

A Systematic Literature Review on Twitter and Democratic Engagement in Malaysia

FADHILAH RAIHAN LOKMAN^{1*}, MUHAMAD TAKIYUDDIN ISMAIL² & SHARIFAH NURSYAHIDAH
SYED ANNUAR²

¹*School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Faculty of Social Science and Leisure Management,
Taylor's University, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia*

²*Research Center for History, Politics, and International Affairs,
Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

Corresponding author: fadhilahraihan.lokman@taylors.edu.my

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Abstract

This article reviews the role of Twitter in democratic engagement in Malaysia from 2020 to 2024, examining its influence on public discourse, political participation, and the democratic process. This review analyses recent scholarly studies to identify trends, opportunities, and challenges in leveraging Twitter for democratic discourse. Using the PRISMA framework, data were gathered from Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases. The findings are categorised into three themes: (1) Political Communication and Campaigns, (2) Political Participation and Activism, and (3) Challenges in Democratic Engagement. The results highlight Twitter's role in shaping political narratives, influencing voter sentiment, and driving strategic campaigns while serving as a platform for information sharing and agenda-setting. However, challenges such as misinformation, trolling, fake accounts and buzzer behaviour hinder its democratic potential. The study underscores the urgency of enhancing digital literacy, regulating online behaviour, and promoting ethics to strengthen Malaysia's democracy. By offering a structured review, this article contributes to understanding Twitter's role in facilitating democratic engagement in Malaysia and its implications for research and policymaking. It emphasises the importance of tackling challenges while exploring Twitter's capacity to foster a more informed, inclusive, and participatory political environment.

Keywords: Democratic Engagement; Digital Literacy; Political Participation; PRISMA; Twitter

Introduction

Over the past decade, social media have become essential for political and social interaction, impacting how people access information and express opinions. Twitter (X), in particular, is one of the favourable platforms for democratic engagement, offering a unique space where political discourse can unfold in real-time effectively with rapid updates, enabling broader forms of political participation and direct communication between citizens, politicians, and institutions.¹ Globally, its influence in political debates, such as the 2016 US presidential debate, demonstrated how users combined humour, fact-checking, and critique to shape democratic accountability.² However, while Twitter offers significant opportunities for public engagement, its democratic potential is tempered by the platform's structural and behavioural challenges. Politicians often use Twitter as a broadcasting tool rather than for genuine dialogue, a behaviour influenced by the incivility prevalent on the platform, which discourages meaningful exchanges.³ Despite these challenges, Twitter is crucial in political

campaigns and public relations. Research indicates that candidates actively using Twitter are more likely to succeed in elections, suggesting that the platform can effectively inform and engage voters.⁴ Additionally, limited but meaningful interactions between journalists and the public on Twitter point to its potential for amplifying diverse voices in democratic processes.⁵ Thus, while Twitter serves as a critical tool for political campaigns and public discourse, its impact is constrained by issues like strategic use by politicians and the pervasive incivility among online users.^{6,7,8}

In Malaysia, Twitter has reshaped the political landscape by transforming how citizens engage in political discourse and activism. The 2013 Malaysian General Election, often dubbed the country's first "social media election," highlighted Twitter's growing influence in shaping political narratives and voter behaviour. Researchers employing Big Data and social network analysis revealed that influential Twitter users, including politicians, significantly impacted election outcomes through their central roles in online networks.⁹ Twitter's brevity and immediacy make it a particularly effective tool for political communication, facilitating real-time dialogue across diverse demographic groups.^{10,11} Additionally, the platform's features allow for dynamic interactions between technological affordances, user practices, and ideological expressions. For example, Graham¹² and Jaidka, Zhou, and Lelkes¹³ demonstrated how Twitter's structure supports ideological debates while enabling users to challenge narratives in real time. This functionality is especially relevant in a multicultural democracy like Malaysia, where diverse perspectives converge on platforms like Twitter. These dynamics underscore the importance of examining the platform's evolving role in shaping public opinion and political engagement within the Malaysian context.^{14,15,16} With these developments, examining how Twitter continues to shape political engagement and public opinion in Malaysia in recent years is important. This review focuses on studies about Twitter and democratic engagement in Malaysia between 2020 and 2024, aiming to comprehensively understand the platform's impact on recent political trends. By synthesising findings from recent research, the paper seeks to identify both opportunities and challenges in leveraging Twitter for democratic discourse in Malaysia using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to offer comprehensive insights into its potential role in future political dynamics for democratic engagement.

