Political Engagement on Social Media as Antecedent for Political Support among Voters in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of new media as a result of the development of the internet has made the media a democratic agent of information. In conjunction with the transition of current political culture, society is now more comfortable using social media as a source of political information. This study was conducted to identify the impact of social media use on politics in Malaysia and to analyze the level of social media uses in determining the people's pattern of support for political parties and political candidates in Malaysia. This study was conducted using survey questionnaire as the research instrument. A total of 993 respondents consisting of males (46.2%) and females (53.8%) were selected randomly to participate in this study. Among the survey results, almost two-third of the respondents used newspapers (65.5%), followed by social media (63.5%) and television (59.5%) to search and read current political information in Malaysia. The findings also show that respondents agree that social media plays a role and has the advantage of channeling political information (mean = 3.57) compared to conventional media. The respondents agreed that social media helped to enhance the image of candidates and political parties (mean = 3.17) by displaying candidate activity in serving the people (mean = 3.25). This suggests that today's society is very concerned with what is shown on social media on matters involving current politics. Therefore, monitoring of political information shared on social media should be done to ensure that information is free from seditious elements that can diverge unity.

Keywords: *Social media, political support, political engagement, political participation, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new media as a result of the development of the internet has made the media a democratic agent of information. Additionally, the new media offers a wide range of up-to-date information such as dialogue and information sharing via blogs, forums, wikis, chats, social networks and other software (Kubiszewski, Noordewier & Costanza 2011). Not only that, hyperlinks and search engines can also connect us all together, while giving users more options to explore and share information.

The rapid development of the Internet and technology network in ICT began when the country was ruled by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. The establishment of several bodies such as MIMOS, JARING and NITA has increased the ability of the Internet to become faster. According to Noor Azlin and Normah (2012), Malaysia should be thankful to Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad for his contribution in the development of the Multimedia Super Corridor, which had opened a democratic space in the Internet network in Malaysia to date.

Based on the history of the communications technology system in the country, the early development of computer networks in Malaysia did not start with the purpose of military and defense, but instead it is used for communication and research purposes (Andan & Kamaliah 2000). In the early years, computer network was introduced for the first time where the use of computer systems was applied in the public sector. At that point, computers were used as tools for data processing, organizational management and keeping institutional records.

In addition to the new media, the emergence of social media is also seen as able to enhance the interactive level by giving the user the freedom to choose the source of information and entertainment desired. Compared to conventional media such as print and electronic media, new media are seen as more dominant (Siti Ezaleila & Azizah 2011) as the new media has less restrictions from the government. Similarly, today's community groups, where communities are no longer living only in physical groups, are instead replaced by community-shaped structures of network communication.

In conjunction with the transition of current political culture, society is now more comfortable using social media as a source of current political information acquisition. What is more, the failure of conventional media in playing its role as a means of communication made the people to shift to a new internet-based medium and digital media (Junaidi et al., 2012). This study was conducted to identify the role of social media on political engagement and support in Malaysia. It also analyzed the sources of political information.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research conducted by Meijer (2012) showed that the introduction of new media has shaped the environment in virtual communication which is capable of building social interactions and allowing greater freedom of participation. The freedom offered by the new media allows anyone to voice their views without taking into account the background of the economy class. There are various new media platforms that have been introduced including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and many others.

Meanwhile, a study conducted by Mohd Amirul Akhbar (2011) which deals with blog threats relating to aspects of policy development, ICT policy, the existence of political blogs and excessive freedom of speech. In line with the Communications and Multimedia (Amendment) Act 2004, blog is said to be the catalyst for increased use of the Internet and freedom of speech by bloggers. While the freedom provided may help to improve the democratization process in Malaysia, but what goes on is the fact that blogging begins to be filled with dissatisfaction and the use of inappropriate language.

