially university students.

Keywords

Social media, online activity, online and offline political participation, Malaysian youth context

1. Introduction

Social Media has transformed the way society is connected and interacted. It can transform the nature of communication with broad consequences for civic and political engagement. There is near-universal agreement among scholars that the social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube) plays a role in representing the transformative period. It is a need to recognise the transformation and understand the context of evolution in civic and political engagement (Sara & Dietlind, 2014). Some basic features of social media are widely known. Social media can facilitate the delivery of a great amount of information without constraints of time or space. It also enables people to engage in two-way communication at an affordable cost.

Moreover, social media offers new opportunities to access information without the scrutiny of information-filtering institutions. It also enables more transparency in political institutions. Significantly, the internet has the potential to facilitate public discussion among the public and political elites. With these special features, it has been adopted as tools for online political participation. Youth are among those been identified as heavy and early adopters of social media. Many studies (e.g., Kruger, 2002, Mossberger et al., 2008) noted that youth are highly engaged with social media. Studies by Ward & Vreese (2011) and Yamamoto & Kushin (2013) noted that this group is particularly apathetic to political life. However, with social media availability, there is a rise in political participation among youth due to digital media use for political information. They rely on digital media for information than the older generation

(Kohut, 2008). Thus, this article seeks to examine the extent to which youths are using social media for political engagement. This study aims to examine the extent to which youth use social media as a tool for participatory politics in their everyday lifestyle, such as political discussion or joining or following any political campaigns.

2. Literature Review

Participatory politics is not only voting but also beyond than that. The conception includes various political activities such as electoral activities (voting or campaign work), activism (protest, boycotting, and petitions), civic activities (charity and community service) and lifestyle politics (awareness of raising the price) (Zukin et al., 2006). The conception of participatory politics is quite broad to capture a wide range of participation. Participation politics can occur inside and outside of the traditional institution. It acknowledges the struggle to shift public attention to a new issue or challenge the balance of power. There are various ways people resist domination and express their preferences through informal action such as boycott. Participation politics also involve political consequences such as understanding citizens on certain political issues, such as their discussion with neighbours and fellow citizens and their news consumption. Their communication with others in social context could help shape (or lack) their engagement with political institutions and political action. Participatory politics also includes changes in how people define public concern and exercise power to them. Few scholars argued that social media as a tool that facilitated those changes in which before the social media, most of political issues and activities have been defined and structured by elites and political institution but, now it involves a variety of direct and expressive politics (Kelley, 1994; Dalton, 2006).

There are several studies examine the possibility of the Internet digital media as a tool and avenue for political expression and mobilisation and thus created new possibilities for civic and political participation (Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Wilhelm, 1999; Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Muhlberger & Shane, 2001; Sunstein, 2001, Stromer-Galley, 2002; Tsaliki, 2002). For instance, Kellner (1998) states that the internet has "produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain the potential to invigorate democracy and increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas". The internet is seen as providing a space for public participation and deliberation (Blumler & Coleman, 2001; Levine, 2001) where people can generate and connect online networks based on their interests, and as space connecting strangers, which results in dispersed but powerful communities (Rheingold, 1994). Access to information allows citizens to be better informed before the deliberative process. Jansen and Koop (2005) note that government and media willingness to publish information online allows citizens to inform themselves easily about political issues.

Similarly, Gimmler (2001) states that the internet can strengthen deliberative democracy because it provides unrestricted and equal access to information. It also facilitates interaction and participation opportunities as it "conceives of a more complex, horizontal and multidirectional interactivity" (Chadwick & May 2003: 280). In addition, the internet generates discussion and could potentially develop as a "virtual community" (Rheingold, 1994). The rise of digital media has facilitated not only cultural changes but also changes in politics. Many political activities are going online and able to reshape the landscape of political life.

Not all scholars are optimistic about the potential of the internet to contribute to political participation. Some scholars caution that the loose network of informal discussions and the overwhelming crowd in cyberspace might not produce the best results for democracy. Margolis and Resnick (2000) argue that the internet has created "politics as usual" and has tended to normalise political activity by reflecting and reinforcing patterns of behaviour and the socio-political structure of "real life" without making any changes in the online space. Norris (2003) notes that political parties' websites do not facilitate public discussion. Rather, they use a top-down model of political participation, since the websites are used only to publicise announcements, not to generate political discussion. Some critics even suggest that the internet, rather than having little or no impact, could have a negative one, such as widening the participation gap. It reflects their concern with the notion of a "digital divide", in which unequal access to the internet will increase other forms of political and social inequality. The internet depends on a division between the rich and poor informations and between activists and the politically disengaged context. Norris (2001) notes that this would create a "democratic divide" between those who use Internet resources to engage, mobilise and participate in public life and those who do not.