Literature Review

Twitter has become an important platform for political discourse and democratic engagement worldwide, supporting solidarity and protest organisations. Highfield and Miltner¹⁷ note that features like hash flags visually endorse social justice causes. However, they often reflect corporate interests more than genuine support. This observation was reflected by Harlow and Benbrook¹⁸, who found that hip-hop celebrities on Black Twitter primarily used the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to construct and affirm Black identity, emphasising solidarity and community over self-promotion. Akerele-Popoola, Azeez, and Adeniyi¹⁹ examine Twitter's role in Nigeria's #EndSARS protests, highlighting its utility in amplifying voices. Nonetheless, its impact tends to be temporary. Russell, Evans, and Gervais²⁰ explore Twitter's emotional appeal in advocacy, especially among female politicians who use anger strategically in polarised climates, challenging gender norms. This finding aligns with King & Carley,²¹ who found persistent gender biases in the 2020 US Democratic primaries, and Sprejer et al.²² who discuss the risks of online harassment tied to emotional discourse. Despite its democratic potential, Twitter often undermines public discourse through misinformation and hate speech. Zapata Rozo et al.²³ use Natural Language Processing (NLP) to track hate speech during the 2022 US midterm elections, linking it to conspiracy narratives. Aguado²⁴ similarly, finds that misinformation erodes voter trust. Sprejer et al.²⁵ argue that Twitter's moderation is insufficient, calling for stronger intervention policies. Yegen, Ayhan, and Demir²⁶ further demonstrate that Twitter

activity during the 2020 US presidential inauguration revealed ongoing political polarisation and that agenda-setters dominated interactions, reinforcing the platform's role as both a digital public sphere and a battleground for ideological contestation. These studies highlight Twitter's complicity in amplifying divisive content, raising questions about its democratic reliability.

Nevertheless, much of the research, like King and Carley²⁷ and Aguado²⁸, is US-centric, overlooking political contexts in other regions. The research on Twitter's democratic impact employs diverse methodologies, including qualitative interviews,²⁹ computational analyses,³⁰ and longitudinal studies.³¹ To enrich these findings, Pal and Gonawela³² advocate for combining large-scale quantitative analysis with small-data interpretive methods to produce deeper, context-sensitive insights into political messaging on Twitter. Despite the platform's role in amplifying grassroots movements, its impact often proves ephemeral suggesting the need for longitudinal studies that examine the sustainability of Twitter-driven activism.³³ Additionally, Highfield and Miltner³⁴ point to an underexplored tension between corporate governance and grassroots advocacy, raising questions about the authenticity and autonomy of digital activism. Further research should explore the long-term consequences of emotional rhetoric and hate speech on democratic stability and cross-cultural comparisons of Twitter's democratic role beyond the US context. Additionally, studies could evaluate the effectiveness of platform policies in mitigating misinformation and enhancing democratic resilience. In this regard, it is essential to understand Twitter's democratic role within the context of Malaysia, where political dynamics and digital engagement present unique challenges and opportunities. This study contributes to addressing that gap by conducting an SLR to capture patterns of democratic engagement in Malaysia through Twitter. This review highlights Twitter's dual potential to facilitate democratic engagement and contribute to democratic challenges. Addressing these challenges through interdisciplinary research and thoughtful policy reform will be essential to preserving Twitter's potential as a constructive democratic tool.

Research Question

This review establishes its Research Questions (RQ) as the foundation for the study and to guide the overall process.³⁵ This approach aims to evaluate the current state of the field of study, utilising the PICo framework, a qualitative research tool proposed by Lockwood et al.³⁶ to structure these questions. PICo represents Population, Interest, and Context. Using the PICo framework, this study identified three RQs:

RQ1: How does Twitter influence political communication and campaign strategies among Malaysian politicians during election periods?

RQ2: In what ways do Malaysian citizens, especially the youths, use Twitter to engage in political participation and activism?

RQ3: What are the key challenges faced by Malaysian citizens in using Twitter for democratic engagement?

Research Methods

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework is a recognised standard for conducting systematic reviews, promoting transparency and consistency in research.³⁷ By adhering to PRISMA guidelines, this review enhances accuracy and rigour, particularly in identifying, screening, and including studies systematically, which minimises bias. This review used Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus for their comprehensive coverage. PRISMA involves four

key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and data abstraction. This structured method ensures reliable findings that contribute to advancing the research and practice of the study.

Identification

Firstly, during the identification phase, keywords associated with Twitter and democratic engagement in Malaysia were identified, with similar terms gathered from dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedias, and prior research. These keywords were then formulated into search strings for thorough exploration in WoS and Scopus, two databases renowned for their interdisciplinary and high-quality research output (see Table 1). This process yielded 807 papers, forming a comprehensive foundation for examining Twitter’s role in democratic engagement in Malaysia.

Table 1: Search Strings for Twitter and Democratic Engagement in Malaysia

Databases	Search String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (((“twitter” OR “social media” OR “online media” OR “microblogging” OR “social networking site” OR “new media” OR “digital media”) AND (democrac* OR deliberation OR politic* OR civic) AND (engagement OR interaction OR activism OR discourse OR debate OR involvement OR participation OR mobili*ation OR advocacy OR communication))) AND Malaysia AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2020) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2022) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2023) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2024)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , “English”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (AFFILCOUNTRY , “Malaysia”))
WoS	(((((“twitter” OR “social media” OR “online media” OR “microblogging” OR “social networking site” OR “new media” OR “digital media”) AND (democrac* OR deliberation OR politic* OR civic) AND (engagement OR interaction OR activism OR discourse OR debate OR involvement OR participation OR mobili*ation OR advocacy OR communication))) AND Malaysia) and 2024 or 2023 or 2022 or 2021 or 2020 (Publication Years) and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages) and MALAYSIA (Countries/Regions)

Sources: Authours’ Work.