In addition to blogs, Twitter is also part of an app that comes through new media platform. Twitter is one of the most influential microblogging social applications in the world where users' uploaded status can be publicly transmitted and visible to anyone. Not only that, the Twitter app is also capable of being a strong political discourse medium as well as the potential to encourage community participation in politics. Hong (2013) found that almost every major politician in the United States has a Twitter account as one of the methods of engagement. Barack Obama, for instance, is one of the politicians who have used social media as one way to campaign during US presidential elections. It turned out that his choice to use the medium brought a positive impact on Obama's victory in the elections.

Despite the advantages of social media, the government is facing challenges due to the fact that social media are difficult to control and monitor as compared to conventional media. While the new media have the potential to disseminate information quickly and benefit the users, on occasions, the content can create doubt making it difficult for users to believe. In fact, in certain cases social media is also blamed for promoting immorality (Ali Salman, 2009).

In a study conducted by Pepinsky (2013), Malaysia is now facing political change as a result of the development of new media particularly in promoting political liberalization. This is because the Internet has created a new form of media which is beyond the scope of government censorship and control. This allows anyone to report freely news that has never been reported in the print or broadcast media.

Meanwhile, in a study conducted by Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, Weiss (2012), found that 25 percent of 2,253 political survey respondents in social media argue that debating, discussing or sharing views on political issues with other people on social networks are something 'very important' or 'quite important' to them. This suggests that the new media are able to increase political participation among the community as every issue presented can attract users to discuss with other users.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study was conducted by using quantitative approach which is survey method using questionnaire as the research instrument. The use of face-to-face survey method was applied with the help of trained enumerators. All the states in the peninsular Malaysia were chosen as the location of the study. Respondents consisted of males (46.2%) and females (53.8%) where 44.2 per cent were between 18 and 29 years old, 27.7 per cent between 30 and 40 years old, and 28.1 per cent over 40 years old. The data obtained from this study were measured using Likert Scale, 1 to 5 i.e. 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somehow Agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The questionnaires were distributed to respondents based on the sample of the study which had been determined by involving residents in selected urban and rural districts in the states according to the selected zones in peninsular Malaysia. The duration for data collection was three weeks which is in the month of July of 2017 less than a year to the Malaysia 14th General Elections. For this article, the data obtained from 993 respondents were analyzed descriptively (mean and standard deviation) using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings and analysis of the study on 993 questionnaires that were analyzed descriptively. Descriptive analysis is used to describe the characteristics of the population based on measurement scale using mean value and standard deviation.

Demography of respondents
Table 1 shows the number of respondents used in this study according to gender. The results showed that the total number of respondents used in the study comprised of males (46.2%) and females (53.8%).

Table 1: Gender.

Gender	Frequency	Percentages
Male	459	46.2
Female	534	53.8

Based on the analysis (Table 2) by age, the study found that 44.2 percent of respondents were between 18 and 29 years old, while the rest 27.7 percent respondents aged between 30 and 39 years, and 28.1 percent over 40 years. Hence, age 18 to 39 formed 71.9 percent and made up two-thirds of the respondents surveyed.

Table 2: Number of respondents by age.

Age	Frequency	Percentages
18 – 29	439	44.2
30 – 39	275	27.7
40 >	279	28.1

This study (Table 3) found that almost two-thirds (68.8%) of the respondents under study were those living in urban areas according to the chosen zones. Meanwhile, the remaining 31.2 percent are respondents living in rural areas.

Table 3: Number of respondents by place of resident.

Area	Frequency	Percentage
Urban	683	68.8
Rural	310	31.2

Use of social media

In terms of social media use, Table 4 shows nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of respondents using social media 2-5 hours a day. The study also found that 26.5 percent of respondents used social media more than 6 hours a day, compared to 9.1% respondents who use social media less than 1 hour a day.

Table 4: Number of hours using social media in a day.