Other studies of the internet claimed that participants are polarised and fragmented. Katz (1997) points out that "confrontation, misinformation and insult characterise many public forums on the Internet". "Flaming", that is, irrational, uncivil, and disruptive attitudes, is seen to result from the anonymous nature of the Internet (O'Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003). A study by Hill and Hughes (1998) based on a UseNet newsgroup demonstrates that it is difficult for members to have a thoughtful discussion; most members write snap comments without reasoning. Similarly, Davis (2005) found in his study of electronic political discussion in the US that the internet did not encourage participation

and was still far from functioning as a forum for deliberative democracy. Sunstein (2001) has a similar view of the online deliberative process. He argues that cyber-discourse leads to fragmentation or what he calls "cyber balkanisation" (Sunstein, 2001). He theorises that Internet users can be segregated and isolated and thus gradually form their own, like-minded groups. Users tend to be hostile and uncooperative with those who do not share their views. He highlights Internet users' ability to customise, filter and select their preferences as one of the factors that leads to cyber balkanisation.

Many types of research have argued that social media could be the tools to link youth to the political process. Many studies (e.g. Boogers & Voerman, 2003; Gibson et al., 2005; Weber, Loumakis & Bergman, 2003) argued that the internet is an effective tool to educate young people to foster political learning and participation due to spending a lot of time on the internet by them. However, even the internet can educate young people, but they less access the websites. Therefore, according to Lupia & Philpot (2002), effort should be done to make those sites accessible and appeal to young people. With the high penetration and popularity of the internet among young people, it rises hope that the internet can revive political participation. Therefore, this article's underlying question is to what extent can the internet facilitate political participation among young people? It is expecting with the overwhelming potential of the internet on the democratic character of participation and mobilisation, able to facilitate young people to participate in politics. Due to their amount of time spent on the internet and various activities that they engage online.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a quantitative method through a survey. The survey is suitable to know the extent of youth using the internet for political participation. According to Berger (2000), a survey is done to 'collect and analyse social, economic, psychological ...and other types of data. It is based on interviewing people (respondent) and asking them for information. It is done with representative samples of a population being studied (p. 188). The advantage of using a survey is that it can analyse the problem in a realistic background. It is relatively expensive; it also can collect a large amount of current information at one time. The survey was distributed among university students in East Coast of Malaysia between age twenty to twenty-five. The sample was chosen based on sampling purposive to make sure that the respondents' access to the internet and respond based on their experience using the internet. Therefore, university students were used as a respondent because they are often expecting and highly engaged with social media. The survey was carried out on 348 university students, 124 of whom were males and 224 females; the average age was 22.4 years (S.D = 2.101). Of participants, 73.4 % were Malay, 18.5% were Chinese, 13% were Indian, and 7% were others. Participants were contacted during classes and recreational activities partly with the collaboration of the student's association.

Data was gathered using a self-evaluation questionnaire. The respondents' level of political participation level was being measured separately for 10 Internet activities (online) and nine offline activities. Each scale's items are based on political participation study by Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2005). Online political participation was measured 10 types of political participation: a) Visited the website of a party or political organisation; b) Share link on the political issue with friends; c) Talk about politics with friends and family ; d) Campaign for preference candidate through social media; e) Give a comment on a political issue in social media; f) Interaction with politicians through social media; g) Joined group that support or oppose the current politics; h) Downloaded political leaflets to distribute offline i) Signed up online volunteer to help with a political cause j) Joined a political organisation online as a member. The items were under online political participation. For offline, respondents were asked a similar series of questions about types of offline participation: a) Attended a public forum on politics b) Attended a political rally or demonstration c) Joined a political organisation as a member d) Attended a meeting of a political organisation e) Donated money to a political cause or organisation f) Discussed politics with friends and family g) Contacted a political or government official h) Campaigned for a preferred candidate i) Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper j) Signed up a volunteer for a political cause.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This section will present the main findings of the survey. First, we report the pattern of media use. For the use of the internet, Figure 1 shows that the respondent's highest hours are 2-4 hours per day (37%) and 5-6 hours is 26%, and last is more than 6 hours is 23%. It shows that majority of university student spent around 2-4 hours per day on the internet. This survey also wants to identify what they are doing when they are online. The study identified there are three activities that they are most popular when they are online; reading news (45%), watching movies (33%), download software (25%) and chatting with friends (18.3%).