Screening

Next, during the screening phase, the collected research papers were evaluated for relevance to the study’s RQs, specifically focusing on Twitter and democratic engagement in Malaysia. Duplicate entries were removed to streamline the dataset. The initial screening eliminated 610 publications, leaving 197 papers for further evaluation based on defined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 2). Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles, while reviews, books, and conference proceedings were excluded unless deemed directly relevant. The review was restricted to English-language publications from 2020–2024 to ensure the use of recent data. Following the removal of duplicates, an additional 64 items were excluded, resulting in a refined dataset for analysis.

Table 2: The Selection Criterion

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2020-2024	< 2020
Literature Type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review
Publication Stage	Final	In Press
Country	Malaysia	Besides Malaysia

Sources: Authours' Work.

Eligibility

Next, during the eligibility phase, the full texts of 133 articles were reviewed to confirm their alignment with the study's objectives. Each article was assessed based on relevance, significance, and accessibility. Exclusions were made for studies that did not align with the study's focus, had irrelevant titles, or presented abstracts unrelated to Twitter and democratic engagement in Malaysia. Articles concentrating solely on other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook or Instagram) were excluded unless they included Twitter or compared multiple platforms. Additionally, articles without full-text access were omitted. This process resulted in the exclusion of 99 articles, leaving a final set of 34 core studies that were highly relevant, accessible, and aligned with the study's aims (see Figure 1).

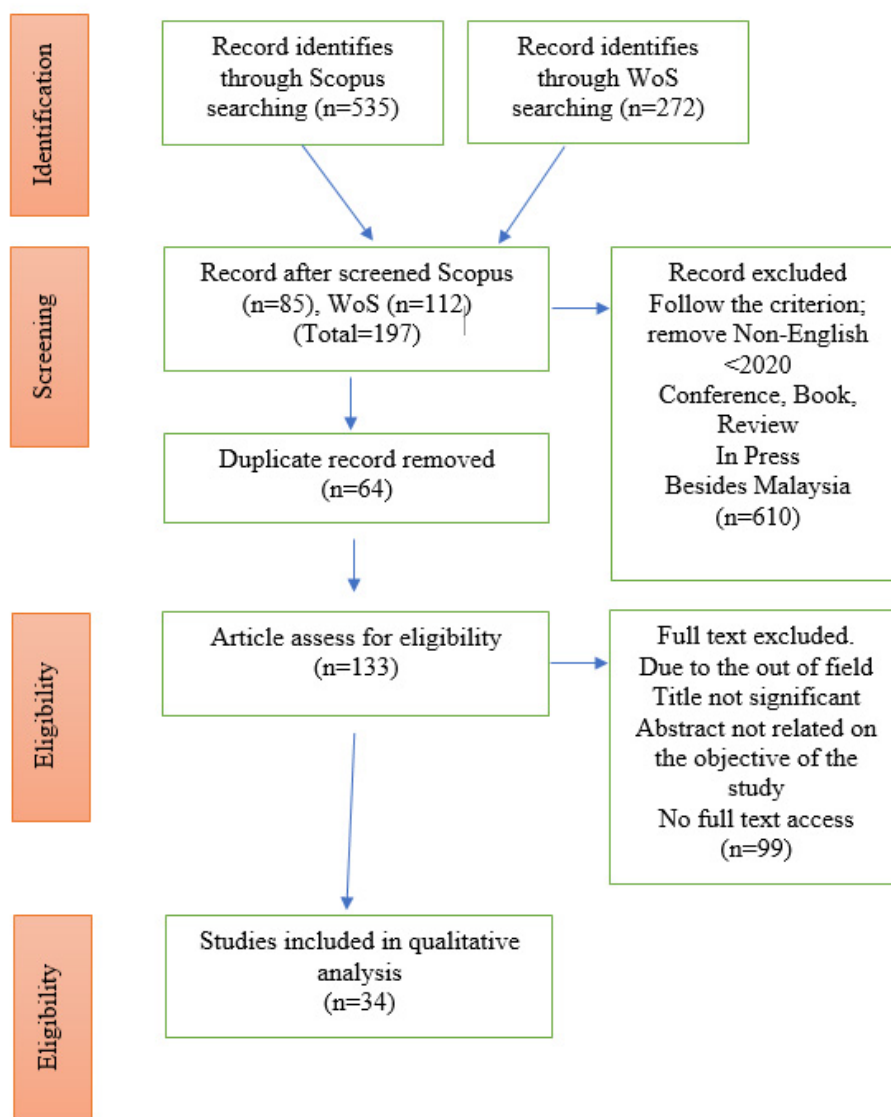


Figure 1: The PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Procedure for Selecting Reviewed Articles. Sources: Page et al.29.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

Subsequently, during the data abstraction phase, an integrative analysis approach was employed to evaluate qualitative research on Twitter and democratic engagement in Malaysia, aiming to uncover key themes within the selected studies. During the data collection, 34 studies were examined for their methodologies and findings, and relevant information was systematically extracted. Themes were collaboratively identified based on this data, and insights and questions were logged to ensure reliability. To validate the themes, three experts—two specialising in democracy and one in digital engagement—reviewed them for clarity and relevance. Any differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion, enhancing the vigour of the findings on Twitter’s role in democratic engagement in Malaysia (see Table 3).