Hours	Frequency	Percentage
6 hours or more	263	26.5
4 – 5 hours	330	33.2
2 – 3 hours	310	31.2
Less than 1 hour	90	9.1

Social media is an important medium or platform for people in Malaysia, especially to search and retrieve information. The findings in Table 4.5 show that the majority of respondents use Facebook (86.5%) and Whatsapp (74.5%) for information. This is followed by 30 percent of the respondents who said they use Instagram and Twitter to search for information. The study also found that there are respondents who still read the information

contained in the blog (23.6%). The rest of the respondents refer to WeChat, Telegram and Line applications for information in their daily lives.

Table 5: Types of social media used to get information.

Social Media	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	859	86.5
Whatsapp	740	74.5
Instagram	300	30.2
Twitter	297	29.9
Blog	234	23.6
WeChat	159	16
Telegram	141	14.2
Line	38	3.8

Source for political information
In terms of seeking information related to politics, there are various types of sources that have been used by the respondents. Referring to Table 6, almost two-thirds of the respondents used newspapers (65.5%), followed by social media applications (63.5%) and television (59.5%) to search and read current political-related information in Malaysia. This suggests that conventional media such as newspapers and television are still among the choices of the people for political information, other than new media such as social media applications.

The survey also found that almost half of the respondents refer to online portal (41%), friends (40.4%) and family members (40.0%) to find and obtain political information in Malaysia. In addition, they also get political information from other sources such as radio, co-workers, blogs and magazines. On the other hand, the opinion leaders in the respondents' community are less likely to be referred for information related to politics where only 11.3 percent of the respondents referred to party representatives and 6.9 percent referred to village headmen.

Table 6: Sources for political information.

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Newspaper	647	65.5
Social Media Applications	631	63.5
TV	591	59.5
Online Portal	407	41.0
Friends	401	40.4
Family	397	40.0
Radio	349	35.1
Colleague	264	26.6
Blog	217	21.9
Magazine	192	19.3
Party Representative	112	11.3
Headman	69	6.9

Trust in the media

In the aspect of trust in conventional media and social media, Table 7 shows that respondents trust in media that have organizational structure such as news portal (mean = 3.27), the press (mean = 3.26), television (mean = 3.17) as compared to new media such as blogs (mean = 2.78) and social media apps (mean = 2.93).

Table 7: Trust in the media.

	Mean*	SD
TV	*3.17*	*1.11*
Radio	3.14	0.98
Newspaper	*3.26*	*1.03*
Magazine	2.91	0.94
News Portal	*3.27*	*0.99*
Webpage	3.01	0.91
Blogs	2.78	0.96
Social Media (whatsapp, Facebook, WeChat, Line)	2.93	0.96

*1 = Strongly disagree | 2 = Disgaree | 3 = Somehow agree |4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly agree

The role of social media in politics

Media play an important role in the political arena of a country. Table 8 shows that the respondents agree on the role of social media having the advantage of distributing political information compared to conventional media (mean = 3.57). Furthermore, social media is also important in helping to provide information for the people to understand political issues (mean = 3.43), and provide equal opportunity and power in sharing political information with the people (mean = 3.43). This led to the respondents agreeing that the people would be more optimistic in the use of social media than in conventional media in terms of politics (mean = 3.52).

In addition, the study also found that respondents agreed that social media could empower the people to share information about politics, attract the people's interest to politics, and provide space for people to create or produce content related to politics.

Table 8: Role of social media in politics.

	Mean*	SD
Social media provides information to understand political issues	*3.43*	*0.97*
Social media empower people to share information about politics	*3.42*	*0.97*
Social media helps the people fulfill their interest in political issues	3.39	0.97
People are happy to get information on political issues through social media	3.37	0.98
Social media has the advantage of channeling political information compared to conventional medium	*3.57*	*0.94*
Social media provides equal opportunity and power in sharing political information with the people.	*3.43*	*0.95*
People are more optimistic in the use of social media compared with conventional media in terms of politics.	*3.52*	*1.00*
Social Media promises space to create/generate political content	3.37	1.02

*1 = Strongly disagree | 2 = Disgaree | 3 = Somehow agree |4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly agree

Political participation in social media

Table 9 shows the results of studies related to respondents' political participation through the use of social media. This study found that the respondents expressed an average agreement on political participation through social media. Respondents also noted that they are concerned about the political views contained in social media (mean = 2.93), to read the content shared regarding political candidates (mean = 2.83) and also to discuss politics with family members and friends in social media (mean = 2.65). The data in Table 9 also shows that respondents are less likely to use social media in terms of political participation to share political information links, comment on political issues, produce political content and interact with political actors.