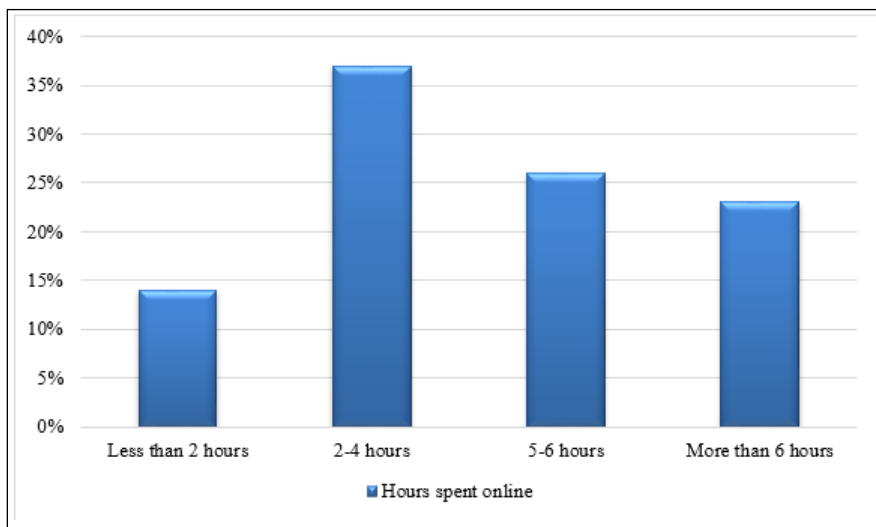


Figure 1. The pattern of media use

Second, we report the political participation. Overall young people participated only in a fairly limited number of political activities. The result indicates, the most active activity – 14.0% is visited the website of a party or political organisation. Majority of the respondent had visited more than once on the website of the political party. Second is talk about politics with friends and family (4.8%), followed by share link on a political issue with friends and family (3.6%) and give comment on the political issue (2.8%). Significantly, majority of respondent never perform any activity of campaign for preference candidate (67.2%), Interact with politicians (66.7%), downloaded political leaflets (50.1%), signed up a volunteer (66.1%), joined a group that support or oppose the current political issue (53.8%) and also joined the political organisation (65.0%). These show that young people are most active in visited political parties' websites and the least active in campaign their preferred candidate. The latter is not surprising because the university students in Malaysia are bind to the law of Malaysia's University and University College Act 1971 (AUKU).

Table 1: Online and Offline Political Participation

Dimension(s) and Item(s)	Never	Rare	S/times	Frequently	Always
Online Participation					
Visited the website of a party or political organisation	15.7	21.6	26.1	21.3	14.0
Share link on political issue with friends	32.2	31.1	23.8	7.8	3.6
Talk about politics with friends and family	33.1	31.1	21.3	8.4	4.8
Campaign for preference candidate through social media	67.2	16.2	9.8	3.9	1.4
Give comment on political issue in social media	46.2	23.8	18.2	7.6	2.8
Interaction with politicians through social media	66.7	15.7	9.2	5.6	1.4
Downloaded political leaflets to distribute offline	50.1	24.9	16.2	5.9	1.4
Signed up online volunteer to help with a political cause	66.1	16.2	12.0	2.8	1.1
Joined group that support or oppose the current politic	53.8	21.6	13.4	6.2	3.6
Joined a political organisation online as a member	65.0	15.7	12.3	2.8	2.6
Offline Participation					
Attended a public forum on politics	50.7	25.5	14.6	5.9	1.7
Attended a political rally or demonstration	74.5	10.6	8.4	3.9	0.8
Joined a political organisation as a member	75.1	9.5	7.0	5.3	1.1
Attended a meeting of a political organisation	76.5	7.6	8.4	4.8	1.1
Donated money to a political cause or organisation	77.6	8.1	7.3	4.2	1.1
Discussed about politic with friends and family	26.9	28.3	28.6	10.6	3.4
Contacted a political or government official	75.1	9.5	7.0	5.3	1.1
Campaigned for a preferred candidate	73.7	11.2	5.0	5.9	2.5
Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper	80.4	7.3	6.2	3.9	0.6