Table 3: Number and Details of Primary Studies Database

No	Authors	Title	Year	Journal	Databases
1	Sualman & Noar ³⁷	#Bajet2020 On Twitter: Issues, Personalities and Sentiments	2021	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	Scopus/WoS
2	Zainol et al. ³⁸	Analysing Political Candidates' Popularity on Social Media Using Popularity Monitoring (POPMON)	2021	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	WoS
3	Lau Wee-Ming et al. ³⁹	Beliefs And Attitude Towards Political Advertising During Malaysia's GE14 Political Tsunami	2021	International Journal of Business and Society	Scopus/WoS
4	Hafeez et al. ⁴⁰	Challenging So-Called Fake Media's Power Abuse with Social Media Verbal Abuse: Analysis Of Twitter Interactions	2021	Asian EFL Journal	Scopus
5	Ting et al. ⁴¹	Digital Government: Social Media As A Mediator In Technology Acceptance With Political Knowledge, Interest, And Participation	2024	Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies	Scopus/WoS
6	Saidin & Azrum ⁴²	Digital Media and Religious Sentiments in Malaysia: Critical Discourse Analysis Of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party And Democratic Action Party Cyberspace Campaigns In The 15th General Election	2024	Religions	Scopus/WoS
7	Leong et al. ⁴³	Digital Organizing of a Global Social Movement: From Connective to Collective Action	2020	Information and Organization	WoS
8	Khairulnissa et al. ⁴⁴	Emerging Themes in Facebook and Twitter Before Movement Control Order (MCO) In Malaysia	2021	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	WoS
9	Salman and Salleh ⁴⁵	Examining Relationship Between Political Agenda on Social Media and Political Support Among University Students	2020	Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication	Scopus/WoS

10	Abdullah et al. ⁴⁶	Examining The Relationship Between Factors Influencing Political Information Seeking-Behaviour Through Social Media Among Youths In Malaysia	2022	Revista de Comunicaci3n de la SEECI	WoS
11	Jalli ⁴⁷	Exploring The Influence of Citizen Journalism Content on The Malaysian Political Landscape	2020	Kajian Malaysia	Scopus/WoS
12	Roslan et al. ⁴⁸	Facebook Vs. Twitter: Social Media Platform Selection for News Consumption Among Undergraduate Students	2022	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	WoS
13	Azwar & Nie ⁴⁹	Factors Influencing Young Malaysians' Political Information Seeking Behaviour on Twitter	2022	Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication	Scopus/WoS
14	Hassan et al. ⁵⁰	Media Literacy and Young People's Integrity in Political Participation: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach	2022	Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication	Scopus/WoS
15	Ng ⁵¹	Motivations For Activism: Exploring BERSIH Activists' Communicative Ecologies	2024	Kajian Malaysia	Scopus/WoS
16	Muhammad et al. ⁵²	Political Communication of The Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim on Twitter	2023	Otoritas : Jurnal Ilmu Pernerintahan	WoS
17	Sanawi, Mustaffa, & Sannusi ⁵³	Political Discussion on Twitter: Attributes of Political Issues in Malaysian Media's Tweets During Pre and Post 14th General Election	2022	Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication	WoS
18	Chinnasamy & Volkmer ⁵⁴	Public Actors in New Spaces A Case Study of Digital Malaysia in Transnational Public Deliberation	2023	Pacific Journalism Review	Scopus/WoS
19	Loh, Somiah, & Ali ⁵⁵	Shame And Shamelessness: Changing Discourses in Najib Razak's Social Media Campaign	2022	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	Scopus/WoS
20	Balakrishnan et al. ⁵⁶	Social Media Analytics Using Sentiment and Content Analyses on the 2018 Malaysia's General Election	2021	Malaysian Journal of Computer Science	Scopus/WoS