Table 9: Political participation in social media.

	Mean*	SD
I often share political information link on social media	2.48	1.04
I often comment on political issues on social media	2.44	1.06
I often take political opinions on social media seriously	*2.93*	*1.03*
I am interested in getting involved in political issues on social media	2.50	1.04
I often surf social media of political candidates	2.54	1.10
I am interested in reading contents shared about Political candidates on social media.	*2.83*	*1.05*
I always interact with political actors (candidates, party workers NGO) through social media.	2.26	1.06
I am interested in producing political content on social media to interact with political actors.	2.30	1.08
I often discuss political issues on social media with members of my family	*2.65*	*1.23*

*1 = Strongly disagree | 2 = Disgaree | 3 = Somehow agree |4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly agree

Social media and political support

This study found that social media is a channel that is no less important in the process of getting political support among the respondents. Table 10 shows the respondents agreed that social media help to enhance the image of candidates and political parties (mean = 3.17) by displaying candidate activity in serving the people (mean = 3.25).

In addition, respondents are happy (mean = 3.21) and always (mean = 3.11) get political information or party activities through social media. They claim that social media can strengthen democracy in Malaysia by giving political actors an opportunity to communicate to the people (mean= 3.10).

The findings show that respondents agree moderately in terms of social media influencing them in giving support to candidates and building closer ties with political candidates. Respondents also noted that social media provided them the opportunity to respond quickly to political and personal issues by and from political parties.

Table 10: Social media support for political parties and candidates.

	Mean*	SD
Social media influence me in giving support to political candidates	2.94	1.08
Social Media assist me in supporting political party	2.97	1.06
Social Media improve the image of the candidate and political party	**3.17**	**1.04**
Social Media help improve the relationship between me and the candidate of political party	2.80	1.07
I see social media showing candidate activity in providing service to the people	**3.25**	**1.04**
I agree social media give information about political party that can be trusted	2.90	1.04
I always receive information about party activity through Social Media	**3.11**	**1.01**
It is easy for me to get political information through Social Media	**3.21**	**1.01**
I am given the chance to give feedback about politics through Social Media	2.88	1.09
I always receive feedback about my private matter quickly from political party through Social Media	2.63	1.12
I agree that Social Media attract my interest to participate in politics	2.73	1.12
Overall, I feel social media have strengthened the democratic system in Malaysia	**3.10**	**1.12**

*1 = Strongly disagree | 2 = Disgaree | 3 = Somehow agree |4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly agree

DISCUSSION

Use of social media

In terms of social media use, research findings show that almost two-thirds of respondents use social media around 2-5 hours a day. The study also found that 26.5 percent of respondents used social media more than 6 hours a day, compared to 9.1% respondents who use social media less than 1 hour a day. Social media is an important medium or platform for people in Malaysia especially to search and retrieve information. The results show that the majority of respondents use Facebook and Whatsapp applications to get information. This is followed by 30 percent of respondents who use Instagram and Twitter apps. The study also found that there are respondents who still read the information contained in the blog (23.6%). The rest of the respondents refer to WeChat, Telegram and Line applications for information in their daily lives. These findings concur with the findings by Siti Zobidah and Norizah (2008) that latest technology development indirectly has facilitated communication in the community.

Trust in the media

Media plays an important role in disseminating information. This is because the media acts as a source or a news delivery agent to the public. Although technology is growing, the importance of television as a source of news cannot be ignored. Television was the third highest in terms of trust surpassing social media. In a study conducted by Abdul Rashid and Herry Rena (2016), found that 83 percent of the people in Kuala Penyu Sabah are still watching the news on TV3. This proves that the use of television as a source of news is still relevant.