Signed up volunteer for political cause	73.1	10.1	7.0	5.0	2.2
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These results seem to contradict the view that young people in Malaysia are active in online politics since online media is a mostly unregulated media in Malaysia. The study tested further on offline participation. The results indicate that most young people are not interested in actively participating in political activities for offline politics. Majority of them never involved any political activities, as stated in Table 1. The highest activity they perform is discussed about politic with friends and family, and the least activity is written a letter to the editor of a newspaper. The study further tested on the barrier for young people not participated in online political activities. As Table 2 indicates, most respondents agree and agree – 53.8% that they will get punishment if they voice their opinion. The second barrier is that they do not believe in online political news (very agree and agree, 48.1%), followed by them not interested in political news 41.2% (for very agree and agree).

Table 2: Barrier that hinders participation

Item(s)	Very agree	Agree	Not agree	Very not agree	Do not know
I am worry will get punishment by the government if I voice my opinion in social media	13.2	40.6	26.3	9.2	8.7
I am not interested in political issue	9.0	24.6	39.8	19.6	5.0
I do not believe in online political news	11.7	36.4	29.5	14.3	8.0

Third, we report the Impact of Online Media on political participation. To investigate the influence of the time spent on the internet on political participation, we use correlation analysis. In the analysis, we investigate the influence of intensive Internet use on political participation. I argue that more time spent online increases frequency and likelihood of online communication, including reading news, chatting about politics, sharing the link of political news, signing an online petition and so forth, which might positively influence youth's political participation. However, if looking at Table 3, I notice that spending online has no significant influence on political participation. How much time spent online does not influence their level of political participation. It probably true as respondents are less performed online political activities when surfing the internet, as shown in Table 1.

Table 3: Correlation between time spent on the internet and online political participation

		Online-political participation
Time spent on social media per day	Pearson Correlation	-.051
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.353

The study also tested the online media user on online and offline political participation levels. As shown in Table 4, the result indicates the correlations between the Internet activities and online and offline political participation are, respectively, .333($p < 0.01$) and .767 ($p < 0.01$). The results suggest that online activities were significantly associated with online and offline political participation. Respondents who spent online – reading news, chatting, online shopping, sharing video, playing the online game, looking for the job, watching movies and downloaded software in the computer, were more likely to engage in online and offline politics.

Table 4: Correlations between online activity and online and offline political participation.

		Online political participation	Offline political participation
Online activity	Pearson Correlation	0.333**	0.767**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000

4.2 Discussion

As many previous studies have concluded, young people are certainly less positively disposed towards the political process in terms of their behaviour and attitudes. This study also suggests that the young people within the study are less interested in political activity. I found that high proportions of youths are not actively involved in political activities as listed in the table. Majority of them are not using social media for political engagement. Youths who spend more time online do not participate in offline or online more frequently. The amount of time spent is also had no predictive power to correlate with online political activities. However, online activity has a significant correlation

with online and offline political activities. The types of online activities that youth engage in such as reading news would affect youth's political involvement positively. There are some important notes to these findings. The first thing to notice is that the survey represents Malaysian youth in East Coast of Malaysia. I cannot argue that this trend will be universal.

As mentioned, youth are a specific group. They socialise with the internet from a young age and display a low level of political participation. Moreover, they do not interest due to majority of them worried about government punishment. It can be understood from the country's history on the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971. The act put cubs on the students' right to assembly and associate with political groups. After thirty years, many criticisms on the act such as it hinders students from thinking critically, creative and leadership and communication abilities of Malaysian students also affected. Weiss (2011) noted that Malaysian students been described as apathetic. In response, the government amended the AUKU to allow greater freedom of university students to participate in public affairs of the country. However, the study shows that the reception of students was lukewarm, and it seems that the amendment still fails to attract the attention of most university students. In fact, with the availability of the internet and limited regulated by the government still less interested. However, their disinterest in political activities was not an indication of their apathy, but rather a reflection of the government's political activism response.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the trend was discouraging as majority youths were not interested in participating in politics. They do not interest due to majority of them worried about government punishment. Even the government amended the country's law to allow greater freedom, and youths' reception was lukewarm. It seems that the amendment still fails to attract the attention of most youths, especially university students.

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