21	Mohd Faizal Kasmani ⁵⁷	Social Media As An Online Public Sphere: A Study Among The First-Time Malay Voters	2024	Kajian Malaysia	Scopus/Wos
22	Jun & Firdaus ⁵⁸	Social Media Political Information Dependency (SMPID): Theorising News Seeking In An Age Of Sharing And Posting	2023	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	Scopus/Wos
23	Fathir et al. ⁵⁹	Social Media Usage and Interactions: An In-Depth Interview on BERSIH 2.0 Social Media Visual Framing	2023	Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication	Scopus/Wos
24	Koay, Eng, & Wong ⁶⁰	The Contradictory Effects of Digital Access And Life Satisfaction on Voting Behaviours: A Retrospective Look at the 2008 Malaysian General Election	2023	International Journal of Business and Society	Scopus/Wos
25	Yin & Fei ⁶¹	The Digital Rhizomorph: Understanding Online Youth Political Participation Post Malaysia's Ge14	2022	Sojourn	Scopus/Wos
26	Azlan ⁶²	The Hashtag Game: Disrupting Dissent During the Bersih 4 Protest	2020	Asiascape: Digital Asia	WoS
27	Hassim, Zian, & Jayasainan ⁶³	The Influence of Peer Engagement on Voting Among Malaysian Youths Through Social Networking Sites	2020	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	Scopus/Wos
28	Widyatama & Mahbob ⁶⁴	The Potential Hazards of Fake Accounts and Buzzer Behaviour on Deliberative Democracy	2024	Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication	WoS
29	Lee & Kerr ⁶⁵	Trolls At the Polls: What Cyberharassment, Online Political Activism, And Baiting Algorithms Can Show Us About the Rise and Fall of Pakatan Harapan (May 2018–February 2020)	2020	First Monday	Scopus
30	M F Kasmani (2023) ⁶⁶	Undi 18: Understanding the Political Participation of First-Time Malay Voters Through Social Media	2023	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	Scopus/Wos

31	Zain et al. ⁶⁷	Views On Student Political Freedom Post-UUCA Amendment and Implementation Of Undi18: A Case Study Of Public Universities In Southern Malaysia	2023	SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research	Scopus
32	Sazan, Al-Smadi, & Rahman ⁶⁸	Visual Representation Of Malaysian Candidates In General Election In Selected Coalition Parties: A Visual Survey On Social Media	2024	Theory and Practice in Language Studies	Scopus
33	Rahman et al. ⁶⁹	Visual Representation Of Selected Malaysian Political Trolling On Social Media: Disclose The Ideology And Power	2024	Journal of Language Teaching and Research	Scopus
34	Alivi ⁷⁰	Voter's Gratification In Using Online News And The Implications On Political Landscape In Malaysia	2023	Asian Politics and Policy	WoS

Sources: Authors' Work.

Quality of Appraisal for Selected Studies

Following the guidelines proposed by Kitchenham,⁷¹ the selected studies were then assessed for the quality of the research by applying the Quality Assessment (QA) using criteria from Abouzahra, Sabraoui, and Afdel,⁷² which include six quality metrics. Each metric was scored as “Yes” (1 point), “Partly” (0.5 points), or “No” (0 points) and presented in Table 4.

- Q1. Is the purpose of the study clearly stated?
- Q2. Is the interest and the usefulness of the work clearly presented?
- Q3. Is the study methodology clearly established?
- Q4. Are the concepts of the approach clearly defined?
- Q5. Is the work compared and measured with other similar work?
- Q6. Are the limitations of the work clearly mentioned?

Three experts have independently scored each study, with only those scoring above 3.0 advancing for further evaluation, ensuring that only studies meeting quality standards were included. The assessment shows that most papers scored highly on QA1, QA2, and QA3, reflecting strong clarity of purpose, methodology, and relevance. However, QA5 and QA6 were the key areas where gaps were observed, resulting in lower scores for some papers. No paper was excluded, as all scored at least 50%.

Table 4: Quality Assessment for Selected Studies

Data	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Total Marks	%
PS1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	4.5	75
PS2	1	1	1	1	0.5	0	4.5	75
PS3	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	4.5	75
PS4	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	4.5	75
PS5	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	100
PS6	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	0	3	50
PS7	1	1	1	0.5	1	1	5.5	91.67
PS8	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	4	66.67
PS9	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	4	66.67
PS10	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.3
PS11	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	4	66.7
PS12	1	1	1	0.5	0	0	3.5	58.3
PS13	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.3
PS14	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.3
PS15	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	100
PS16	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	0.5	3.5	58.3
PS17	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	4	66.7
PS18	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.3
PS19	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	4	66.7
PS20	1	1	1	1	0.5	0	4.5	75
PS21	1	1	1	0.5	0	0.5	4	66.7
PS22	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.3
PS23	1	1	1	0.5	0	0.5	4	66.7
PS24	1	1	1	0.5	0	0	3.5	58.3
PS25	1	1	1	1	0.5	0	4.5	75
PS26	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	4	66.7
PS27	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	5	83.3
PS28	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	5.5	91.67

<i>PS29</i>	1	1	1	1	0.5	0	4.5	75
<i>PS30</i>	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	5.5	91.7
<i>PS31</i>	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	5.5	91.7
<i>PS32</i>	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	4	66.7
<i>PS33</i>	1	1	0.5	1	0.5	0	4	66.7

Sources: Authors' Work.

Result and Findings

As political discourse in Malaysia becomes increasingly digitalised, Twitter has become a key arena where democratic engagement unfolds in real time, influencing political and civic participation. This study delves into how Twitter facilitates democratic practices in the Malaysian context. Using a structured review approach, 34 articles were analysed. The findings were categorised into three main themes: political communication and campaigns, political participation and activism, and challenges in democratic engagement. This categorisation highlights Twitter's multifaceted role in shaping political discourse, mobilising activism, and addressing obstacles to fostering a deliberative democratic environment.