Even though we have entered the digital reading age or "digital readiness", a large number of the respondents still chose to trust the printed press as a source of information. This is because the information available on the internet has tendency to be unprocessed information that is not filtered and tend to create unprofessional views (Dennis & Merrill 2006). Additionally, shared information may be exaggerated by certain individuals to build up their reputation.

Meanwhile, in contrast the respondents chose the online news portal as the most trusted media. Looking at the borderless world environment now, it is possible for respondents to choose the news portal because with the speed of technology makes everyone want to get information quickly and accurately. Additionally, the online news portal allows it to be accessible to anyone who has the intention to read (Lee, Liana & Siti Suriani 2016).

As is commonly known, the radio is often used as an entertainment medium that accompanies listeners especially when driving on the road. However, the respondents have chosen radio as among the top four trusted media channel. This means that radio is not only able to entertain listeners, but it can also be an information provider albeit very low. This finding is distinct from past study conducted by Mohd Fuad et al. (2012), in Kluang and Muar districts, as radio was used as a source for political information then. However, the situation has changed with the advent of the Internet.

Though social media connect every individual worldwide, social media applications were not among the top four trusted media among the respondents. This could be due to nature of social media where users have become prosumers producing and sharing content most of which cannot be verified. Hence, their credibility is questionable.

The role of social media in politics
Along with the latest technological advances, social media has begun to take over the role of traditional media acting as information distributors. Not only that, the media is also the agent responsible for propagating propaganda in influencing the people's votes, especially in the face of elections. Based on the research done, the majority of the respondents felt more optimistic in using social media than conventional media in politics. This is because of the failure of conventional media to play its role as an information medium causing people to turn to the new media of communication using the internet and digital media (Junaidi et al., 2012).

In the meantime, a large number of respondents strongly agree that social media has the advantage of disseminating political information compared to conventional media. This is also agreed by Najmuddin, Samsudin and Ali Salman (2015), where the latest technology-based media can help anyone express themselves, as well as help them obtain the latest information. What's more, the use of hashtags found on social media makes it easy for users to get political information quickly with certain keywords.

Like traditional media, the respondents agree that social media also help them understand political issues through the information provided and shared. Hazlin Falina, Wan Amizah and Maizatul Haizan (2016) also believe media has helped many communities to build perceptions and shape the society's attitude through the information presented. Furthermore, all the information presented is detailed in order not to cause confusion or raise questions to readers.

Freedom of expression in social media makes the youth more willing to use the medium than other media (Mohd Hamdan 2015). This view concurred with the findings of this study as a large number of the respondents said social media had empowered the people to share information about politics. Moreover, not just sharing information, social media is also used as a discussion platform when there is an issue.

While social media gives freedom to its users, the respondents agreed that social media should provide equal opportunity and empower users in sharing political information with the people. This concurred with Howard and Park (2012), where not only influential people are able to lure votes through social media, even those who are marginalized can also be an important influence in politics. In addition, Junaidi et al. (2012a), were of the view that with the fast and up-to-date technology, information is easily accessible, more open and balanced between government and opposition.

Political participation in social media
The development in communication technology and social media has attracted many parties to engage voters in the current political situation. This is also agreed by majority of the respondents who say they care about the political views expressed on social media. Therefore, social media serves as a channel for the dissemination of current political information to the public (Tabroni 2012).

In addition to the features offered by social media, political actors also play an important role in attracting people to equally engage in political discourse. This is because, political actors sharing information on their social media has the potential to attract users to get the latest political information. It is also acknowledged by the respondents that they expressed their opinions on posts shared by political candidates on social media.

Furthermore, the respondents said they often discussed political issues on social media with family members and friends. This is in line with Hayes (2008) and Abbe et al. (2003) that the media can help candidates highlight certain issues for discussion in election campaigns. In fact, this can indirectly attract more social media users to engage with politicians.