Theme 1: Political Communication and Campaign

Political communication on social media, especially Twitter, has become vital for political engagement in Malaysia during significant events like elections and budget discussions. Sualman and Noar⁷³ analysed #Bajet2020 tweets and found topics such as affordable housing, petrol subsidies, and tax reforms dominated the discourse, with negative sentiments reflecting public dissatisfaction. This trend was also seen in Zainol et al.⁷⁴, who explored real-time sentiment analysis of political candidates' popularity on Twitter. These studies show how Twitter shapes political narratives and public sentiment during key events. The rise of social media also fostered new tools for real-time political analysis. Zainol et al. further introduced the POPMONITORING tool, using sentiment analysis to track political candidates' popularity and predict election outcomes. This analytical approach aligns with Balakrishnan et al.⁷⁵, who analysed Twitter communications during Malaysia's 2018 General Election, finding that English-language tweets had positive sentiments, while Malay-language tweets reflected more negative sentiments. Social media has thus become essential for shaping political strategies.

Furthermore, the strategic use of social media extends beyond political candidates to broader political campaigns, with influential political figures using these platforms to engage directly with the public. Muhammad et al.⁷⁶ highlighted Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's use of Twitter for direct political communication, which is crucial in an environment where traditional media is perceived as biased. Similarly, Loh et al.⁷⁷ examined Najib Razak's post-political fall social media campaign, where he reshaped his image to gain support by portraying himself as relatable to the working class, particularly among younger Malays. This example shows social media's role in political rehabilitation and persona negotiation. Social media also influences political campaigns through visual communication strategies, including discussions on sensitive issues such as race and religion. Sazan et al.⁷⁸ found that Malaysian political parties use visuals and slogans on social media to reinforce ideological values, impacting public opinion. Similarly, Saidin and Azrun⁷⁹ explored how political parties like the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) use digital media for political campaigns to appeal to religious and ethnic identities, fuelling racialised sentiments. Visual strategies strengthen party messaging and resonate across social media. Additionally, political

advertising on social media plays a significant role. Lau Wee-Ming et al.⁸⁰ found that young voters are sceptical of negative political ads, with such content potentially turning voters away. This finding reflects the broader trend on Twitter, where political tone directly affects public engagement and trust in candidates. Jalli⁸¹ noted that citizen journalism on social media impacts political landscapes by shaping public opinion and contributing to a dynamic and diverse media environment.

Theme 2: Political Participation and Activism

Social media plays a key role in political participation and activism among Malaysian youth, particularly through platforms like Twitter. Kasmani⁸² highlights the prevalence of social media for passive engagement, with young voters seeking political information but hesitant to actively offer their views. Zain et al.⁸³ similarly found that students use social media mainly for information gathering, not activism. Correspondingly, Jun and Firdaus⁸⁴ note a growing reliance on social media for political information, though interaction remains mainly one-sided. These studies reveal a gap between social media's potential for enhancing democratic engagement and the actual participation levels of Malaysian youth. Social media also facilitates political agenda dissemination, as shown by Salman and Salleh⁸⁵, who observed a correlation between the visibility of political content on social media and increased political support. Kasmani⁸⁶ and Yin and Fei⁸⁷ found that young Malaysians, especially first-time voters, use social media for political expression despite limited political knowledge. Abdullah et al.⁸⁸ emphasise that students in public universities use social media to engage in political discussions, with knowledge, efficacy, and perceived usefulness influencing their behaviour. Azwar and Nie⁸⁹ further argue that political self-efficacy and government trust affect youth engagement on platforms like Twitter. Media literacy also plays a crucial role in ethical political participation. Hassan et al.⁹⁰ showed that youths with stronger media literacy skills engage more ethically, avoiding misinformation and maintaining high moral standards in online interactions. This emphasis on media literacy and ethical engagement aligns with Azwar and Nie's⁹¹ finding that quality information improves political engagement, suggesting that informed youths are better equipped for meaningful participation in democracy.

The introduction of the Undi18 constitutional amendment, which lowers the voting age to 18, has increased youth participation on social media. Azwar and Nie⁹² note that this change has led to more engagement on platforms like Twitter, though it also brings challenges, such as misinformation. Hassan et al.⁹³ argue that media literacy programs are vital to helping youths critically engage with political content and positively contribute to democracy. The Bersih movement illustrates social media's role in activism. Leong et al.⁹⁴ and Fathir et al.⁹⁵ discuss how social media facilitated initial mobilisation, but organisational efforts were crucial for sustaining activism. Ngu⁹⁶ found that social media was used by Bersih activists to combat misinformation, supporting Azlan's⁹⁷ study on the use of hashtags during the Bersih 4 protest. Chinnasamy and Volkmer⁹⁸ emphasise digital platforms as alternative voices in Malaysia's media landscape, facilitating broader civil discourse. Despite these positive aspects, challenges remain. Kasmani⁹⁹ and Hassim et al.¹⁰⁰ highlight that first-time voters are hesitant to engage in online political discussions due to concerns over surveillance and a lack of knowledge. Social media encourages passive consumption of political content, limiting deeper engagement, especially among youths uncertain about their political views. Policy changes, such as Undi18 and the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA), have shifted how youth engage with politics, with Zain et al.¹⁰¹ observing increased political freedom among students, particularly in southern Malaysia. However, Kasmani¹⁰² found that youths prefer private platforms like WhatsApp for political discussion, avoiding public forums like Twitter due to privacy concerns.

Theme 3: Challenges in Democratic Engagement

The challenges in democratic engagement in Malaysia, particularly on platforms like Twitter, highlight the complex interplay of digital activism, political manipulation, and the impact of social media on public discourse. While these platforms offer spaces for citizen participation, they also facilitate cyber harassment and political trolling, which hinder democratic engagement. Politically motivated trolling has been a significant issue in Malaysia, especially between May 2018 and February 2020. Lee and Kerr¹⁰³ emphasise the role of algorithms in amplifying political trolling, strategically targeting individuals to manipulate discourse. This algorithmic amplification often involves collective efforts to influence social and informational justice, creating a toxic environment for democratic discussions. International platform infrastructure exacerbates the problem by enabling cross-border attacks that challenge local governance. Similarly, Hafeez et al.¹⁰⁴ explore how Twitter becomes a battleground for political activists to counteract mainstream media, using humour and verbal abuse to discredit media figures. This undermines the credibility of media institutions and complicates balanced political discourse. Widyatama and Mahbob¹⁰⁵ highlight the threat of fake accounts and buzzer behaviour, which distort public opinion and undermine healthy democratic discussions by spreading false information. These manipulative practices, including paid actors or “buzzers,” further aggravate political polarisation and decline in public trust, skewing public perception and threatening the authenticity of democratic engagement. The need for regulatory measures to protect online discourse is clear. Social media also impacts voter behaviour. Roslan et al.¹⁰⁶ identify Twitter as a key platform for Malaysian university students seeking political news, with trust in sources influencing platform preference. While this may lead to a more informed electorate, misinformation can easily mislead voters. Alivi¹⁰⁷ underscores the importance of online news in shaping voting decisions, showing how satisfaction with information from digital media influences political choices. This dual role of social media enhances and undermines democracy, depending on the quality of shared information.

The role of social media in shaping Malaysia’s political landscape creates a paradox: it offers platforms for democratic engagement. However, it exposes voters to manipulation and divisive rhetoric. The lack of strict regulations on online behaviour and the proliferation of fake accounts further complicates maintaining a healthy democratic environment. As Malaysia moves into the digital age, balancing free expression with political discourse integrity remains an important challenge. Khairulnissa et al.¹⁰⁸ note that social media became pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic, shaping public sentiment and government communication. However, the mixed and often contradictory messages on platforms created confusion, especially during the Movement Control Order (MCO). This complexity undermines informed public participation, highlighting the need for coherent strategies in crisis communication. Koay et al.¹⁰⁹ analyse voting behaviour during the 2008 General Election, finding that digital media democratizes information and reshapes voter behaviour. While social media levels the playing field, it complicates democratic engagement as voters react differently to political content based on life satisfaction. This complexity underscores the unpredictable nature of online political discourse and its impact on electoral behaviour. Rahman et al.¹¹⁰ explore the ideological power of political trolling on Twitter, revealing that visual trolling challenges and reinforces political perceptions. While it allows citizens to express their views unfiltered, it risks distorting public understanding. Regulating such content while maintaining freedom of expression remains a challenge. Ting et al.¹¹¹ examine social media’s role in political participation, noting its positive influence and the challenges posed by uneven access to digital tools and varying levels of political interest. Despite widespread social media use, it may not always foster informed engagement, particularly in a country with varied digital literacy.

Discussion

Social media, particularly Twitter, has become an important tool for political communication in Malaysia, especially during key events such as elections and budget discussions, where it significantly influences political communication and campaign strategies. The platform provides a space for public discourse, allowing people to express their opinions on political issues and shaping the overall political narrative. Key topics such as economic policies, public services, and tax reforms often dominate discussions, with public sentiment tending to reflect dissatisfaction or criticism. Social media platforms, including Twitter, are now essential for real-time political analysis. Sentiment analysis tools are now used to help track public opinion and predict electoral outcomes. Political figures utilise these platforms as an alternative political arena for direct communication with the public, allowing them to bypass traditional media outlets, which have historically favoured the long-ruling Barisan Nasional. In the lead-up to GE14, politicians from Pakatan Harapan, notably Rafizi Ramli and Nurul Izzah Anwar, effectively engaged with urban, tech-savvy voters through social media. This form of engagement allows politicians to present themselves in a more personal and relatable manner, which influences public support, especially among younger voters. For example, Najib Razak strategically portrayed himself as connected to the Malay working class in an effort to achieve political rehabilitation. Consequently, Twitter serves not only as a source of information but also as a platform for politicians to create a digital persona that enhances their visibility. Social media has also enabled political campaigns to incorporate visual elements and slogans that reinforce key messages and appeal to voters on a deeper emotional level. For instance, the hashtag campaigns like #pulangmengundi during GE14 have created a non-partisan movement that calls for voters about civic duty, unity and democratic participation. Political advertising on these platforms plays a crucial role. Hence, managing the tone of such content has become increasingly important, as negative ads may turn potential supporters away. Furthermore, social media influences discussions on sensitive topics, such as ethnicity and religion, often shaping the political landscape by fuelling polarised sentiments. Digital content, particularly from ordinary citizens, also contributes to the media environment, making it more dynamic and reflective of diverse political opinions and ideologies.