Citing a study by Siti Rokiah and Fadzli (2015), the average user spent 20 hours on the Internet to surf for information. Similarly, respondents of this study say they often spend hours visiting the social media of a political candidate, while only few respondents admitted they frequently commented on political issues discussed on social media.

Social media and the pattern of people's support towards political parties in Malaysia
The widespread use of social media apps today is no longer focused on only social relationships, but instead has developed as one of the new branches of political communication. According to Gibson (2013), most parties and politicians today prefer to use online applications as part of their campaign strategy. This is evident by the majority of the respondents agreeing that social media can help showcase the activities of political party candidates in serving the people.

Not only that, the respondents feel that social media is capable of strengthening the democratic system in Malaysia. This is because the Internet has opened a new space in democracy, not only to achieve information but also to provide interaction space in political communication (Schulz et al 2005). This situation is very different from the use of conventional media in the past where the society only received information without the ability to dispute the content of the information received.

For a country that practices the democratic system, the development of information and communication technology is seen as capable of raising political engagement among the people, but it is also capable of overthrowing the existing government (Samsudin 2010). Similarly, the view given by the respondents of this study is that social media can enhance the image of candidates and political parties. In other words, any party adept at using social

media will be at advantage over other parties and the just ended Malaysia 14th General Elections was a marked example.

Speaking of sources of political information acquisition, the respondents stated that political information was easier to obtain through social media. Furthermore, current voters prefer to obtain information and opinions directly from politicians through the official social media sites itself (Hellweg 2011). What's more, the availability of internet on their smartphones allows them to access or connect with politicians at any time.

In the meantime, the sharing of information on social media regarding the activities conducted by any political party makes it easy for users to know the progress and contributions they have made. A large number of the respondents acknowledged that they always received information on party activities through social media. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Mohd Fuad et al. (2012) where 70 per cent of the respondents agreed that all information obtained from the Internet, blogs and even Facebook has influenced the political tendency among Indian youth in public universities. This suggests that information sharing about activities that have been done can influence the pattern of political party elections among the people.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY AND CONCLUSION

The development of social media has brought a rejuvenation in the field of media and communication. The creation of Facebook, and Twitter (and other social media applications), for example, has brought new innovation in the digital technologies to spark a great information sharing wave since Google was introduced in 1998 (Alejandro, 2010). Additionally, with its fascinating features and the freedom of sharing videos, pictures and status make the social media apps even more appealing to the users. Not only that, the speed of social media in disseminating a wide range of information has also triggered a phenomenon that allows every information shared to be accessed by anyone.

Since Malaysia's first social media election in 2008, a new phase in the country's political arena and landscape began. In the past, people received news only from conventional media, but now everyone has the option of getting the latest information from social media. However, despite the freedom of information, the public is also vulnerable to manipulated information as well as the exploitation of news sources to lure votes.

Based on the results of the study and discussion, it can be concluded that this study has successfully achieved the objectives set. The findings show that respondents are very engaged with the political views shared on social media. Not only that the respondents also expressed their interest in reading news content or information about political candidates shared on social media. This suggests that today's society is very concerned with what is being posted on social media on matters involving current political scenario.

The findings of this study resonate with the just ended 14th General Elections of Malaysia where social media (especially Facebook and Whatsapp) played a crucial role in disseminating politically flavoured information to win the hearts and minds of voters. The amount of short but powerful video clips circulated in the run up to the elections was phenomenal couple with live telecast of election campaigns on Facebook. From the outcome of the elections, it was clear that social media have had some impact on the voters' decision, albeit a study needs to be conducted to support this claim.

Research on impact of social media on politics can indirectly help the society to benefit from the contribution made by social media to the pattern of voting in Malaysia. However, the relevant authorities need to monitor the credibility of information and news sources so that the information shared does not affect the credibility of any individual or party. Therefore, monitoring of political information shared on social media should be ongoing to ensure that information is free from seditious elements that can diverge unity. This is not to say social media use should be restricted as this will stifle democratization of information.

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