Social media has also become essential for political participation and activism among Malaysian youth. Platforms like Twitter allow young people to access political information. Nonetheless, their involvement in sharing opinions or participating in debates remains limited. While social media holds the potential to enhance democratic engagement, the actual participation of youth often falls short of its capabilities. The role of social media in political agenda dissemination is significant, as it enables the spread of political content and influences support for certain political causes. Even though many young Malaysians, particularly first-time voters, engage with social media for political expression, their political knowledge tends to be minimal. Factors like knowledge, self-efficacy, and the perceived value of social media contribute to the extent of youth engagement. Media literacy also plays a vital role in ensuring that youth can engage in political discourse ethically and responsibly, fostering more meaningful participation. The lowering of the voting age through the Undi18 Amendment has led to greater youth activity on platforms such as Twitter. However, challenges like misinformation have emerged, underlining the need for programs that enhance media literacy and help youth navigate the complex digital landscape. Without strong media literacy to address Malaysia's polarised media environment, online engagement risks reinforcing echo chambers and having shallow engagements instead of promoting meaningful discussions. Additionally, many youths tend to self-censor due to concerns about backlash or government scrutiny, often limiting their participation to actions like "liking," "retweeting," or silently following political content. Movements such as Bersih illustrate the influence of social media in activism, yet the sustainability of such efforts often requires offline

organisational support. This highlights the limitations of Twitter activism in Malaysia. Despite the positive contributions, surveillance concerns and limited political knowledge deter some young people from engaging in online discussions. This passive consumption of political content indicates a gap between the potential of social media and the depth of youth involvement. The introduction of policy changes such as Undi18 and the UUCA has provided more political freedom. However, controlled and private platforms like WhatsApp remain the preferred spaces for political discussions, further limiting the reach of public political engagement.

The challenges to democratic engagement in Malaysia, particularly in the context of social media, are complex and multifaceted. While platforms like Twitter provide a space for citizen participation, they also present significant obstacles such as cyber harassment, political trolling, and misinformation. The Malaysian experience demonstrates that the same tool that can empower individuals to express their opinions can also be used to distort conversations, silence opposing voices, and deepen societal divisions. Political manipulation through these platforms, including using fake accounts and paid actors to spread false information, contributes to political polarisation and undermines public trust. These issues distort public opinion and compromise the integrity of democratic discourse, creating an environment that is more divisive than constructive. Social media plays a dual role in shaping voter behaviour, offering opportunities for greater political engagement and information dissemination and exposing users to misleading content. The spread of misinformation and a lack of effective regulation complicate maintaining a healthy and informed public discourse. This paradox, where social media both empowers and manipulates voters, highlights the need for more robust strategies to ensure that online platforms serve as tools for enhancing democracy rather than hindering it. It highlights the governance gap that persists even with a regulatory body like MCMC involved in shaping the democratic landscape. Often, the efforts to regulate social media backfire, appearing either too weak or overly aggressive. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the complexities of digital communication, with mixed messages and contradictory information on social media platforms creating confusion among the public. This situation emphasised the importance of coherent communication strategies, particularly during crises. In a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia, disinformation poses not only a threat to facts but also a threat to social cohesion. The influence of social media on voter behaviour is also unpredictable, as individuals' reactions to political content are shaped by personal factors such as life satisfaction. Social media has the potential to enrich democratic engagement. However, issues like misinformation, unequal access to digital tools, and political manipulation hinder its current impact on political participation in Malaysia. To improve the democratic process, efforts should focus on enhancing digital literacy, ensuring more transparent political communication, and managing the adverse effects of online trolling and misinformation. These measures are essential to creating a more informed, fair, and participatory political environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media, especially platforms like Twitter, play a pivotal role in shaping political communication by influencing public discourse, political campaigns, and the ongoing negotiation of political identities and reputations. This review highlights the opportunities and challenges the platform presents in fostering democratic discourse. As digital tools evolve, their presence in the political landscape continues to expand, creating new avenues for engagement and analysis. While social media has significantly transformed political participation in Malaysia, it also brings challenges such as misinformation, digital literacy gaps, and privacy concerns, which hinder active engagement. Despite the potential for social media to enhance democratic participation, its current impact is limited by issues like unequal access to digital tools and political manipulation. The low levels of active

participation suggest the need for continued efforts to improve digital literacy and encourage ethical-political engagement, particularly among the youth. Equipping young people with the necessary skills to navigate political content online is essential for strengthening Malaysia's democracy. To address these challenges, it is critical to improve digital literacy, promote more transparent political communication, and manage the harmful effects of misinformation and online trolling. These steps are crucial to fostering a more informed, inclusive, and participatory political environment in Malaysia, ensuring that Twitter can fully realise its potential in shaping future political dynamics.

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